

# #iwill Fund Learning Hub

## What is youth social action?

NOVEMBER 2022

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Department for  
Digital, Culture  
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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
Introduction	4
The challenge of creating a common understanding of youth social action	5
What has the #iwill Fund funded over the years?	10
Typology of youth social action	12
What happens within youth social action?	21
Discussion	26
References	27
Appendix 1	29
Appendix 2	30

# Summary

This report is the first in a four-part series of summative reports by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub and provides a definition of 'youth social action' and a richer understanding of what can be considered youth social action. Additional reports will focus on reach and participation of youth social action, quality of youth social action, and the outcomes and impact of youth social action.

The evidence presented in this report draws from the insights and data that Match Funders and grantees have shared with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. This report is for those wanting to learn and understand more about youth social action, organisations working with young people, funders supporting young people to drive change and champions of youth social action.

There are three common mechanisms of change across all types of youth social action. These mechanisms are central to the success of youth social action. They are: 'safe challenge', 'self-directed action' and 'engaging with others'. Activities must involve at least one of the mechanisms to be defined as a youth social action activity.

**From these key findings, youth social action can be defined as youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action.**

## Here are some of the key findings from the evidence:

1. 'Youth social action' has historically been difficult to define, however, a common understanding has been developed by Match Funders through a shared consensus on the activities of youth social action.
2. The interests of young people have been central in influencing the focus, or cause, which is at the heart of the social action activity. These causes can often be influenced by current events and the geographic location of the young person.
3. The key features of youth social action are that it is youth led and produces a double benefit that benefits young people and communities.
4. There are six main types of youth social action. These are: Volunteering; helping to improve the local area; tutoring, mentoring or coaching; supporting others; fundraising; and campaigning.
5. Youth social action is a broad umbrella term for a variety of activities. The 'range' of activities and provisions that sit under the umbrella of youth social action can be defined according to a number of parameters. These include activities, outcomes and impact, quality features, mechanisms of change, youth involvement and theoretical underpinning.

# Introduction

The #iwill Fund is a joint fund established by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS), and more than 25 independent Match Funders ([See Appendix 1](#)). The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was established to capture and reflect on learning from the #iwill Fund’s investment in youth social action. It does this in two ways: first, by helping the funders involved to learn as they go. Secondly, it supports the legacy of the #iwill Fund by building a body of knowledge that can support future funders and enablers of youth social action. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub is a three-member consortium of Dartington Service Design Lab, Renaisi, and the Centre for Youth Impact. Work by all three organisations has fed into this report.

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has produced 39 reports since 2018, [all of which can be found here](#).

Over the course of the #iwill Fund, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub’s has focused on answering four sector evidence plan questions ([See Appendix 2](#)). The #iwill Fund Learning Hub developed the questions in consultation with stakeholders in the #iwill Fund Learning Hub – Match Funders, their evaluation partners, and the #iwill Fund Leadership Board to help guide learning. This report is the first in a series of high-level reports summarising learning from the past five years and endeavours to answer the sector evidence plan question **What Is Youth Social Action?**

This report is for stakeholders within and beyond the #iwill Fund, including funders, delivery organisations, decision-makers and young people. It is particularly relevant for anyone looking to understand how to design, deliver, and

fund quality youth social action opportunities.

Within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, three workstreams have fed into answering the sector evidence plan questions:

- **Systems** - Learning how to support youth social action within systems and supporting funder collaboration on shared challenges
- **Sector Evidence Plan** - Aggregating learning across sources to build answers to key questions about youth social action
- **Quality Practice** - Supporting organisations enabling youth social action to reflect on and improve practice, and share lessons from this

This summative report draws specifically on the Sector Evidence Plan workstream.

The table below shows information sources used for analysis in answering the question “*what is youth social action?*”.

Information Management System (IMS)	Match Funder Reports	Match Funder Evaluations	#iwill Fund Learning Hub Activities
<i>Quantitative data provided by Match Funders on funded activity</i>	<i>Qualitative information provided by Match Funders on their funded activities</i>	<i>Commissioned work by Match Funders to evaluate the process of their funded activities</i>	<i>Insights into funded activities from our LabStorms, Impact Accelerator<sup>a</sup> cohorts and events</i>

Table 1. Information sources for data collection

a. The Impact Accelerator is a 12-month process designed to help organisations delivering youth social action to examine, build confidence in, and improve their programmes’ outcomes on the basis of evidence. Labstorms were a space created for Match Funders to share learning and collaborate on solving problems.

# The challenge of creating a common understanding of youth social action

The #iwill Fund has consisted of many different Match Funders offering diverse youth social action opportunities, which has driven the need to define what youth social action is. Throughout the #iwill Fund, both Match Funders and the #iwill Fund Learning Hub have shared their experience of trying to create a common understanding of youth social action.

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub observed in [earlier papers](#) that the lack of a clear definition for youth social action is a significant hurdle to generating useful evidence and learning for the field. Without a shared understanding of youth social action, it is difficult to generalise the outcomes of one youth social action opportunity to another.

Through evaluation of Match Funder opportunities, it became clear that some youth social action was happening but lacked recognition, whereas other Match Funders found that some delivery organisations had different understandings of what could be classed as youth social action. Some Match Funders reported that delivery organisations minimised their use of the term 'social action' and rather talked about specific young people and projects or referred to youth social action with terms like 'really good youth work'.

Similarly, some delivery organisations and Match Funders had different understandings of the core quality principles of youth social action that define key aspects of good quality youth social action (See page 7).

For example, some delivery organisations thought their projects were youth led due to a consideration of the young person's opinion. However, when examined, these projects were often inflexible to the needs and ideas of young people.

**A clear and common understanding of youth social action can aid smoother implementation of projects, create a more accurate picture of who is participating in youth social action, provide acknowledgement of young people taking part in social action and ultimately support its sustainability as a practice. Furthermore, this can create clarity on how to evaluate outcomes for children and young people, identify what outcomes are relevant to measure, and assess what outcomes are being achieved. Without a clear definition it is difficult to determine what can be considered as high-quality design to support effective outcomes.**

# Youth social action as an umbrella term

Youth social action is a broad umbrella under which an extensive range of activities and provision exists. This can make distinguishing what youth social action is especially difficult. For example, although volunteering sits under the umbrella of youth social action, not all volunteering activities can be classified as youth social action.

The 'range' of activities and provisions that sit under the umbrella of youth social action can be defined according to a number of parameters that are detailed further within this report. These include:

1. The **type of activities** undertaken
2. Whether the activities adhere to the core **quality principles** of youth social action detailed by the #iwill Campaign<sup>1</sup>.
3. Whether activities are **youth led** and aim to produce a double benefit
4. Whether the activities involve at least one of the three **core mechanisms** that improve the **socio-emotional skills, well-being or increasing knowledge of others and sense of belonging** of a young person.

**All of these parameters are important in recognising youth social action but may become apparent at different stages of a programme and serve different purposes.**



# Definitions of youth social action

Previously, youth social action has been defined by the #iwill Campaign as:

*"Youth social action refers to activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways in which young people can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning or supporting peers".<sup>2</sup>*

The above is a broad definition that encompasses a range of activities. While the definition is inclusive, it remains ambiguous in pinpointing exactly what youth social action is and lacks reflection of its double-benefit.

The #iwill Campaign, alongside IVAR and the Young Foundation, identified four commonly cited definitions of youth social action. To assess whether or not an activity can be classed as youth social action, youth social action activities have been characterised as being:

- 1. Group-based activities, involving young people in working together and supporting each other towards agreed goals.** While some groups may be locally based and depend upon face-to-face communication, digital communications free young people to take collective action nationally, internationally and globally.
- 2. Activist in nature.** Young people identify an issue of common concern to the group, and work to achieve positive change. This may be an issue arising from their immediate environments, such as school or community, or it may be something that concerns them at a national or international level.
- 3. Following a step-by-step process.** A planned process is integral to youth social action. The young people take responsibility for each stage of planning and activity is directed towards an agreed objective.
- 4. Owned by young people.** While appropriate adult facilitation is critical, the action is driven and managed by young people themselves. In pursuing their goals, young people acquire real-life experience of managing social change.<sup>3</sup>

Youth social action does not need to possess every condition detailed above. These conditions only add to our understanding of what can be considered as 'youth social action'. Crucially, these conditions do not include the benefit to young people, which is an aspect of youth social action.

# Definitions of youth social action

The benefit to young people is included in the core quality principles detailed by the #iwill Campaign<sup>4</sup>. These quality principles are:

- Be youth led
- Be challenging
- Have social impact
- Allow progression to other opportunities
- Be embedded in a young person's life
- Enable reflection about the value of the activity

The two main elements associated with youth social action that have been found to be key in youth social action within the #iwill Fund:

## **i) Double Benefit**

The first element is double benefit. Youth social action requires the definition and pursuit of two sets of outcomes or 'benefit' – for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action. Double benefit allows the young person to gain a greater social awareness and develop a wider perspective, which includes understanding and serving others. Overall, this should lead to a prioritisation of their own social impact early on in their lives<sup>5</sup>. It's important to note that 'communities' does not necessarily mean 'place-based' (although this could be the case) but can also extend beyond geographical location or even time, and refer to communities of shared culture, beliefs or lifestyles for example.

## **ii) Youth Led**

The second element of youth social action is that youth social action must be, at least to some extent, youth led. In practice this can mean young people making decisions about the community benefit they are trying to achieve, the activities they pursue, and the length of their engagement. Many Match Funders and delivery organisations agreed with this element for various reasons whether this was a rights-based reason for young people to have a voice in society or as a mechanism to promote outcomes (See page 20).

# What has the #iwill Fund funded over the years?

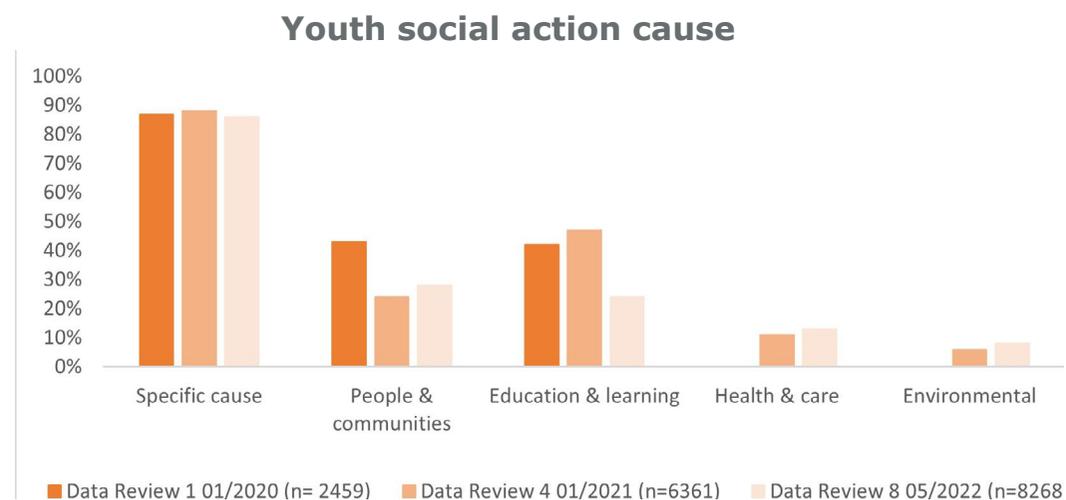
The #iwill Fund Information Management System (IMS) was introduced to track the coverage and nature of the projects supported through the #iwill Fund. Data is returned by Match Funders about the grants they have made, the grantee organisations who received the funding and the youth social action opportunities delivered by the grantee organisations. Three different data points between January 2020 and May 2022 within the #iwill Fund have been used to represent the beginning, middle point and most recent data on youth social action cause, delivery and typology. From the IMS data<sup>b</sup> it is possible to see what the #iwill Fund has funded from a bird's eye view. The most funded opportunities have been focused on a 'specific cause' that is important to the young person, as can be seen in Graph 1 to the right.

Graph 1 demonstrates the 'cause' that has driven youth social action across three data points from 2020 to 2022 within the #iwill Fund. 'Specific cause' is a deliberately broad term as it encompasses causes that are important to young people individually, or as a group. Some identifiable causes that are specific to young people amongst Match Funders include: animal welfare, bereavement, intergenerational linking, youth loneliness and mental health.

As can be seen in Graph 1, the most popular causes surrounded people and communities and education and learning. There was an increase during 2021 to 2022 in

interest in causes involving the environment and health and care. However, youth social action causes tend to be contextually relevant to the current events happening in young people's lives or **geographical location**.

For example, some Match Funders reported an increased interest in activities relating to well-being, health care and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>6</sup>. This may offer an explanation in the rise of interest in health and care and environmental causes.



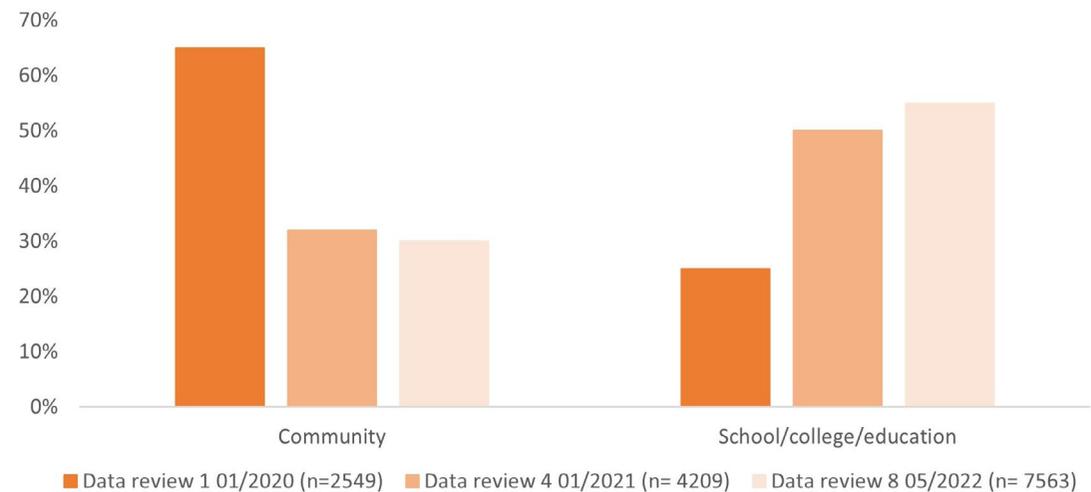
Graph 1. Targeted cause for youth social action over three data points

b. A total of 29 Match Funders fed into the IMS system bi-annually or annually, providing opportunity level data. The #iwill Fund completed spot checks and reasonableness checks to ensure that this data was accurate.

# What has the #iwill Fund funded over the years?

As can be seen in Graph 2, the most common delivery settings within the #iwill Fund have consistently been community and educational settings. Although there are changes in delivery across each data point, the core function of youth social action activities can still remain the same. This was most notable during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was an increase in digital or blended delivery to meet restriction requirements. Despite the move to online delivery, it was still possible to achieve the function of youth social action<sup>7</sup>. Suggesting that youth social action has flexibility in delivery setting.

**Where youth social action is delivered**



Graph 2. Setting of youth social action delivery over three data points

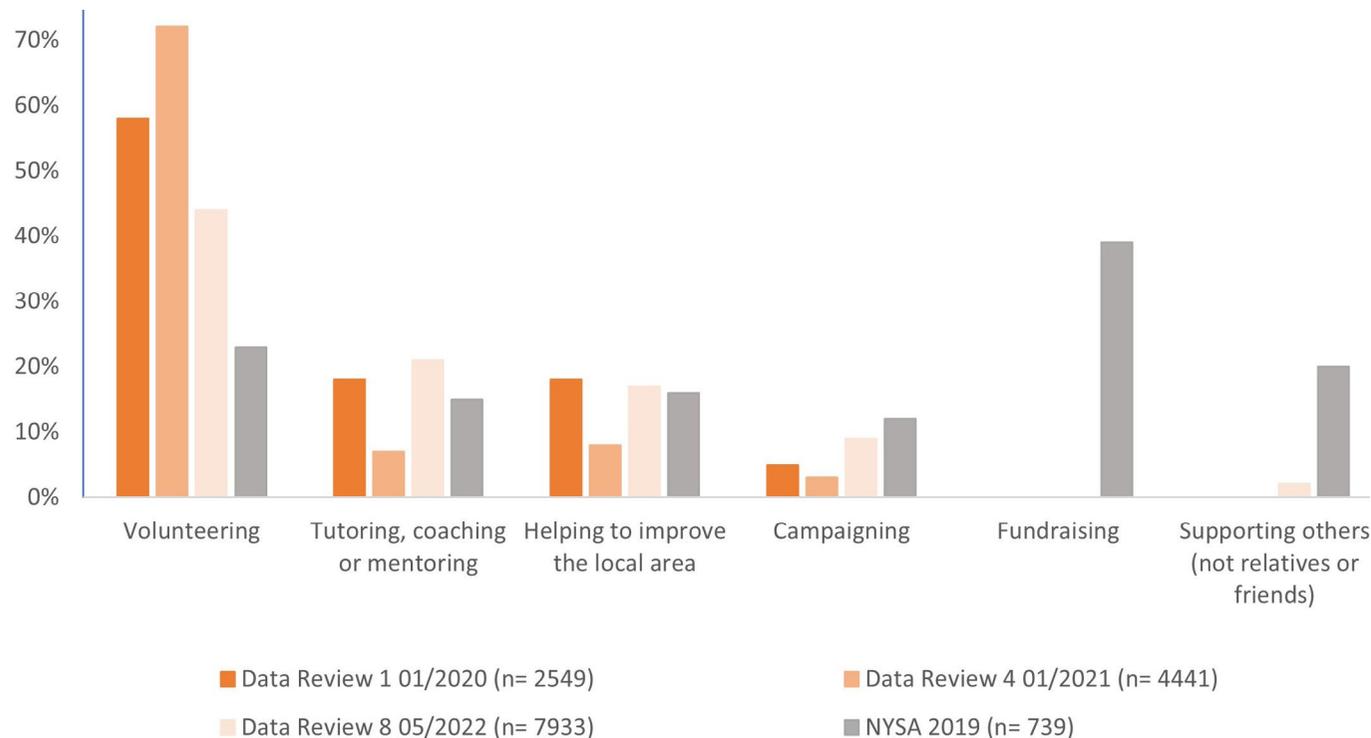
# Typology of youth social action

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub's paper '[Towards a Typology of Youth Social Action](#)' reviewed definitions and typologies of youth social action and began to build an evidence-based picture of the six different types of youth social action being supported by the #iwill Fund (as outlined in Graph 3). As the #iwill Fund has continued to grow, newer data has revealed a clearer picture of prevalent typologies when reviewing feedback from IMS data.

Graph 3 draws demonstrates that the percentage distribution has remained consistent throughout the #iwill

Fund, with the exception of data review 4. It also compares the prevalence of youth social action opportunities between these points with the most recent 2019 National Youth Social Action Survey (NYSA).

It should be noted that while NYSA reported that 'donating money or goods' encompassed the highest percentage of youth social action at 56%, the Ipsos review on National Youth Social Action Survey underlined that donating money or goods does not qualify as a meaningful youth social action opportunity as it does not produce a double benefit<sup>8</sup>.



Graph 3. Six types of youth social action, the proportion of young people doing each and the proportion of #iwill Fund opportunities supported. Sources: National Youth Social Action Survey 2019; #iwill Information Management system [Accessed 29/08/2022]

# Typology of youth social action

Youth social action volunteering is the most commonly funded opportunity. Tutoring, coaching and mentoring and helping to improve the local area also made up a larger portion of opportunities. Although campaigning has been funded by several Match Funders throughout the #iwill Fund, it still represents a smaller category of opportunities. There has been an increase in campaigning over data points, with the exception of [Data Review 4](#). The increase in campaigning could be explained by previously found anecdotal evidence that suggested it could be a result of the COVID-19 restrictions<sup>9</sup>. Due to the ease of delivering support in the form of campaigning online, while other 'service-based' activities were more likely to halt altogether during restrictions. The smallest categories of youth social action were fundraising, that made up less than 1% and supporting others who weren't relatives or friends which made up 2% of opportunities. Supporting others (not relatives or friends) was initially removed from youth social action typologies to provide some consistency with monitoring systems which Match Funders already had in use. However, some Match Funders underlined that excluding support of family and friends disregarded action that less affluent young people were already participating in, further driving the socio-economic gap to participation<sup>10</sup>. On consideration of this, supporting others (including family and friends) has been added to the youth social action definition. However, as this is new to the definition, data surrounding support of others (including family and friends) is inaccessible.

All six types of youth social action have been important in defining typologies of youth social action. While these are identified as primary typologies, some Match Funders offer youth social action opportunities that have a secondary type. For example, many young people may volunteer to improve their local area or volunteer to tutor, mentor or coach others (as can be seen in [2. Tutoring, Coaching or mentoring case study](#)). A huge consortium of Match Funders, delivery organisations and youth social action activities can take shape in a wide array of forms.

Over the next few pages are case studies of some activities that took place within the typologies of youth social action.



# 1. Volunteering



<b>Overview</b>	Youth social action volunteering allows young people the chance to <b>contribute to causes they care about through freely giving time or labour to support others or their community</b> . Youth social action volunteering involves an element of double benefit.
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Volunteering
<b>Case study</b>	<b>Greater London Authority</b>  Vinspired microgrants (from the Small Grants Programme)  In partnership with Thrive LDN, Team London have awarded grants to community groups and charities to promote good mental health and emotional wellbeing in young people. The grants fund volunteer projects for young Londoners disproportionately affected by mental health needs, such as those within the criminal justice system or young refugees or asylum seekers.  Below is a highlight from one young person taking part in a volunteering youth social action project:  "Our project aimed to change young people's "mindset" on mental health. We ran an event from 11-4 with classes, workshops and stalls all aimed at improving people's wellbeing. The event was based around a timetable of yoga, meditation and fitness classes run volunteer organisations. We had a mental health charity stall called the Voice Collective join us, the other stalls were food stalls, cupcake decorating and arts and crafts. We have all learnt more about mental health. We learnt teamwork skills, how to plan a budget, organisation, time management and working with other organisations" – Young person <sup>11</sup>

## 2. Tutoring, coaching or mentoring

<b>Overview</b>	Young people have the chance to <b>provide guidance, share knowledge or training to peers or others.</b>
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Tutoring, coaching or mentoring
<b>Case study</b>	<p><b>The Duke of Edinburgh's Award</b></p> <p>The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) Diamond Fund is committed to making grants to groups, leaders, and individual young people to enable them to take part in the DofE Award.</p> <p>Activities within the DofE can include mentoring as demonstrated below: A group of girls undertook Ambassador training after having achieved their DofE Bronze Awards. They arranged a meeting with the DofE Manager and developed an action plan for how they were going to assist with the delivery of the Award. They spoke to younger students to encourage them to take part in the Award and undertook a publicity campaign around the school. Finally, they came on the Bronze practice expedition as mentors to the younger students and encouraged others to work alongside them in this role.<sup>12</sup></p>



# 3. Helping to improve the local area



<b>Overview</b>	Young people have the chance to <b>contribute to their local area</b> . These are typically small-scale projects that promotes cleanliness, safety, improved aesthetic or contributing towards solving local problems for the community.
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Helping to improve the local area
<b>Case study</b>	<b>The Ernest Cook Trust</b>  360° Grant Award. 360° Grants (representing 360° circle of influence) are awarded to groups as 'seed corn' funding to initiate ideas and get projects started. At the end of December 2021, 133 grants of £360 had been awarded for groups for a variety of projects including:  Improving a local community area or schools' grounds by creating a garden, recycling (and upcycling) projects including a plastic bottle fashion show and creating sculptures out of waste, litter picking, improving biodiversity including bee hotels and wildflower meadows, planting trees and building ponds in local parks and gardens. <sup>13</sup>

# 4. Campaigning

<b>Overview</b>	Young people have the chance to <b>come together to work towards a particular goal for a cause</b> . Campaigning allows young people to have a voice and raise awareness about something they care about.
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Campaigning
<b>Case study</b>	<p>The <b>Act for Change Fund</b> is a £3.6 million partnership for organisations supporting young people working for change. It provides resources for young people to challenge social injustice, find ways of overcoming inequality and give voice to issues they are experiencing.</p> <p>Within this fund, <b>Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)</b> has enabled young people to lead and inform the development of stabilising and developmental interventions that meet the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking young people. KRAN provided training workshops for young people in public speaking and creating public awareness campaigns. Young people's campaigning activities included but were not limited to publishing a wordless book on refugee journeys, presenting issues to decision-makers, influencers and the public, and using social media to campaign through blogs and media interviews<sup>14</sup>.</p>



# 5. Fundraising



<b>Overview</b>	Young people have a chance to <b>gather voluntary contributions, monetary or resources to contribute towards a cause</b> they care about.
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Fundraising
<b>Case study</b>	<b>Premier League Charitable Fund (PLCF)</b>  The PLCF and #iwill partnership was launched In September 2019 running for three years to August 2022. One of the programmes run by PLCF is - <b>Premier League Primary Stars</b> – which supports primary schools across England and Wales with free access to resources, events and competitions to inspire children aged 5-11 to learn, be active and develop important life skills.  Young people from year 5 at Laithes Primary School worked together to create a social action project that raised much needed funds for Barnsley Animal Rescue Charity. The project saw young people from across the school run 1 mile a day for 1 week to raise funds for the local charity. Young people would do this during break times over the course of a day. In total they completed 810 miles and reached their target set at the project outset. In total £100 of funds were raised and the young people created a £100 hamper of gifts. The donation went towards vet bills, animal bedding and food. <sup>15</sup>

# 6. Supporting others

<b>Overview</b>	Young people have the chance to <b>support peers or other disadvantaged people.</b>
<b>Youth social action activity</b>	Supporting others (not relatives or friends)
<b>Case study</b>	<p>The <b>Housing Association of Youth Network (HAYN)</b> have continued their strategic partnership with InCommon after the success of their Intergenerational youth social action in 2021.</p> <p>Over the last six months <b>InCommon</b> have been facilitating intergenerational social action by sharing resources, project ideas and introducing youth organisations to their local resident Live Smart Schemes.</p> <p>InCommon have just launched a new campaign 'Hand Warmers Against Heating Costs'.</p> <p>This 'Hand Warmers Against Heating Costs' project encourages young people to make microwaveable hand warmers for an older person.<sup>16</sup></p>



# Typology of youth social action

The #iwill Fund offers a unique opportunity to gain insights from various youth social action activities. There are a number of considerations to be made when understanding the differences between youth social action typologies:

## **i) Activity led definitions are unstable and broad**

Youth voice is central to the direction of youth social action<sup>17</sup> and therefore, youth leadership and interests influence typology. Furthermore, the location of young people impacts the youth social action that they participate in, due to regionalised relevancy<sup>18</sup> and available resources of delivery partners. As such, defining youth social action solely on the type of activity taking place could lead to an ever-changing, broad definition that remains difficult to measure outcomes from.

## **ii) Limited ability to monitor online youth social action**

The IMS does not capture all youth social action that is happening. This may have been exacerbated throughout lockdowns during the pandemic during which social action delivery drastically changed to accommodate new restrictions and capabilities. Many youth social action opportunities moved to digital delivery. As monitoring online occurrence of youth social action was limited, this also impacted IMS data collection. Therefore, more youth social action may have occurred but is not included in the typology analysis presented in this report.

## **iii) Differing perspectives or interpretation of typologies**

Match Funders were given a survey to identify which typologies applied to the youth social action they were enabling. The interpretations and perceptions of how Match Funders categorised these typologies may have varied, especially as youth social action provisions can have multiple types of activities that overlap. This may have impacted how frequently a typology has shown to occur.



# What happens within youth social action?

Because 'youth social action' covers a diverse range of activities and is also a relatively new term, it's especially important to be as precise as possible in describing what activities a particular youth provision will enable, and how they think this will lead to change (these are known as the 'mechanisms of change'). Organisations' 'Theories of Change' are critical tools in defining and sharing these 'mechanisms of change' and provide a helpful lens in understanding the nature of youth social action in practice.

One way to further build an understanding of what youth social action is, is to review Match Funders' Theories of Change and the ways that change happens within youth social action. This review of the Theories of Change was done to add additional evidence to the [typology of youth social action](#) created as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub.

An analysis that evaluated various Theories of Change from Match Funder reports found three common activities that differ from traditional typologies. These included; 'fun and challenging activities, indoors and outdoors', 'reflective practice and planning of youth social action' and 'educational and training programmes' all of which can contribute to learning, development and well-being of young people participating in youth social action. This emphasises that youth social action does not always fit into one of the six typology categories. Therefore, youth social action cannot be defined solely by its typologies and a further dive into what additional aspects happen within youth social action is needed.

## What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change is a practical tool which helps teams design, deliver and evaluate their provision well. It requires a team to decide and describe the change they wish to make, articulate why they expect the change to happen, and set out what's needed to achieve it. Throughout the journey of the #iwill Fund, Match Funders and delivery organisations were asked to develop their own unique Theory of Change using both [Theory of Change: Guidance for organisations enabling youth social action](#) and [Theory of change: Guidance for Funders and Grantees](#) as tools to help guide development. The purpose of implementing a Theory of Change was to aid with high-quality design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of youth social action. Delivery organisations have been offered additional support and guidance throughout the development of their Theories of Change using the confidence framework<sup>19</sup>. From the Theories of Change developed, we were able to identify commonalities, specifically within mechanisms of change. Understanding mechanisms in Theory of Change is comparative to looking under a car bonnet of youth social action to discern what is driving the change in outcomes.

# Common mechanisms of change

Delivery organisations have developed Theories of Change using the confidence framework as a guide which can be [found here](#). The confidence framework is a tool designed to examine 5 fundamental components of a programme's life cycle, and within each highlights 5 areas for detailed examination. These include; design, delivery, monitoring evidence, determining double benefit and sustainability. A previous analysis of Match Funders' and delivery organisations' Theories of Change can be [found here](#). From this analysis, three common Mechanisms of Change has been underlined:

- Young people have a safe yet challenging space in which to develop practical, vocational and socio-emotional skills.
- Young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their wellbeing, self-concept and/or self-efficacy.
- Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging.

A more recent analysis was conducted on the most updated versions of existing Match Funders' and delivery organisations' Theories of Change. The Theories of Change were evaluated by reviewing common mechanisms and categorising them. This analysis strengthens the previous findings that 'safe challenge', 'self-directed action' and 'engaging with others' were the most prevalent mechanisms of change. Thus far, there has been greater evidence

from Match Funder reports on the efficacy of the 'safe challenge' mechanism, although this may change as more delivery organisations and Match Funders create and test their Theories of Change. Recent updates from Match Funder outcomes have provided more evidence for the effectiveness of the 'self-directed action' mechanism as insights emerged that young people felt greater confidence, agency and sense of achievement from youth social action. The 'engaging with others' mechanism continues to have mixed evidence for effectiveness when comparing external reviews with Match Funder reports. However, the benefits of young people building peer relationships during youth social action have become much more prevalent, which has grown the evidence base for the 'engaging with others' mechanism. Over the next few pages is a breakdown of the three mechanisms of change and evidence surrounding the effectiveness of each one.



# 1. Young people have a safe yet challenging space in which to develop practical, vocational and socio-emotional skills

## Overview

Youth social action provides young people with a chance to learn by doing. Young people act in a space where it is safe to fail but are nevertheless faced with real challenge against which they can practice and develop their skills.

## Features of the mechanism

- Training and teaching of practical, vocational or socio-emotional skills.
- A structured process in which social action is devised, completed and reflected upon.
- A clear role, and responsibility, for the young person to undertake.
- The young person takes a perceived risk. This should be emotionally challenging.
- The young person has some control over the direction of the activity.
- Social action takes place in a space where it's safe to fail. This may include:
  - » Structured time for reflection;
  - » Ongoing adult support;
  - » Limited scope of action.

## Examples

**Ormiston Academy Trust** is a multi-academy trust, aiming to build pupils' self-efficacy, resilience and social and emotional skills through youth social action as part of the core and wider curriculum. Social action is intended to enable pupils to "develop, practice and refine... and evidence social and emotional capabilities."

**HAYN Volunteering Academy Young Leaders Project** delivered by Peabody is designed to support young people to become leaders within their communities by enabling them to build their skills, confidence and knowledge through meaningful youth led social action and masterclasses. The accredited programme provides young people with funding, resources and knowledge to design and deliver social action projects to develop themselves, their peers and their wider communities. Partners are chosen based on their track record of working with hard-to-reach young people and delivering high quality services. All Young Leader projects are designed and delivered by the young people themselves.

Peabody provides structured processes for participation; funding; accreditation; signposting; masterclasses to develop young people's skills; and further development opportunities. The accreditation provides structure for young people to plan, deliver and reflect upon their project and their role in its success.

Partners offer the opportunity to young people who are already using their service, including young people who might not otherwise access social action and support young people to develop and deliver their ideas.

Specialist organisations provide expertise through delivering masterclasses or being commissioned by young people for their events e.g., networking and communication skills training, digital skills or event management<sup>20</sup>.



## Evidence

**There is promising evidence that these mechanisms are effective.**

Randomised controlled trials of opportunities that seek to use this mechanism of change have found small, statistically significant improvements in 'life skills' such as empathy, problem solving and cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

There is some evidence that youth social action contributes to the development of non-cognitive skills that are relevant for success in the classroom.<sup>22</sup>

## From the #iwill Fund

Of the young people on Virgin Money Foundation's Youth Advisory Panel, 100% self-reported improved decision-making skills and 57% improved teamworking skills.<sup>23</sup>

A pre-post evaluation of the HAYN Young Leaders Project shows a positive change in attitude to education, motivation and specific skills but no change in empathy, self-confidence, teamwork and resilience.<sup>24</sup>



## 2. Young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their wellbeing, self-concept and/or self-efficacy

### Overview

Youth social action opportunities enable young people to determine and carry out action to address an issue that matters to them. This can create the feeling of making a difference and give a sense of purpose and meaning to young people's lives, which may have a positive effect on their wellbeing, self-concept and/or self-efficacy.

### Features of the mechanism

- The young person chooses the cause for which they take social action.
- The young person has some control over the direction of the activity.
- A clear role, and responsibility, for the young person to undertake.
- Positive affirmation from others that social action is making a difference. This could come from programme leaders, peers or beneficiaries or the community.

### Examples

**Team London young ambassadors (TYLA)** connects young Londoners with their communities through social action. Since the programme began in 2013, they have helped

430,000 young people in over 2,000 schools across London start volunteering projects on issues they really care about.

TYLA conducted an end of year survey involving all participating schools. This included questions on numbers of hours volunteered, fundraising, as well as thematic insights on Learning and Leadership, School Culture and Community Engagement. For example:

- young people have demonstrated increased leadership among their peers, from organising projects and events to encouraging their peers to get involved
- Young people demonstrate more consideration of local and global issues in their everyday life choices, including kindness, recycling and energy conservation
- Young people feel a greater connection to their local community.<sup>25</sup>

The **EmpowHER programme** supported by Spirit of 2012 and delivered through UK Youth includes a component in which young women and girls (YW&G) undertake social action. Through social learning YW&G explore issues they care about tackling in their communities. Local youth workers and British Red Cross youth engagement workers support YW&G to explore project ideas. YW&G then lead their own social action project(s) in the community. Qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the programme suggests that YW&G experience improved wellbeing and/or self-efficacy.<sup>26</sup>

### Evidence

**The evidence for the effectiveness of this mechanism is still emerging.** The ways in which youth social action causes these changes is not well understood, while there is evidence of positive outcomes on well-being from participation in youth social action, the underlying mechanism is not well explained. One study showed an increase in life satisfaction and wellbeing, following participation in volunteering however, there was a lack of measure for the underlying mechanism<sup>27</sup>. One paper shows evidence of youth social action activities increasing self-efficacy and resilience by learning to set their own goals and empowering the young people to self-reflect. However, the evidence contained a very limited sample.<sup>28</sup>

### From the #iwill Fund

Team London Young Ambassadors has consistently shown small increases in educational attainment. Notably young people within this programme report a significant increase in their motivation after the project had finished. There is also evidence that wellbeing is improved by young people gaining a sense of meaning in their life and actions.<sup>29</sup>

A pre-post evaluation conducted by Spirit 2012 for EmpowHer shows a significant increase across areas including; confidence, resilience, responsibility and taking the lead amongst YG&W<sup>30</sup>. Indicating that 'self-directed action' has been an effective mechanism of change for Match Funders.

### 3. Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging

#### Overview

Youth social action opportunities enable young people to engage with and support different communities. These could be their local community, or communities of culture, interest, or experience. This can create a sense of belonging for the young person. It may also expose the young person to communities they would not otherwise meet which can increase their openness to and comfort with difference.

#### Features of the mechanism

- The young person meets people who are different to them/have different experiences.
- The young person has increased contact with people in their own communities.
- Through social action the young person makes a perceived positive contribution to their community.
- A community that can be reached by the young person (with adult support).
- Peer support is established and enables young people to relate to others and share emotions.
- The young person develops coping mechanisms by identifying and sharing emotions.

#### Examples

##### Greater London Authority (GLA)

GLA managed, and funded three different programmes designed to improve the mental health and well-being, reduce isolation and

increase social integration of young people. These were all match funded by #iwill.

- Booster Grants (from the Small Grants Programme);
- Team London Young Ambassadors, and;
- My London.<sup>31</sup>

#### Co-op Foundation

The Co-op Foundation have funded youth social action opportunities through the #iwill Fund with the goal of reducing loneliness and isolation in young people and society more widely. This was approached by enabling young people to take action in their communities. The programmes supported by Co-op Foundation aimed to increase the number of young people who have enough good quality relationships that are based on mutual trust and empathy and who felt part of a wider community that values their contribution.<sup>32</sup>

#### Evidence

**The evidence that these mechanisms are effective has gained traction over the course of the fund.** Previously, these mechanisms were said to have mixed evidence of effectiveness<sup>33</sup>. A previous investigation underlined a randomised control trial that found a decrease in social connectedness after engaging with youth social action participation due to the opportunity feeling disconnected with other parts of their lives<sup>34</sup>. However, there is evidence of positive effects from engaging with others.<sup>35</sup>



#### From the #iwill Fund

Match Funders have demonstrated an overall increase in 'engaging with others' mechanisms amongst young people. Pre-post survey data from Greater London Authority evidenced an increase in young people's social integration within their communities. Similarly, pre-post survey data from Spirit of 2012 reported a significant increase in young people's perception of their place in their communities (social cohesion), feeling accepted by others, a trust for others and meeting different people.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, early insights from a peer-research evaluation of Young Manchester's programmes show young people reporting benefits in terms of social connections.<sup>37</sup>

# Discussion

Youth social action has been difficult to define due to the ambiguity surrounding what youth social action looks like and what happens within youth social action. The #iwill Fund's previous definition has been:

*"Youth social action refers to activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways in which young people can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning or supporting peers."*

This paper has built upon this definition for youth social action providers:

***Youth social action can be defined as youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action. Youth social action can be flexible in delivery and must involve at least one of three core mechanisms that improve the skills, well-being or increasing knowledge of others and sense of belonging of a young person. These are:***

- ***Young people have a safe yet challenging space in which to develop practical, vocational and socio-emotional skills.***
- ***Young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their well-being, self-concept and/or self-efficacy.***
- ***Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging.***

It is important to acknowledge that youth social action is an intentionally broad term that encompasses an array of activities. These typologies can co-occur within youth social action (e.g., a young person can primarily volunteer but also fundraise) or an opportunity is solely focused on one type of youth social action. Although the typology is useful for developing Theories of Change and contributes to our understanding of what activities in youth social action might look like, it cannot be used as a sole parameter in distinguishing what falls under the umbrella of youth social action.

Because youth social action covers a diverse range of activities, in this report, we have provided evidence on the three core mechanisms of change which are central to the success of youth social action and can occur within any type of youth social action activity. These common mechanisms of change include: "safe challenge", "self-directed action" and "engaging with others".

# Discussion

Understanding these commonalities has helped define what happens within youth social action and what features enable change.

Throughout this paper, we have unpacked how types of youth social action activities, quality features, outcomes and impact, mechanisms of change, youth involvement and theoretical underpinnings all contribute to our understanding of what can qualify as youth social action. Importantly, these different aspects of identifying youth social action may come into play at different stages of programme delivery as well as serving different purposes.

## Next steps...

This has been the first of a four-part series in answering the sector evidence plan questions (**see Appendix 2**). All outputs from the #iwill Fund Learning Hub can be found on the Centre for Youth Impact **website here**. The next steps in addressing the sector evidence plan questions will be to review “How do we support Youth Social Action for all?” in the second of the four-part series.

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# Appendix 1: List of Match Funders

BBC Children in Need  
Bite Back 2030  
Careers & Enterprise Company  
Clarion Futures  
Comic Relief  
Co-op Foundation  
Dulverton Trust  
Dunhill Medical Trust  
Global Action Plan  
Global Fund for Children  
Greater London Authority  
Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade  
Liverpool Football Club Foundation  
Mumsnet  
National Deaf Children's Society  
One Million Mentors  
Ormiston Trust  
Paul Hamlyn Foundation & Esmee Fairbairn Foundation

Pears Foundation  
Premier League Charitable Fund  
Scouts Association  
Sovereign Housing Association  
Spirit of 2012  
Sport England  
The Diana Award  
The Duke of Edinburgh's Award  
The Ernest Cook Trust  
UK Community Foundations  
UK Youth  
UpRising  
V inspired  
Virgin Money Foundation  
Volunteering Matters  
WE Foundation  
Young Manchester  
Youth Endowment Fund

# Appendix 2: Sector Evidence Plan

## Question: What is youth social action?

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub exists to harness the evidence and learning generated by the wave of youth social action opportunities supported through the #iwill Fund. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub developed the sector evidence plan questions in consultation with stakeholders in the #iwill Fund – Match Funders, their evaluation partners, and the #iwill Fund Leadership Board. The sector evidence plan questions have largely guided the learning of the learning hub.

Question	Sub-questions
What is Youth Social Action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What types of youth social action have been funded, including via digital delivery?</li> <li>• What are common Theories of Change?</li> </ul>
What does Youth Social Action do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What positive outcomes have been shown to be promoted for CYP and communities?</li> <li>• How can double benefit be managed?</li> <li>• What features of youth social action make it effective?</li> </ul>
How do we support Youth Social Action for all?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we reach CYP from backgrounds less likely to participate?</li> <li>• How do we reach younger children?</li> <li>• How do we initiate youth social action in 'cold spots' (places/institutions/sectors)?</li> <li>• What are the pros and cons of digital delivery for reaching all young people?</li> </ul>
How can we support quality Youth Social Action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we know about strengths and weaknesses of providers? - What do we know about supporting providers to improve?</li> <li>• How can digital delivery support the quality principles?</li> </ul>



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