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# #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream

Follow up on the first #iwill Fund Learning Hub  
Labstorms

The Centre for Youth Impact  
January 2020

## Follow up on the first #iwill Fund Learning Hub Labstorms

The Centre for Youth Impact is facilitating four sets of LabStorms as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. LabStorms are collaborative problem-solving sessions designed to help generate and explore actionable responses to challenges with which organisations are wrestling. The first set of LabStorms was held on 17 June 2019. There were two sessions on the day, led by Bridget McGing (Deputy Director, the Pears Foundation) and Viv Jackson (Programmes & Learning Manager, Act for Change Fund).

In December 2019, six months after the first Labstorms, the Centre conducted short follow up interviews with each presenter, asking them to reflect on their experience of the session and to explore how their thinking and practice has moved on since taking part. Below is a summary these conversations.

It should be noted that we are not expecting to evidence that great change has taken place since the LabStorms: we are of course aware that the issues discussed are beyond the power of any one organisation to 'solve', and the problems addressed were sufficiently complex and significant that one would not expect to see a great deal of movement over a six months period. Nevertheless, the follow up provides an opportunity to explore how thinking and practice has evolved over this time period.

### The Pears Foundation, Bridget McGing

For the first LabStorm in June 2019, Bridget McGing, Deputy Director at Pears Foundation, led a discussion on community benefit. The following question was used to frame the discussion:

*How should we, as funders, support others to understand and communicate their community benefit?*

#### Rationale behind the topic

- In the context of the #iWill Fund, Youth Social Action is defined by its 'double' benefit – the impact the activity has on both the young person, and their community. For Pears Foundation, however, it has felt increasingly as though there is a greater focus on the benefits of social action for the young people involved, than the effect of this action on the surrounding communities. Efforts and approaches to understanding, and potentially harnessing, any community impact feels like a "niche issue" across the sector.
- Across the #iWill Fund, significant activity is being delivered by youth sector organisations, or through youth focused Match Funders, and consequently can have an understandably greater focus on the young people involved. As the Pears #iWill Fund has increased its activity in non-youth sector organisations (such as NHS Trusts), this has been amplified, and led to an interest in exploring how both sides of the equation can be represented.

## Preparation for the LabStorm

- Preparing for the session, particularly with the support from the Centre, was beneficial for narrowing and refining the remit of the topic. Although it feels like a niche issue, it is also a wide-ranging topic, and the preparation, especially the forming of the questions, helped to give it “a more coherent shape” both for the LabStorm and for Pears’ own internal thinking.
- The preparation process was also constructive for thinking about questions that we can legitimately ask and share with other funders, even where funded work or funding approaches differ. This has felt important for moving towards collective or shared solutions across funders.

## Development of thinking since the LabStorm

- The role of community benefit had been a core driver of Pears’ support of social action prior to their engagement with the #iwill Fund, but owing to the different drivers of the other Match Funders, it has felt at times like “a bit of an echo chamber”, lacking direct comparisons in approach and focus that would enable easy collaboration or shared learning. A key takeaway from the LabStorm is that they no longer feel they are in an echo chamber. There was a strong sense of shared interest in the topic, with most Match Funders in agreement that more focus on community benefit would not dilute or betray their work, but enhance and sustain it. The willingness of other Match Funders to engage in the debate provided confidence for Pears Foundation, to “continue pushing to have conversations around the topic, or even to push a little harder”.

## Commitments to action

- Pears Foundation did not make any explicit commitments to action in the LabStorm because they “didn’t go into it with an agenda” and “didn’t feel like this is a topic we own in any way”. The main thing they came away with was a sense of confidence and legitimacy in the issue, encouraging them to talk about the topic more often and more openly.
- For instance, Pears Foundation have had more conversations around community benefit with the partners they fund (with mixed results). Some partners (particularly in the youth sector) feel that tackling the issue is “just too complicated at the moment”. While this is understandable, through having these conversations the Foundation are supporting organisations to “break down what they mean by ‘too difficult’, and what might be in their grasp as the next small step”. They have also been more open in asking what the organisation might be missing out on by not championing the community impact of their work.

## Follow up interaction since the session

- Structured follow-up since the LabStorm has primarily taken place through Dartington Service Design Lab and the #iwill Campaign, with more informal discussion taking place with other Match Funders. Pears have shared their internal frameworks on thinking about community benefit with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, as a means of continuing the conversation.
- There was a feeling on the day that “this was something we could all do more of as funders”. Pears Foundation would be interested to know if other Match Funders have taken action on the issue since the session, but are not aware whether this is the case.
- In conversations with other key players in the #iwill campaign, there has been interest and surprise that there was such an appetite to discuss community benefit. Despite the learning opportunity the LabStorm provided for the Match Funders, Pears Foundation felt there was a missed opportunity in terms of wider listening and learning for the partnership because the conversation has not been more widely recognised. They feel it could be instructive to have

others listening to these conversations as they are happening (though they equally recognise the practical challenges of ensuring the right people are in the room).

## Setting of the LabStorm

- As both a participant and a presenter, Pears Foundation felt the LabStorm “was one of the best #iwill Fund sessions we’ve had in terms of actually making progress”. Reasons for this included: it was well structured; a good amount time and resource that went into the preparation; and the coherence of the group (i.e. all participants were funders with things in common and shared interests).
- It was noted that, in leading a challenge, “you are essentially presenting and receiving at the same time, which is an intense form of interaction”. Whilst there are practical restrictions, it would’ve been valuable to have more space to reflect and gather thoughts on the day.

## Act for Change Fund, Viv Jackson

For the second LabStorm, Viv Jackson, Programme and Learning Manager for the Act for Change Fund (a partnership between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation), led a discussion on developing a habit of social action. It was focussed on the following question:

*What role should we, as funders, have in creating or supporting the structures that are needed to make social action a habit for life, for all young people?*

## Rationale behind the topic

- A key hypothesis that underpins youth social action projects is the idea that once young people have participated in these kinds of activities, they are likely to continue participating in similar forms of social action in the future. This belief is based on an assumption that the skills, dispositions, and sense of self that is developed through the activities will lead to and sustain more social action in the future, therefore forming a ‘habit’.
- The Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation were keen to explore this idea with other Match Funders because they recognise that the evidence base to support this hypothesis is in its early stages of development and is not conclusive. Additionally, they noted that the young people they work with have lived experience of disadvantage and inequality: they considered whether the idea of ‘habit’ has a particular manifestation in their work, and have some reservations as to whether it necessarily develops in the way that is hypothesised.

## Preparation for the LabStorm

- The idea of a habit of social action had been pertinent before the session and so they “had a lot of questions floating around in our heads”. Similarly to the Pears Foundation, they found the preparatory conversations with the Centre in advance of the session valuable, both for the purposes of their own reflection, and in order to “put the topic in a context that was relevant and helpful for all the Match Funders”.

## Development of thinking since the LabStorm

- One of the most useful things about the LabStorm was that “the conversations mean you are no longer in silo”, and to “go beyond our own mental echo chamber”. Whilst the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation have regular conversations on the topic within their teams, the LabStorm allowed them to broaden their thinking and get varied perspectives from across the diverse range of Match Funders in the #iwill Fund.
- For instance, there is some scepticism around the idea of a “habit of service” as a way to describe young people’s continued engagement with youth social action. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation felt this concept is not necessarily appropriate to the young people they work with: whilst they may want to give back to their communities, they don’t necessarily think about their lives in terms of service to others. It was helpful to explore this with people who had been around at the origins of youth social action, to discuss how the concept had originated in the US where youth social action is viewed very differently. This historical context has since helped them to see the concept of ‘service’ more positively, to understand that others share similar concerns, and to consider relevant alternative concepts such as ‘habit of activism’ or ‘habit for change’.
- The LabStorm has also supported their thinking on how the concept of ‘habit’ is defined. For instance, in some research ‘habit’ is defined in quite a ‘low level’ way (with a general focus on young people’s intentions over the next six months). They have considered alternative ways of defining the concept that would refer to more regular and structured engagement.
- Nevertheless, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aren’t directly focussed on the idea of a habit of social action in their day-to-day work because they are funding two-year programmes, and “the concept of a habit is a much longer term issue”. They may pick up some qualitative comments from young people, and if there is a continuation of the projects it is something they would be interested look into in more depth in the future.
- The Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation are interested to keep up with the findings from other organisations who keep in contact with young alumni who have gone through youth social action programmes, to explore if and how habits of social action are developed.

## Follow up interaction since the session

- The first LabStorm on the topic of community benefit was equally pertinent to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and they felt the ongoing interaction around this “has been more live”, with more continued conversations since the sessions June.

## Setting of the LabStorm

- The intense structure of the LabStorms offers “an exciting opportunity to dig deeper into the issues that niggle with us, with lots of people who have interest in one area”. It is felt it should be more standard to talk through things in this way with others who have practical experience.
- They felt the conversation was well facilitated and they received useful questions and comments from others in the room.
- It was noted that there is no way to make the session anonymous, and that the topics discussed vary in how relevant they are to others in the room. These are both challenges with the nature of the session which are difficult to avoid, but both worked fine in practice.