#iwill Fund Learning Hub

Quality Practice Workstream

Final Report on the Third Impact Accelerator Cohort

The Centre for Youth Impact
December 2021

Introduction

The Quality Practice workstream of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub seeks to identify strengths and areas for development in youth social action delivery, by supporting learning and improvement amongst delivery organisations, and sharing the resulting learning with funders and beyond. At the core of this workstream is a 12-month learning programme, developed by Generation Change and now delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact ("the Centre"), called the Impact Accelerator. This scheme is undertaken by #iwill Fund grantees individually and as part of a peer cohort. The Impact Accelerator is structured around a self-assessment tool, originally developed by the Dartington Service Design Lab ("Dartington"), called the Confidence Framework. The self-assessment process sits alongside a package of training, consultancy, and coaching to help organisations to use the tool to inform and drive improvement and learning.

By supporting delivery organisations to understand and improve their offer in this way, and by building their capacity to clarify and learn about their programme outcomes, this work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. This will also generate insights that can inform Match Funders' understanding of practice across different settings. Alongside, the Impact Accelerator aims to establish a strong community of practice amongst organisations offering youth social action opportunities, all of whom are using the Confidence Framework as a common self-assessment process to better understand and improve their impact.

The Quality Practice workstream has supported three cohorts of organisations in total to undertake the process. The learning from each cohort has fed into two Quality Practice Insights Reports - one during the early stages to capture initial insights, and one produced at the end, once improvement work has been implemented. These reports build on each other, with learning from each cohort feeding into the delivery and reports for the next. You can read previous papers here:

- Cohort One - Initial Insights Report and Final Insights Report
- Cohort Two - Initial Insights Report and Final Insights report
- Cohort Three - Initial Insights Report

This is the Final Insights Report for the third cohort, which commenced the Impact Accelerator in September 2020. In this paper, we build on initial learning from the start of the cohort and share additional insights and reflections following each organisation's completion of their identified improvement actions, and a final review meeting.
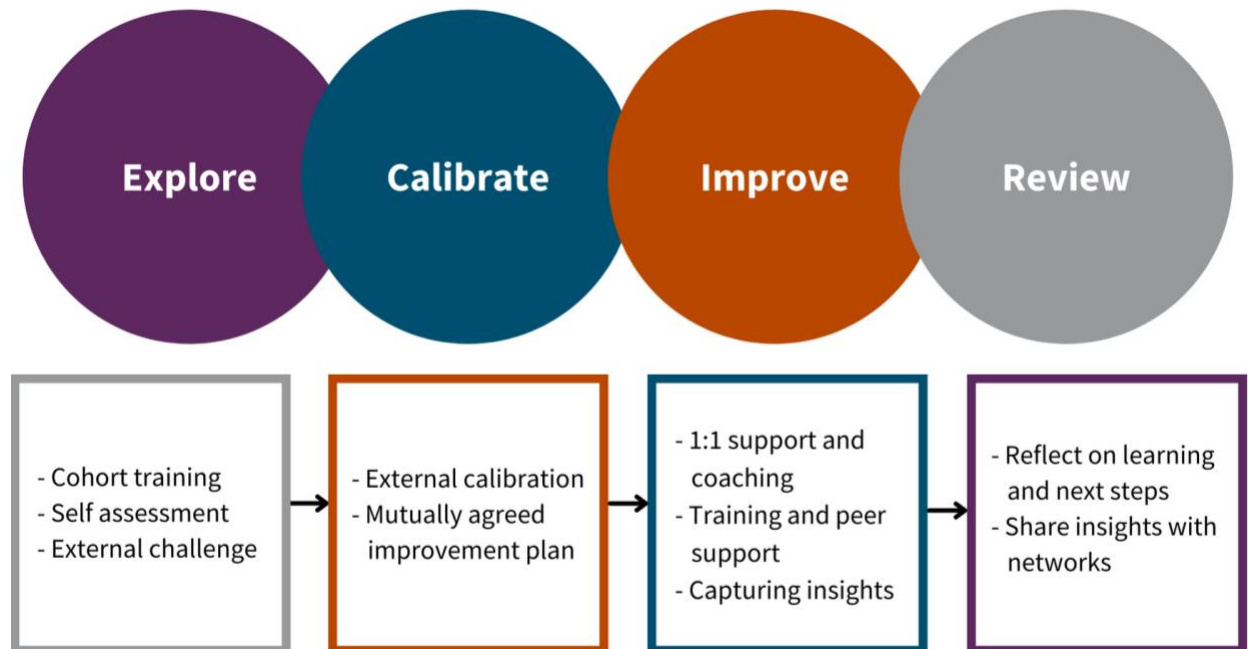
The Impact Accelerator Programme

The Impact Accelerator is an intensive, 12-month programme for organisations offering youth social action opportunities that are committed to getting (even) better at what they do. It is designed to work towards three core aims:

     i) to foster a culture of learning within programme delivery;
     ii) to build organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement; and
     iii) to establish a common assessment of programme efficacy.

It is a cohort-based programme, with opportunities for organisations to share collective lessons, insights and good practice as they progress through the process. Whilst many participants can recognise the potential value of this aspect, most have not felt that they had the capacity to make full use of the community. For the second and third cohorts, we have therefore focused efforts on connecting relevant organisations within and between cohorts as and when there is clear benefit, demand, and capacity to do so.

The Impact Accelerator programme takes place over four key phases:

Explore — **Calibrate** — **Improve** — **Review**

- Cohort training
- Self assessment
- External challenge

- External calibration
- Mutually agreed improvement plan

- 1:1 support and coaching
- Training and peer support
- Capturing insights

- Reflect on learning and next steps
- Share insights with networks

1) Explore

The common structure running through each of these phases is the Confidence Framework, which supports organisations to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to prioritise their improvement goals. Building on feedback from Cohort Two organisations – as well as the experience of Centre and Dartington staff in administering the process – we rebuilt the Confidence Framework in the spring of 2020. More detail on this can be found in the appendix of our last report.

These new forms are 'in beta' and will be further refined in the light of feedback from Cohort Three organisations. Examples of some of the questions contained within the 'Design' form can also be found in the Initial Insights Report for this cohort, pages 4-5.

2) Calibrate

The participating team then gathers evidence as grounds for their 'confidence' rating, which is 'calibrated', via a moderated review from two external coaches (members of staff from Dartington and/or the Centre). This calibration is not a 'pass/fail' process: rather, it provides the organisation with a broader perspective, informed by external insight and expertise, and how others in the cohort have rated and evidenced their confidence levels. It also indicates any areas where they may have over- or under-estimated how established their practice is within each of the five pillars.

3) Improve

The calibrated Confidence Framework then informs the production of a targeted improvement plan, which sets out specific objectives that the organisation is committed to achieving; for example, developing a specific theory of change for the youth social action opportunity, or creating new tools to support implementation fidelity, such as a checklist for delivery. This is undertaken with a combination of dedicated one-to-one support (usually with a member of staff from the Centre), as well as peer review and support from other members of the cohort.

Some of the objectives may be achievable within the 12-month timeframe of the Accelerator; others will be set out for the medium and long term. Crucially, the process as a whole is intended to support a cycle of continuous quality improvement – assess, plan and improve – that manifests across every aspect of participating organisations' work.

4) Review

The final phase sees the organisation return to the Confidence Framework and their improvement plan, re-assessing themselves and reflecting on any changes they see. This also provides a backdrop for a final 'improvement report' and/or review meeting, which combines a retrospective review of the process, and identifies next steps for the organisation in its continuous quality improvement cycle. Cohort participants are also actively encouraged to share insights, learning, and examples of effective practice that others can apply to their own context.

How far have we met the programme aims?

i) Foster a culture of learning within youth programme delivery

8 out of 11 organisations in this cohort have completed all phases of the programme. Although this is slightly fewer than previous cohorts, more individual organisations have been able to make progress with specific improvement priorities than those in Cohort Two, whose 'improvement' phase fell at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic was starting to take effect across the United Kingdom. Whilst Covid-19 has continued to disrupt and place additional pressures on delivery organisations, as noted later on in this report, it has done so in a different way and at a different pace (for example, there was no sudden loss of contact as buildings were closed and activities were rapidly moved online). Consequently, many organisations have been able to engage deeply with the questions that have emerged through the self-assessment process and, as detailed in the insights section below, have demonstrated some notable examples of behaviour and culture change. We are confident, therefore, that we have made good progress towards this programme aim.

> *"[It was] really good to learn that extra level of insight […] it opened my eyes to a whole new way of planning."*
> **Kent Refugee Action Network [KRAN]**

> *"Changes have included an understanding internally that more time is needed to set up projects well with quality, best practice etiquette and strong outcomes at the heart of this planning."*
> **Cardboard Citizens**

Longer-term culture change is harder to assess at this stage. There is no doubt that dedicated individuals will work hard to maintain and continue to build strong learning cultures at their organisations, but it is also a reality that further progress will significantly rely on the sustainability of programmes and organisations, staff retention, and ongoing capacity and resourcing for reflective work.

ii) Build organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement

The Impact Accelerator has proved effective in meeting this aim. Organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement requires staff to engage in regular reflective practice, to be able to prioritise improvement work, and to make decisions that are driven by data and evidence. There are obvious resourcing implications here, but it also requires practitioners to be equipped with the right tools and frameworks to support ongoing quality improvement. This can be as simple as starting with asking the right questions (for example, those provided through the Confidence Framework), as well as building

confidence and wider advocacy for driving forward dedicated improvement efforts. The Impact Accelerator helps with this:

> *"[The Impact Accelerator] gave us as practitioners that golden ticket, or that backing, to say what was important. We felt it was important but being on the programme, it gave us that push and that drive to actually say, internally, this is what's important - this is what we need for it to be effective, successful, all these things."*
> **Just for Kids Law**

> *"The Centre for Youth Impact has helped us think outside the box and to begin a process of developing something that will be very useful long term."*
> **Youthscape**

In review meetings, many participants also noted an increased awareness or realisation of the significant time needed for ongoing quality improvement through reflection and action planning, as well as the need to engage a wide range of colleagues and other stakeholders in the process.

Participants have shared helpful learning and insights from the perspective of driving evidence-led improvement at their respective organisations, which are summarised in the Key Insights section below. These insights are also used to inform the Recommendations for Match Funders that conclude this report.

iii) Establish a common approach to understanding and improving impact

The key concepts and frameworks noted in previous reports continue to resonate with organisations as a helpful way to understand and improve impact, again supporting us to make progress on this aim. These concepts and frameworks include: a focus on social and emotional learning outcomes for young people; a 'low stakes accountability' [1] approach to self-assessment and improvement; and a commitment to ongoing cycles of assessing, planning, and improving. Specific concepts that seem to have particularly resonated and proved useful to cohort participants include **mechanisms of change** and '**core and flex**' - as demonstrated by the Key Insights shared below.

> *"Being able to sit together as a team to go through the assessment questions was extremely valuable and it forced us to reflect on how we design, implement and evaluate our programmes. The process is equally applicable to all our programme areas at FORWARD."*
> **FORWARD**

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[1] This is a term drawn from the Youth Programme Quality intervention, a continuous quality improvement process that has been piloted across the UK by the Centre, with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. Low stakes accountability means that teams are collectively accountable to each for identifying where and how they can improve, improvements are attainable, and resources and support are available (internally and externally) to achieve them.

As flagged in previous reports, from both the Impact Accelerator and other streams of work within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, there is still much work needed to support youth organisations to build consistently strong foundations in their design, delivery, and evaluation of social action opportunities. Many Cohort Three participants have yet to identify and select measurement tools to test out specific elements of their theories of change, or to establish a strong evidence base for their theories of change. This work is required before we can make more progress in identifying specific gaps in evidence for youth social action or opportunities for shared measurement at a wider scale, particularly given the breadth of activities on offer.

Continuing to increase the sustainability and embedding of meaningful quality improvement processes (i.e. reflective practice and action based on data), and improving the design and delivery of opportunities will therefore be essential groundwork for building a common approach to understanding and improving impact across the sector. Again, our recommendations to Match Funders propose some ways in which we might move forward.

Ongoing COVID-19 response and mitigation

Covid-19 has continued to disrupt delivery of youth provision for all organisations involved in Cohort Three, further impacting their capacity to sustain engagement with learning and improvement work throughout the programme. Whilst 8 out of 11 organisations completed all phases of the programme and have made good progress with improvement priorities, engagement has ebbed and flowed over the past 12 months, which has required the Centre to be highly flexible in providing timely support for participants. As reflected by cohort feedback, this flexibility is important to ensure that any improvement efforts are meaningful and realistic, but it does present challenges for the programme's cohort model. For example, it has not been possible to provide many cohort-wide training opportunities, as organisations have progressed at different paces and required different support at various time points throughout the year. This has a knock-on effect on our ability to create a strong 'community of practice' through the programme.

As we discuss in this blog, organisational churn and instability was not uncommon before Covid-19, however it has, without question, made it increasingly challenging for many organisations to sustain continuous quality improvement efforts. That said, in some cases it has actually provided organisations with more 'head space' and time to do reflective work. We share more detailed reflection on the impact of Covid-19 in the **Key Insights** section below on pages 18-19.

Outputs

The findings in this report are based on reviewing the following programme touchpoints and activities:

- Self-assessed Confidence Frameworks for 10 organisations participating in the Impact Accelerator (one organisation dropped out prior to self-assessment);
- Calibrated Confidence Frameworks for these same 10 organisations;
- Submitted evidence in support of each organisation's Confidence Framework scores;
- Case notes from each organisation's 1:1 meetings;
- Case notes from 10 improvement meetings with Research Associates (two organisations dropped out after this point);
- Completed improvement plans from six organisations;
- Case notes from five theory of change workshops;
- Case notes from nine review calls; and
- Feedback generated from staff and Associates working on the Impact Accelerator throughout the process.

The #iwill Fund Cohort Three

Having begun their Impact Accelerator involvement with three virtual training sessions in September 2020, the majority of organisations in Cohort Three progressed through the first two stages of the process – 'Explore' and 'Calibrate' – between October 2020 and March 2021, resulting in the production of a set of improvement priorities within an improvement plan. Dedicated support was then offered to each organisation to support them in advancing these improvement priorities in the 'Improve' phase. Some organisations took advantage of this offer, for example attending a theory of change workshop facilitated by the Centre, whilst others pressed on independently or with external consultants with whom they already had a relationship. Others took a mixed approach, seeking feedback from the Centre on outputs produced independently or with an external partner.

One organisation dropped out from the Impact Accelerator after the initial training, and another had a staff change which meant the process could not realistically be picked up again. One final organisation decided to withdraw at a later stage when they decided that the Impact Accelerator support and structure no longer felt appropriate for their nominated project.

An extensive summary of the youth social action provision delivered by each of the Cohort Three organisations, their specific improvement goals, improvement work completed, and the next steps that they identified for their ongoing improvement efforts is provided in the Appendix on page 24. The

two organisations who dropped out before identifying improvement goals are not included in this summary.

Key Learning and Insights

Insights about practice from improvement work

Theory of change

Most organisations spent some time developing a theory of change, as well as starting to use it in new ways, for example as a template for other projects and activities, or to consult with young people and other stakeholders on programme design and delivery. Participants reported multiple benefits from this work including greater internal clarity about programme elements (which in turn facilitated other benefits, such as more effective referrals of young people in-house); being able to better explain to young people and stakeholders what the youth social action opportunity consists of and supporting them to make informed decisions about engagement; and helping to capture and plan for evaluation in a more realistic way.

> *"We realised that 90% of the mechanisms and outcomes could be applied to our over 25 [other] programmes as well."*

> *"The learning from the [youth social action] theory of change will also continue to be embedded in our organisational theory of change."*

> **Cardboard Citizens**

Attending to specific data types

As part of their work on theory of change, several organisations spent time reflecting and improving on their use of specific data types, including:

- Demographic data - "Looking at the difference in terms of the demographics between the youth social action programme and others to map the 'typical' attendees and those 'unusual suspects.'"
- Outcomes - building clarity around outcomes and making sure they are understood by different team members
- Mechanisms of change - establishing what they are and how they can be delivered with fidelity.

"The programme outcomes have changed and it is therefore much more realistic what we are wanting the young people to achieve over the programme."
Youthscape

"We are working towards how we can look at assessing [mechanisms of change] into other strand areas when our programme finishes. This will help staff development, especially when bringing new programmes to the table. [...] It has been helpful to drill down into "why we do what we do" and how we can carry that through into further funding bids. Also discussing how we measure each mechanism of change."
Positive Youth Foundation

Mechanisms of change proved to be a particularly helpful concept for organisations to reflect on their programme design, delivery, and quality, and can be seen as a **connector between different components of the Confidence Framework**, as we demonstrate in the following sections.

"Why do we do what we do? If we're doing things for the sake of it, we probably shouldn't be doing it."
Positive Youth Foundation

"Firstly, [we wanted] to develop an understanding of what mechanisms of change meant/were [...] to work out exactly what happens within our practical sessions that we can evidence as an impact on participants, including how/why. Developing [mechanisms of change] will also help with determining what are the core competencies and skills needed by staff to deliver activities as intended."
Positive Youth Foundation

"[We] gained a much clearer picture from the beginning of what needs to be put in place at the beginning to get the successes/impacts later on."
Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)

Work on theory of change also enabled improvement work on other areas of the Confidence Framework, including:

Target groups - young people and communities
Those who spent time defining and refining their target groups felt that they could now better ensure programmes are meeting the needs of young people (and start to identify an evidence base against this), as well as 'maintaining *youth-ledness* at the core' of their work. One organisation, which does not work exclusively with young people, was able to scrutinise what makes its youth programme unique compared to its other activities, building on its work identifying mechanisms of change. Several

organisations also used work on target groups to improve their programme delivery guidance - for example, including criteria for recruitment in a programme manual, whilst others used it to inform consultations with stakeholders about their theory of change.

Stakeholders

Many participants prioritised consultation with young people and other stakeholders within their improvement work. One organisation formalised their stakeholder management by mapping and consolidating stakeholders into one document, whilst another thought about how stakeholders contribute to data collection (for example, through feedback or collecting 'stories of change'), and assessed how their youth programme sits within a wider network of support for young people, including family engagement. In this latter example, focused reflection on a specific programme ended up feeding into wider strategic conversations about the organisation's evolving identity. Other participants prioritised staff consultation within their improvement work, as a method to ensure that staff felt engaged, informed, and involved in decisions regarding delivery and wider organisational priorities.

> *"Lots more consultation, team feel far more engaged than ever before, far more understanding of mechanisms and why we do things. [Senior management team] talk a lot more about how the team [is] involved and aware of strategic decisions."*
> **Make Some Noise**

Codifying and manualising

Two organisations focused on developing internal manuals or similar resources, for example programme flowcharts to sit alongside existing documentation such as risk assessments, timelines and milestone trackers, and staff training plans.

> *"[We want] to create a full overview of the programme – amalgamated into one place – and refocus. Support to identify gaps in process, delivery techniques and additional programme needs."*
> **Positive Youth Foundation**

This work has also supported with engagement of young people:

> *"This has been a great support when introducing the programme to young people and also other staff within the organisation as well as outside partners. It clearly sets out what is undertaken as part of the programme and the intended outcomes. When working with young people this is especially helpful, as it means they can see a full picture of what they are engaging in and also have an informed choice in regard to retention."*
> **Positive Youth Foundation**

Two organisations have been developing resources for external partners to use, including other youth organisations, and schools and colleges who want to deliver the social action activity in-house. This work sits alongside efforts to consolidate programme design (for example, defining what is core and flex) and will help to increase the sustainability of youth social opportunities - as they can be more easily picked up and delivered by others in the future, with fidelity to programme design and intention.

> *"It means that we can be very confident with a brand new programme, because we have thought it all through, and thought about it from all aspects and new ways of looking at it as well."*
> **KRAN**

Staff and volunteer training and support

This area of work is closely related to codifying and manualisation. Actions taken by participants in this area included using data from a staff survey to inform new staff training, specifically related to meeting the demands of Covid-19, and developing new guidance for peer mentor volunteers.

> *"It's important to ensure all staff involved in the programme have a consistent understanding of what the programme is setting out to achieve and ensure this vision with specific aims and outcomes is shared across the organisation. This includes HOW the programme will be delivered, defining core and flex ingredients and ensuring that a short manual outlining this information and example session plans clearly show the learning/outcomes we are aiming to achieve and HOW the input/activity will achieve these. This would be very helpful to share with funders as well as internally to ensure information doesn't sit in heads of staff."*
> **Cardboard Citizens**

Quality

Whilst organisations approached 'quality' from different standpoints, it was a common priority across the group. Some participants were already thinking about quality alongside the development of new programmes; one could clearly articulate that quality, for them, was about holding themselves and external facilitators working with young people 'accountable to set standards which achieve the aims and outcomes set out' (i.e. in a theory of change). For others, the process of self-assessment provided a 'lightbulb moment' that 'quality was not just about numbers of people coming through the door.' One organisation had not previously considered manualising their programme but could see how it was going to support ensuring the quality and consistency of provision moving forward. For a number of participants, conversations about quality seemed to open up much deeper thinking and lines of enquiry, along with a real consideration of the time required to properly and consistently attend to quality as a core component of programme design and delivery.

Improvement work that focused on quality involved bringing in the expertise of different colleagues and stakeholders to consultations, thinking about skills profiles for staff, identifying specific quality frameworks or indicators that aligned with the organisation's work, moving from *defining* quality to *demonstrating* quality, exploring how quality relates to identified mechanisms of change, and improving staff training and support. At the heart of these conversations, again, sits work on mechanisms of change: identifying specific programme components and then digging into what high quality looks like for those. These mechanisms can then be used to create tools for monitoring fidelity against those quality standards or indicators, such as:

- Checklists and reporting logs for staff or volunteers to ensure they have undertaken specific tasks
- Observations of staff or volunteer practice to assess the way in which they are interacting and building relationships with young people
- Skills profiles for staff or volunteers, which are supported by training for staff or volunteers (for example, in specific methods for working with young people).

"Changes have included; an understanding internally that more time is needed to set up projects well with quality, best practice etiquette and strong outcomes at the heart of this planning. We are discussing whether a more joined up approach to our Participation work is needed, focusing more on ensuring we are successful in these core areas rather than delivering too much activity without capacity to embed meaningful learning. Future strategic discussions will need to interrogate what we mean by quality."
Cardboard Citizens

Evaluation planning
Finally, a number of organisations felt that their existing evaluation frameworks and processes were not capturing the most helpful or meaningful data to support with learning or improvement; focusing too heavily on outputs or employing tools that were not entirely reliable or fit for purpose (for example, relying on young people's self-reporting more than was felt to be appropriate). Two organisations wanted to 'join the dots' more effectively, and to develop more efficient processes and tools across the organisation, beyond their youth social action programmes. Increasing youth participation in evaluation was also flagged as a priority.

It is difficult for organisations to develop strong evaluation plans until they have attended to their theory/theories of change - as per the cohort overview table in the Appendix, this will now be the priority for many participants moving forwards. Some participants are now looking into new measures developed by the Centre for Youth Impact specifically for youth provision, as well as tools that are used commonly across youth provision. Again, organisations identified that this work takes time and strategic investment:

"As mentioned above we are testing mechanisms through project specific evaluation and have agreed to simplify outcomes to allow more capacity to achieve these outcomes, as well as to reflect on unexpected outcomes and take this learning into future models of working. By April 2022 we would like to have embedded a revised evaluation plan taking learning from the past 12-18 months on board."
Cardboard Citizens

One organisation that was manualising and looking to scale its programme will be including evaluation planning within this, in order to "help youth workers across the country to deliver [the programme] to high quality and measure young people's progress effectively throughout the programme."

"We are beginning to think more broadly about what and how we might measure work across the organisation. The Centre for Youth Impact has helped us think outside the box and to begin a process of developing something that will be very useful long term."
Youthscape

Insights about practice from theory of change development

With this cohort, we have been able to take a closer look at the theories of change developed through the programme. Unsurprisingly, given the underpinning values and [quality principles](#) of youth social action, authentic involvement of young people who are supported to shape the delivery approach, and opportunities for youth leadership, were common factors across the theories of change that were developed. Flexibility from staff is cited as key to enabling this (for example, allowing young people to take the lead) which is underpinned by training and specific skill sets, and 'cultural competence'. Other common mechanisms included:

- Young people feel safe; in trusting and engaging environments
- Young people feel included, heard, respected, and valued
- Young people feel a sense of ownership and autonomy over activities
- Young people have a fun or creative experience
- Young people form positive relationships with others (peers, staff, and wider community)
- Young people have an opportunity to connect with others
- Young people build awareness of issues affecting them/peers/their community.

Common outcomes areas for young people include:

- Improved sense of belonging
- Increase autonomy

- Improved interpersonal skills
- Improved social awareness
- Increased emotional wellbeing
- Increased confidence to affect change

These mechanisms and intended outcomes are broadly in line with those reported by the wider and more extensive [#iwill Fund review by the Learning Hub Evidence Review workstream](#), which digs deeply into specific mechanisms and the extent to which current evidence suggests they are likely to be effective in achieving desired outcomes. There are also parallels with the recent [Rapid Evidence Review for Youth Social Action,](#) prepared for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in March 2021 - for example, increased sense of belonging and empowerment.

Insights about process from review meetings

Top level reflections from review meetings indicated that participants found the Impact Accelerator process helpful and valuable, that support was flexible, and that it provided an in-depth approach that could not or would not have been achieved alone. Participants appreciated having dedicated time and space to reflect on and discuss key framework areas (such as programme design and evaluation) and to have the opportunity for input from someone external to the organisation. However, there were several blockers - including Covid-19 and other factors - that prevented organisations from progressing as much as they had hoped to. We expand on these themes in more detail below.

Blockers
Specific challenges that participants faced during the Impact Accelerator process included:

- **Accessibility:** Some participants found technical terminology challenging, that there was too much jargon, or that concepts felt too 'rigid', especially when trying to engage young people in the process. Others found that online webinars were more difficult to engage with than in-person training, and that this meant it took longer to get to grips with key concepts.

- **Focus:** At times, participants felt conflicted about whether it was best to approach the programme and assessment from a project-specific or organisation-wide perspective. One organisation experienced challenges where youth social action is not prioritised widely across their organisation, making it harder to get buy-in and investment from the wider team. Whilst some recommended being really specific in the Impact Accelerator programme's focus, others found benefits from taking a more holistic view; highlighting that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to this work.

- **Timing:** This was cited by several participants as a challenge; some would have liked more time to invest in the programme, and others found that starting the Impact Accelerator process late in the lifespan of their youth social action opportunity - or having joined the organisation as a new staff member mid-way through delivery - meant that it was difficult to implement changes.

- **Capacity:** Some participants felt overwhelmed as delivery of face-to-face provision returned and they needed to put improvement work on hold, as priorities within their organisation shifted. Changes in staff teams aggravated this for some, and capacity - along with the time needed to enact changes - was cited by several as a significant blocker to progress. Some also found the initial self-assessment very intense, that it took a long time to complete, or that they were uncertain about what evidence to upload to support their form responses.

   > *"I think all of us in this line of work are stretched to our capacity, but we recognise that [the Impact Accelerator] provides more capacity, and more boundaries, and more support for us, but it's hard to work backwards."*
   > **Just for Kids Law**

Enablers

Factors that helped participants to be successful in progressing through the Impact Accelerator programme included:

- **Youth participation:** involving young people and helping them to have a better understanding of different programme elements, and their purpose. The theory of change was also identified as a useful tool generated through improvement work, which could then help to understand what young people need and want from provision.

   > *"It's nice for young people to see the other side of it."*
   > **Positive Youth Foundation**

   > *"Really important for us that staff didn't just do it [...] They [youth ambassadors] have the ownership over it, it's their project."*
   > **KRAN**

- **External support:** having access to dedicated expert feedback and resources, as well as external facilitators to provide accountability and add capacity for developmental activities (for example, not needing to lead on facilitating and logistics for a theory of change workshop) and a structure to work from. Flexibility in the process was also important here.

- **Internal support:** participants were successful when they created a visible plan of action with clear communication of priorities and a strong sense of direction, as well as having someone else to help internally and supportive team members who 'ask good questions'.

- **Timing:** for some, the timing of the Impact Accelerator programme was well aligned with their stage of programme/activity delivery. It also gave 'permission' and created space to attend to developmental work, as well as providing leverage and validity for staff to push improvement priorities forward within their organisation.

Impact of Covid-19 on learning and improvement work

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a clear blocker for many participants, however for others, it was also an enabler. Given the scale of this factor, we have summarised key reflections separately below:

- **Reduced capacity:** delays enforced by Covid-19 meant it took longer to get delivery of youth provision off the ground - with staff furloughed and activities pushed back, it then took longer to get to improvement work.

   > *"We personally have struggled for time, [we] would have liked and would like more time to invest in this work. We aspire to be proactive but face the fact that we're still in Covid recovery, [we are] not where we were pre-Covid with the team [...] [we are] in a formative stage still with some aspects of our work. Had we been in a more settled stage, [this] would have had more/greater impact."*
   > **Make Some Noise**

- **Altered priorities:** lack of certainty about organisational and programme sustainability was unsettling and a big distraction; alongside changeable delivery needs and priorities, and reduced capacity, there was a lot for project leads to be focusing on at any one time. It also reinforced staff wellbeing and inclusivity as a priority, which something that is reflected by the organisations who used improvement work as an opportunity to consult with staff to help them feel empowered, and who made improvements to staff support, training, and development.

- **Limited participation:** others felt that they couldn't involve young people in the process as much as they would have liked, due to lack of face-to-face work, and that conversations about evaluation would have been more effective in person with fellow staff members.

- **More time to dedicate to learning and reflection:** many participants noted that Covid-19 had given them more space to reflect (for example, due to reduced delivery requirements), allowing time to question practices and aims and to consolidate learning. Several reflected that

Covid-19 had reinforced the need to reflect, strategise, and improve their provision, as well as doing a 'stock take' of their work - for example, by reviewing job specifications to ensure that they are aligned with delivery needs.

> *"Had we not had more support from the Centre, [we] would have shelved this work for a period of time, but now is more important than ever. It's been very inspiring! Which is great. The theory of change feels far more embedded than it ever has. [We are] at the beginning of our journey, we understand very clearly that this isn't something that you do, this is about organisational behavioural change."*
> **Make Some Noise**

> *"We had an absolute pause because we couldn't do anything - it was really nice to have time to focus on the programme and reflect on it. [It's] better than putting it to the back of your mind and saying 'we can't think about that.'"*
> **Small Green Shoots**

Withdrawing from the programme

The Impact Accelerator programme is not appropriate for everybody. Based on feedback from some of those who have not been able to continue the process, we have brought together a number of key considerations that organisations looking to engage with the process should be thinking about:

- **Timing** - at what stage of delivery is the programme at, and how familiar and confident are staff members/project leads with the activity? The programme can offer a great development opportunity for staff members, but it might be more challenging for a staff member who is getting to grips with a new role and/or project.

- **Fit with other organisational development activities** - if the organisation is already employing external consultants or dedicating more internal capacity to learning and improvement work, it might not be the right time to embark on the Impact Accelerator process. Before committing, it's worth checking there is no risk of duplicating efforts or clashing timelines.

- **Capacity and willingness to implement improvements** - is it realistic to make changes to the youth social action opportunity, in design, delivery or evaluation? Is there support from the wider team and senior management at the organisation? If not, it might be worth spending more time having those important internal conversations and thinking about how to foster a culture that is more conducive to ongoing improvement efforts. This might also be about context; for example, if funding is coming to an end imminently.

- **Structure of the framework** - the Confidence Framework has been developed as a common tool for supporting high quality design, delivery, and evaluation of opportunities for young people. This means that some questions might not feel as relevant to all opportunities, and that it does not consider specific local or contextual considerations. Before commencing a self-assessment, it's worth doing some research into other tools and frameworks to see if there's something that might better meet the desired aims.

Key lessons for the future

Advice for organisations taking part in the Impact Accelerator process

At the end of the review meetings, we asked the participants to share any advice that they would give to another organisation taking part in the Impact Accelerator, or any kind of continuous improvement journey. Their responses are grouped and summarised below:

Share the load with others	Take it step by step
- Having a partner (or team) to work with is really helpful; it helps with feeling like it's **not all on your shoulders**. You should be really clear that if you're embarking on this, you need to be **supported** with it and share the **accountability** and understanding with others. Bringing other people together also helps them to **understand what their role is** in the work. - Getting multiple staff members together in one space can take a long time; you need to have **commitment and motivation** to get the work done, and **strong**	- Don't feel like you have to change everything overnight - you can **chip away** at the work. Don't feel like you need to scrap everything or create a whole new organisation. Do it gradually and start by looking at just one project, or even just a small area of your work. - Use the **Confidence Framework regularly** to support periodic reflection on programme design and reflection; it is an important tool for improvement.

Commit, prioritise, and resource accordingly	Be open to feedback and new learning, trust the process
leadership to ensure that it happens - otherwise others won't **prioritise the work**.	
• You need to be able to **commit and make the time** to do this properly in order to get the value from it • **Resource and plan for the work** that follows the improvement meeting, and to implement any new learning. Embed it within **existing processes** or conversations if you can. • Use the process as an opportunity to **create things that you can take forward**, and ensure that learning doesn't get forgotten. Don't treat the opportunity as a standalone.	• Be **prepared to learn** and accept that things do need improvement - you are embarking on this for the betterment of the project. Own the fact that you don't know everything and be willing to 'go back to school and learn.' • **Trust the process**; at the beginning it can feel quite overwhelming, but there is something to be said about allowing things to progress as they will and **asking lots of questions**. • **Be confident** in what you are sharing in the self-assessment process - just upload what you've got, as you can always talk it through or share additional evidence at a later stage.

We intend to use this advice, and broader learning from delivery of the Impact Accelerator programme, to inform a set of dedicated guidance for organisations seeking to use the Confidence Framework to inform their continuous quality improvement in future.

Confidence Framework tool

Feedback from all cohorts has clearly indicated value in the Confidence Framework tool; at the Centre, we are committed to maintaining the tool as an offer to support continuous quality improvement across the youth sector. As mentioned in this blog, there are still improvements that we can make, especially as we think about use of the tool beyond youth social action provision. We have already begun using the tool to support other streams of our work and will continue to explore opportunities for this across the sector, as well as continuing to refine the tool based on feedback from those who use it.

> *"The questions in the confidence framework tools are very valid, especially where they ask for evidence. Being able to evidence what you have and what you don't have is really valuable to building effective programmes."*
> **FORWARD**

External support for quality improvement

Alongside the Confidence Framework tool, Impact Accelerator participants have valued the opportunity to access dedicated support and expertise for their improvement goals. The following features were cited as particularly enabling:

- **Supportive and helpful**
  Participants felt that staff from the Centre had been supportive and helpful, particularly at the induction stage and when framing the Impact Accelerator 'offer'. It was felt that staff and associates gave good advice and participants appreciated receiving in-depth support. For one organisation, having someone external was felt to be especially helpful to facilitate discussions about theory of change.

- **Accessible**
  Participants described support from the Centre as 'very accessible', 'user-friendly' and manageable. One participant described the Centre's support as 'really valuable', especially when contextualising what is asked within the Confidence Framework and thinking practically about how to apply that to what the organisation was doing on the ground, as well as 'translating' measurement and evaluation terminology.

- **Flexible**
  Flexibility in support was described as a 'real positive' - participants described how they never felt any unreasonable pressure from the Centre, and that support always came with

understanding and consideration about their wider context. One participant noted how they appreciated the Centre's patience as they took some time to 'get into action.'

When asked about what support participants would need to move forward with improvement priorities, they said:

- Ensuring that senior management were on board to support prioritisation of ongoing improvement efforts;
- Access to a 'project mentor' for follow-up check-ins, support and accountability;
- Support with embedding improvement actions into an operational plan (i.e. more dedicated support similar to that which is provided in the 'Improve' stage);
- Access to ad hoc conversations and support from the Centre for Youth Impact;
- More capacity for evaluation within their organisation; and
- Time and space to action improvement priorities.

We will use this feedback, and that from all previous participants, to inform any similar offers of support for the sector in the future. They have also informed the recommendations made to Match Funders below.

Recommendations for Match Funders

Building on the recommendations made in earlier Impact Accelerator reports, we would recommend that Match Funders:

- **Collaborate to build a supportive infrastructure for ongoing improvement work. This should include a commitment to:**

  - Provide capacity building opportunities that support high quality design and delivery of youth social action provision (theory of change, core and flex, implementation fidelity, etc.);
  - Explicitly resource continuous quality improvement within delivery organisations - including time for both reflection and improvements; and
  - Support and encourage more senior leaders to commit to ongoing improvement work, including giving practitioners/staff teams time and headspace away from delivery.

- **Support grantees to undertake a period of learning and reflection to establish any insights and evidence that may be taken from youth social action activities to inform**

future delivery, either for the continuation of the youth social action opportunities or other activities at the organisation.

For example, to ensure that organisations are capturing as much learning as possible from delivery of #iwill Fund activities, they could be supported to:

- Identify specific mechanisms of change or outcomes that have had a positive impact for young people and/or communities; or
- Develop legacy resources, such as manuals and toolkits for delivery, to enable others both within or external to their organisation to replicate activities that have proved effective, and to do so with fidelity (ensuring activities remain high quality).

Appendix

The #iwill Fund Cohort Three - Overview

Cardboard Citizens	
Match Funder	Comic Relief
Programme description	Act Now aims to give young people the skills and opportunities to share their stories, to campaign, and raise awareness of the issues around youth homelessness through a year-long programme of activity, supporting participants to develop their confidence & skills through outreach at partner organisations, in-house workshops and training around campaigning.
Improvement priorities	- Develop a logic chain for Act Now - Define reach and target beneficiaries - Establish a quality framework/guidelines - Develop manual/session plans for future use - Develop evaluation plan
Improvement work	- Internal meeting with Arts Team to discuss both reach and beneficiaries, before sharing with key Society Team staff - discussions were then used to inform theory of change workshop - Theory of change exercise with internal team and the Centre for Youth Impact - Initial conversations about core and flex ingredients are and what outcomes/output they help to achieve - Discussion about creating a blueprint for the 'model' session, based on mechanisms of change, which can be used by internal and external facilitators to ensure consistency and progression for young people - Team discussion about outcomes, with a plan to simplify these based on learning from testing the mechanisms of

	change
Next steps	- Test mechanisms through project specific evaluation - Continue to develop theory of change including participation from young people - Embed learning from young people's theory of change exercise into organisational theory of change to ensure they align - Simplify outcomes to make them more achievable and realistic, as well as reflect on unexpected outcomes and take this learning into future models of working - Develop and embed a revised evaluation plan taking learning from the past 12-18 months on board, by April 2022 - Scope a more joined up approach to Participation work is needed, to enable and embed more meaningful learning - Future strategic discussions to will need to interrogate what we mean by quality (across all work, including young people's participation) is on future agendas for strategic planning - this will include developing quality indicator/framework to work against, including a more formalised list of qualities/characteristics or person specification for delivery staff

FORWARD	
Match Funder	Act for Change
Programme description	Enrichment and leadership training for young people aged 11 – 25 to tackle violence against women and girls issues, by equipping young people with tools for activism and networking to become resilient leaders in their communities.
Improvement priorities	Create organisation-wide theory of change

	• Conduct a 10 year review (including external evaluation) in consultation with young people, staff, and stakeholders • Collaborative research report on community impact, to better understand and evidence target group/s
Improvement work	• Drafted organisational theory of change, based on a series of senior leadership team meetings • Research report is still in progress but will provide good evidence/learning to build on, and will support FORWARD's evidence for their intended target group and manualising of activities
Next steps	• Complete theory of change and write-up on strategy. This is part of a broader strategy review - to ensure work is aligned and that impact and feedback is being captured in a realistic way. • Dive into indicators for strategy - the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning team are leading on this and are working with different programme teams to work out what is realistic • Act on learning from research report (for example, clarifying target group/s and creating a manual, as above).

Just for Kids Law	
Match Funder	Act for Change
Programme description	The Schools Exclusion Campaign offers young people aged 14-24, with lived experience of school exclusion in London, a supported opportunity to elevate their voice and work in partnership with Just for Kids Law to create a steering group and campaign that will influence positive change and wider reform for all children and young people.

Improvement priorities	- Develop a theory of change for Schools Exclusion Campaign - Definite target population - Develop monitoring and Evaluation plan - Develop tools to measure quality of delivery
Improvement work	- Theory of change workshop involving people from across the organisation - Theory of change used with the steering group to help guide their thinking, provide structure, and identify priorities for the programme in a participatory way. It has also been shared with young people in other spheres of work - Reviewed timeline of delivery - how this is structured to build learning opportunities for young people - Developed structured evaluation processes to be included in programme planning Gantt charts
Next steps	- Additional input from young people to further develop the theory of change - Developing evaluation tools tailored to the project and what young people are doing, through group and 1:1 sessions

Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)	
Match Funder	Act for Change
Programme description	The Youth Ambassador and Youth Forum Programme supports and empowers young, separated refugees and asylum seekers to undertake social action activities to address the needs of their peers through a regular Youth Forum. The programme is led by Youth Ambassadors.
Improvement priorities	Develop a theory of change for Peer Mentoring Programme

	- Develop monitoring and Evaluation plan - Define target groups - Create Peer Mentor guidance documentation - Establish regular participatory reviews of the theory of change (every six months)
Improvement work	- Developed two theories of change (one for mentees & one for mentors) in a participatory way with youth ambassadors - Dedicated meetings to look at specific theory of change components, such as mechanisms of change, and quality. These have focused on key questions such as: 'How do we create that feeling we want to create when mentors/mentees meet?' 'What does a good healthy positive mentoring partnership look like?' 'What questions do we need to ask to get the feedback that that relationship is in place?' 'What does quality look like when matching mentees and mentors? - Development of a manual, created with peer mentors. This includes quality indicators and a checklist of things that mentors should cover with their mentee, resource links etc., as well as mentor logs and guidelines. - Improvements to mentor training and work with the mentoring team to develop and adapt that for young people who will be peer mentors (based on conversations about quality)
Next steps	- Use the pilot to focus on whether target group selection is working, and whether focus on quality is working (for example, is the right data being captured to measure this?) - Embedding learning in new programmes, using tools and models already developed through improvement work

Make Some Noise

Match Funder	Co-op Foundation
Programme description	Inclusive music making project with two cohorts of young people – primary age (Year 5 and 6) and secondary age (Year 7 and 8), firstly to reinterpret the landscape of loneliness and understand the stigma of being lonely through song and music making; and secondly taking a social action approach to use these learnings to support the younger cohort of young people in the transition towards attending secondary school.
Improvement priorities	• Develop organisation-wide theory of change, to capture learning from the social action programme and align with wider strategic review • Extended consultation with young people, staff, and other stakeholders
Improvement work	• Theory of change workshop with staff, including trustees • Extensive consultation with all levels of the organisation (from board through to programme participants), including a consultation with young people focusing on 'wellbeing journeys' • Development of organisational theory of change, including physical 'theory of change wall' in the office to support staff engagement
Next steps	• Completion of extensive stakeholder consultation, including sessions with young people • Exploring quality frameworks and processes to support theory of change and new strategic plan

Off the Record

Match Funder	Act for Change

Programme description	Acts of Activism allows young people aged 16-21 to connect with peers who are interested in learning, engaging and understanding social activism. It is an 8-week long project where young people learn about different topics around social action and activism. Each week, the group hears from a different young local activist, and explores ways to take small acts of activism in their own daily lives.
Improvement priorities	• Develop a theory of change for Acts of Activism • Develop an evaluation plan • Define programme aims • Define target group/s
Improvement work	• Development of draft theory of change • After this, Off the Record withdrew from the Impact Accelerator programme as they decided it would no longer be appropriate for their specific project.

Positive Youth Foundation	
Match Funder	Comic Relief
Programme description	Head Positive: Young people engaged in, co-producing and delivering social action campaigns. Team Up: Young People who graduate from Head Positive, and additional targeted participants, are trained in Youth Consultancy whilst delivering social action campaigns to/with their peers.
Improvement priorities	• Develop theory of change for Head Positive, including identifying mechanisms of change • Utilise learning from family engagement • Use data from staff survey to develop staff training and guide conversations reflecting on the demands of Covid-19

	- Develop outcome framework to sit alongside timeline and milestones trackers - Create a programme manual - Map demographic data
Improvement work	- Created a specific theory of change for Head Positive and shared this as a model across the organisation - Worked with Youth Voice Coordinator to identify mechanisms of change and ways to measure them - Used data from staff survey to inform organisation-wide training day in June 2021 - Improved data processes - created an outcomes tracker to be utilised alongside the timeline and milestones documents, and incorporated within 'Views' system - Created a programme and participant flow chart to illustrate the journey of young people, to sit alongside other key programme documentation (instead of a manual) and staff training matrix and development plans - Started conversations as a team in order to add more reporting and M&E elements to existing 'Views' system and capture consistent data/key questions to support with reflection on delivery
Next steps	- Young people's survey and wider stakeholders survey (including parents, guardians, family) to conduct later on in the year; selecting tools that effectively capture required data but in an easy, accessible and fast way for the people involved - Embed tools and resources developed through improvement work into reporting - Identify mechanisms of change for other strand areas when the Head Positive programme finishes. This will help staff development, especially when bringing new programmes to the table

	• Map mechanisms of change against existing/potential feedback survey questions for young people (including [Youth Investment Fund](#) - YIF - feedback survey) [2]

Small Green Shoots	
Match Funder	Comic Relief
Programme description	Fundamentals is a creative outreach programme that de-stigmatises mental health issues amongst young people using trained "Young Shoots" to curate and lead the programme making it credible and impactful in terms of encouraging volunteering and participation amongst low-income, diverse young people.
Improvement priorities	• Develop a theory of change for Fundamentals • Map current partners and stakeholders • Develop an online toolkit and resource • Develop equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policy
Improvement work	• Refined existing theory of change and updated to include all projects, including Fundamentals, and incorporate feedback from Review Meeting - including clear target groups and consultation with young people • Achieved 'Trusted Charity' status, which aligned well with key areas of and actions from the Confidence Framework self-assessment • Worked with external evaluator and working with board to develop EDI policy • Initial work to creative takeaway resources for organisations, schools, and colleges to deliver their own Fundamentals sessions

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[2] See *Measuring the quality and impact of open access youth provision: Lessons and recommendations from the Youth Investment Fund learning project*, May 2021

Next steps	- Ongoing reporting and evaluation - Continue to refine theory of change and evaluation plan following additional feedback from the Centre - Complete toolkit

Youthscape	
Match Funder	Co-op Foundation
Programme description	Targeted work with socially isolated young people through a community cooking programme.
Improvement priorities	- Create a theory of Change for OpenHouse - Develop an evaluation Plan for OpenHouse - Manualise OpenHouse for a national resource - Explore potential tools for measurement across the organisation - Share learning with team for future use
Improvement work	- Created a clear and simple Theory of Change for OpenHouse with input from the Youthscape team - Developed Open House national resource, including core and flex and methods for ensuring quality and implementation fidelity - Initial work on the evaluation plan, including scoping different measurement tools
Next steps	- Developing the evaluation plan, including deciding on specific measurement tools, will be a significant investment of time and effort and is a priority - Trialing the ARYB (Adult Rating of Youth Behaviour) tool - Work on theory of change with relevant Project Leads

About the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

This is a report by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was commissioned to support, and build on, the activities of the #iwill Fund. It has two strategic objectives:

1. To inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund. This will ensure that the Leadership Board and #iwill Fund delivery partners are able to target funds into the right areas, ages and approaches, where it is really needed.

2. To strengthen and connect the youth social action sector by enabling and facilitating the sharing of learning, data and insights across delivery partners, including what does and doesn't work. Sharing key insights and learning more broadly within the wider youth social action sector.

The #iwill Fund Learning Hub has developed three workstreams which will support its objectives. This will allow us to support funders in making decisions about how to support youth social action now, and to capitalise on the evidence generated through the #iwill Fund to create a legacy of evidence to support funding and delivery in the future.

1) Systems

This work will develop our understanding of barriers and enablers in building and strengthening sustained youth social action. It will support the identification of emerging practice and the testing of potential new solutions as well as to help guide investment decisions.

(a) Systems Mapping
Co-production workshops, supported by research briefings, helped to build the understanding of barriers to, and opportunities for, embedding and sustaining youth social action in three priority themes: education, place, and the relationship between youth social action and 'all ages' social action. Workshops were attended by Match Funders, invited grantees, and other invited stakeholders. (Sept 2018 – Mar 2019)

(b) Funder Collaboration
A series of 'Lab Storms' were offered to Match Funders to enable a collaborative approach to identify common challenges, to find and share actionable responses to them, and to support Match Funders to fund as effectively as possible (April 2019 – April 2021).

2) Sector evidence plan

This work will build our understanding of what youth social action achieves, how to reach under-served groups, and how to sustain youth social action (Aug 2018 – ongoing). It will draw on these four information sources to develop and evolve answers to key questions:

- Intra-fund evaluation aggregation
- Extra-fund research aggregation
- Match Funder returns to the Fund #iwill Fund and data from the Information Management System
- Results from other workstreams.

3) Quality Practice

This work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. It will illustrate how delivery organisations define 'double benefit' and how they attempt to both achieve and measure it. This work will support delivery organisations to improve their offer (September 2018 – ongoing). 'The Impact Accelerator', delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact, is an intensive process of impact support, challenge and development – up to 30 organisations will take part in this. Learning from these organisations will be shared more widely to spread knowledge about improvement across the youth social action landscape.