#iwill Fund Learning Hub
Quality Practice Workstream

Initial Report on the Third Impact Accelerator Cohort

The Centre for Youth Impact
March 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, 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, 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 intends to support three cohorts of organisations in total to undertake the process. The learning from each cohort will feed 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 will build on each other, with learning from each cohort feeding into the delivery and reports for the next. You can read the initial paper relating to the first cohort here, and our final report here. You can read the initial paper relating to the second cohort here, and the final report here.
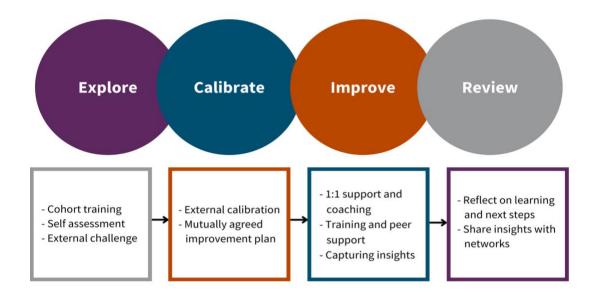
This is the initial insights paper for the third cohort, which commenced the Impact Accelerator in September 2020. In this paper, we cover insights that have been collected from the first two phases of the Impact Accelerator programme, and our reflections on how insights from this cohort support learning from the previous two cohorts.

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
   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, in their final reports most organisations from the first cohort reflected that they had 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 report annex.

These new forms are 'in beta' and will be further refined in the light of feedback from Cohort Three organisations as they go through each domain.

Examples of some of the questions contained within the 'Design' form can be found below:

How have you set out the details of what activities your service involves?

Describing in detail what you do, how often, with whom and in what setting, allows you to assess whether you are delivering the service as you intend it to be delivered. Some aspects should be 'Core', while others may be 'Flex'. Core elements of your service are those which – if they weren't there – would fundamentally change your service into something else, and potentially something less effective. The core elements are the things that you hope every single young person you work with will experience. This isn't necessarily an activity (like a one to one session with a mentor) and could be a perception, like feeling safe or respected. Flex refers to other elements which, while also valuable, are 'flexible' – their presence or otherwise doesn't make or break the impact of service.

○ We have not written down the details of the activities we provide

○ We have a description of some our activities written down, but without much detail

○ We have a description of some of our activities written down, with some detail

○ We have a description of all of our activities written down, with some detail, including describing some activities as 'core' or 'flex'

○ We have a detailed description of all of our activities written down, including describing which are 'core' and which are 'flex', and these are supported by evidence

How developed are the materials and resources required to deliver the activities involved in your service?

If you are in the early stages of designing your service, you will not yet have developed materials and resources. If your service has been up and running for some time, it is good practice to test out their suitability, and update them in the light of feedback from young people, staff and volunteers who are using them.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	○	○	○	○	○	Fully developed, tested and updated

Have you defined measurable outcomes for communities benefitting from your service?

What positives changes are you intending to bring about for your target community or communities, and how will you know if these have occurred?

○ No, we have not specified any outcomes for communities

○ We have specified some outcomes for communities, but most or all of them are not measurable

○ We have specified some outcomes for communities, and some of them are measurable

○ We have specified all of our intended outcomes for communities and most or all of them are measurable, and we have identified tools to measure them..

○ We have specified all of our intended outcomes for communities and most or all of them are measurable. We have also used measurement tools to gather outcomes data.

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. 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. As a cohort, organisations 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

> Whilst COVID-19 has continued to disrupt improvement work (mainly because it is also disrupting 'normal' delivery), 10 out of 11 of the Cohort Three organisations have remained in touch with the Centre and are continuing to work through the key programme stages, albeit with a few delays from organisations that are, for example, having to manage capacity due to staff being furloughed. Our approach has been to balance flexibility with structure and accountability, adapting support and deadlines in negotiation with the organisations directly.

> For Cohort Three, we have also introduced a new strand of activity, focused on organisations sharing what they are learning, as they go, within their own already established networks. During recruitment and the induction stage of the programme, we asked organisations to identify specific networks through which they might be able to cascade learning from the Impact Accelerator, and as we progress into Phase Three - improvement work - we will

encourage and support organisations to think about any upcoming opportunities for sharing back with these networks.

ii) Build organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement

As mentioned in our [final report for Cohort Two](#), a focus on the fundamentals is key when thinking about capacity building for improvement work that is driven by evidence. In practice, this means developing a clear theory of change and a strong foundation of user and engagement data. This priority has directly shaped our revision of introductory training content and streamlining the improvement support that is on offer for participating organisations (see more below).

As we move into Phase Three of the programme, we will also be collating more resources for organisations to progress improvement priorities independently; for example, a resource guide to align with key sections of the Confidence Framework self-assessment. Looking ahead to the end of the Impact Accelerator programme, we will be thinking about the best way to 'package up' all learning, insights, and resources developed over the course of working with the three cohorts, in a way that can provide ongoing support and guidance for organisations thinking about how to improve their youth social action delivery.

iii) Establish a common approach to understanding and improving impact

Building on key points detailed in our previous report - a focus on quality of practice to support social and emotional learning for young people, acting on insights in a cycle of continuous improvement, and a 'low stakes accountability' [1] approach - we intend to progress all three further through our work supporting Cohort Three organisations with implementing improvement plans. For example, we hope to gain insights from the development of programme and youth social action specific theories of change across the cohort, and from the ways in which organisations decide to progress other improvement priorities, such as evaluation planning or tools for monitoring implementation fidelity. This process may also indicate where there are specific gaps in evidence or highlight opportunities for more shared measurements efforts.

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[1] This is a term drawn from the Youth Programme Quality intervention, a continuous quality improvement process currently being 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.

A note on our COVID-19 response

Recruitment for the third cohort began in mid-February 2020, and conversations with organisations that had been nominated to take part in the programme by their Match Funders had already been scheduled to take place throughout March, at the same time that the first national lockdown was announced. From these conversations, it became clear that there was still appetite and perceived capacity to engage with the Impact Accelerator programme, and with ongoing quality improvement work, and so we proceeded to recruit for the third cohort, making adaptations to the programme structure and expectations in response to feedback and conversations with participating organisations. Further reflection on these conversations, and on the motivations and concerns shared by organisations throughout the recruitment process, can be found further on in this report on page 16. Details on how we adapted the programme can be found in Appendix 2.

The #iwill Fund Cohort Three - Overview

Match Funder	Organisation	#iwill Fund activity name	Description
Virgin Money Foundation	Families First North East	diffability	diffabilty is a youth led project that challenges the stigma surrounding differently abled people. Young people have created a framework of diffability standards to help businesses and individuals improve their services for all members of the community. Those organisations that achieve or diffability standards following an assessment process receive a diffability kitemark. Current partners include Starbucks, Virgin Money Bank, Sainsburys, One77 and Santander. Families First North East works in collaboration with partners to learn, listen and improve experiences for all. Most importantly, young people are at the core of the project creating and designing every element, from working with businesses to improve standards and carrying out the assessments providing feedback from real - life experiences.

Act for Change, Co-op Foundation	Comics Youth CIC	Marginal Pop Up (Safe spaces)	Originally, the Safe Spaces project aimed recruit two 24-week cohorts of LGBTQIA young people aged 10-25 with lived experiences of mental health and isolation; and provide them with training, guidance and support to reclaim the high street and develop pop up 'Safe spaces' in disused shop fronts and run-down community venues within the city. In light of the current COVID crisis, Comics Youth has moved its training and delivery to an online digital space, where it is supporting young people to design campaigns and initiatives around creating safe digital spaces and to 'reclaim the narrative' for marginalised young people. This has resulted in a dedicated youth-led radio station, Instagram/social media takeovers and designing #StaySafeClub packs to be sent out to other marginalised youth across the Liverpool City Region. The pack itself has been designed by the young people to include mental health resources and practical advice to stay safe during a time of pandemic.
Act for Change	FORWARD	I am rising: for equality, rights and BME young women's leadership	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.
Co-op Foundation	Youthscape	Openhouse	Targeted work with socially isolated young people through a community cooking programme
Comic Relief	Small Green Shoots	Fundamentals	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.

Act for Change	Off The Record	Acts of Activism	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.
Comic Relief	Cardboard Citizens	Act Now	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. Cardboard Citizens runs 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. Over the past three years, young people's creative work and stories has developed into a production that has toured schools, festivals and other settings. Over the past year this took the form of an interactive film due to the Pandemic. The young people's programme is designed to develop leadership and enable the progression of young people involved - they act as facilitators in engaging their peers, and the campaigning work is co-created with them.
Comic Relief	Positive Youth Foundation	Head Positive & Team Up	Head Positive: Young people engaged in, co-producing and delivering social action campaigns. Team Up: Young People graduate from Head Positive and additional targeted participants to be trained in Youth Consultancy whilst delivering social action campaigns to/with their peers.
Co-op Foundation	Make Some Noise	Song to Belong	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.
Act for Change	Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)	Youth Ambassador and Youth Forum Programme	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 and led by Youth Ambassadors.
Act for Change	Just for Kids Law	The Schools Exclusion Campaign	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 JfKL to create a steering group and campaign that will influence positive change and wider reform for all children and young people. With the encouragement of the Young People's Development Worker, the young people on the campaign form the steering group and are responsible for and lead the creation and direction of the School Exclusion Campaign. The young people are recognised and regarded as the experts by experience and as activists for their involvement.

Involvement by organisations

Expectations for engagement remained the same as for previous cohorts: to commit to all four stages of the Impact Accelerator programme and to identify at least one Project Lead who would be responsible for driving forward the programme within their organisation. As with previous cohorts, specific improvement work priorities would be led and scoped by the Project Leads. There is no minimum or maximum amount of work that we expect organisations to complete; rather, it must be proportionate for their capacity and feel like a meaningful commitment.

The nominated Project Lead must have *some* responsibility for either delivery on the programme or its evaluation and monitoring, as they are responsible for completing the self-assessment and then implementing improvement work. In the current cohort, Project Leads make up a combination of

Directors and CEOs, Programme Development Officers, Engagement Managers, Team Managers, Programme Managers, and Business Development Officers.

To ensure that the Project Lead is supported to initiate a process of internal change, at application stage organisations were also asked to confirm that senior management were supportive of their organisation's participation in the Impact Accelerator programme.

Types of organisations

Cohort Three organisations operate across Kent, London, Liverpool, Bristol, Coventry, Staffordshire, Luton, and Hartlepool. Six organisations are medium sized (income of £100,000 - £1,000,000) and five are large (£1,000,000 to £10,000,000). Seven organisations are solely focused on working with young people and six organisations are targeting their social action opportunities to young people under the age of 14 years. Prior to lockdown, many organisations were delivering social action in Further Education colleges or sixth forms, youth clubs, primary and secondary schools, and/or community spaces such as cafes. One or two were also delivering in sports clubs, social care settings, or through detached or street-based work with young people.

The intended community outcomes stated by the participating organisations focus on a wide range of areas, including LGBTQ+ youth mental health, community integration and social cohesion, social isolation and loneliness, youth homelessness, violence against young women and girls, local community issues, and stigma surrounding differently abled people. A number of organisations could be considered to be employing a 'reflexive benefit' model, whereby young people benefit from the changes that they create in their own community. For more information on the 'role' that social action plays for organisations within the current cohort, see the 'Reflections from cohort induction' section below on page 17.

Key Learning and Insights

The findings in this report are based on reviewing the following forms of assessment:

- Case notes from each organisation's 1:1 calls and online meetings
- Self-assessed Confidence Frameworks for 9 out of 11 organisations
- Calibrated Confidence Frameworks for 8 out of 11 organisations
- Submitted evidence in support of each organisation's Confidence Framework scores
- Case notes from 7 Improvement Meetings with Research Associates
- Improvement plans for 3 organisations
- Feedback from participants of all cohorts

- Feedback generated from staff and Associates working on the Impact Accelerator

Where previous reports have focused on insights related to specific areas of quality and programme design and delivery, this report also reflects on the process and context of organisations engaging with quality improvement work, through a time of exceptional strain and pressure on youth programme delivery. This reflects both where we are at in terms of the Impact Accelerator programme - with improvement work significantly disrupted for Cohort Two, and not yet started for Cohort Three - and the wider context within which this cohort is participating in the programme.

Emerging insights

- As noted in previous reports, the majority of organisations taking part in the Impact Accelerator need to attend to fairly foundational improvement priorities related to the design of their activities, before moving onto other areas such as developing tools for implementation fidelity and ongoing, systematic quality assurance and improvement. There is clear appetite from organisations to be able to better define what 'high quality' looks like, but before this can happen there is work to be done on theories of change, and particularly in developing understanding of what the **mechanisms of change** are for their youth social action opportunities - by this we mean, the process through which young people engage and benefit, and what young people experience 'in the moment' that creates or affects change. High quality is defined by the consistent presence of intended mechanisms of change, or 'active ingredients'. For us to be confident of outcomes occurring, we need to know that the mechanisms are 'happening' or being enabled to the highest quality possible. A collective focus on this will deepen our shared understanding of what **high quality** youth social action opportunities look like, as well as how to know whether or not they are taking place.

- Building on this, the third aim of the Impact Accelerator programme - to establish a common approach to understanding and improving impact - will be crucial if we are to make progress with the first two aims - to foster a culture of learning within youth programme delivery, and to build organisational capacity for evidence-led improvement. Learning from all cohorts across the duration of the Impact Accelerator has demonstrated **challenges in organisational capacity to engage with ongoing, systematic improvement work** that is driven by data. These challenges were present before COVID-19 but have been exacerbated by the increased strain that the pandemic has placed on organisations that are working to support young people throughout lockdown; both in terms of their emergency response work, and the challenge to remain financially viable throughout the crisis period. There are steps that we can and must take to **streamline data requirements**, based on a shared understanding of what **'good enough' data** means and how we can use that data to generate

actionable insights that drive improvements. This will support with developing and embedding positive data practices and behaviours that 'stick'.

- Organisations value the Impact Accelerator structure and framework, as a process and tool that guides them through asking key questions about their programme design and delivery. **Protecting time** for reflection through these conversations is as important as following up the conversations with efforts to **codify and manualise**, to ensure that key information and decision making is written down and to support with retention of learning and intentional design. This is to ensure that those delivering youth social action opportunities understand how **and why** activities are to be delivered in a particular way. Again, the ongoing uncertainty of COVID-19 makes this all the more important, as organisations face increased staff churn and must often make quick decisions about how and what to deliver. This does, of course, make it ever more challenging to find time to stop, reflect, and document.

- As we know, youth social action is resourced and integrated in different ways across both youth organisations, and organisations who do not work primarily with young people but who have developed a youth social action offer. This will, in turn, influence the nature and extent to which organisations both invest in and draw from learning on the Impact Accelerator programme. The majority of the Confidence Framework can be applied to non-social action youth provision – making learning and insight from the process **transferable to other areas of activity** – however there are, in some cases, limitations as to how much organisations will be able to **dedicate capacity** to specific social action improvement goals. For example, it might be deemed a better use of time to focus on developing a theory of change for a wider set of programmes, rather than just the #iwill Funded activity.

- Finally, moving key interactions (training and improvement meetings) online has allowed for greater flexibility and has reduced the initial time commitment required by organisations. Participants have also valued the **external challenge** of the Impact Accelerator – through the Confidence Framework self-assessment and improvement meetings – as well as the opportunity to **connect with peers** through initial cohort training. Moving forward, we must think about how we draw on these elements in order to support **ongoing and sustainable cycles of reflection and improvement**, beyond the scope of the Impact Accelerator programme.

Reflections from cohort recruitment

As already noted, the conversations with organisations at the recruitment stage indicated a continuing demand for structured and supported quality improvement work.

At the application stage (May 2020), organisations were asked to identify their top three motivations for taking part in the programme. The most popular response was 'learning and evaluation', which was selected by eight organisations. This was followed by 'growth' (four organisations), 'shifting to new kinds of delivery' (two organisations), 'improving what we do' (two organisations), 'sustaining our funding' (two organisations), and 'influencing stakeholders' (one organisation).

Given that we were well into a national lockdown by this point, some of these motivations are likely to be driven by COVID-19 (for example, 'shifting to new kinds of delivery'). One organisation noted how COVID-19 had highlighted a greater need for the aspect of their programme that supported young people with resilience building. One organisation also expanded on this motivation in their application:

> *"[...] working with the Impact Accelerator will help us think through how to reshape the work in response to COVID (changing needs & the delivery constraints) from an impact perspective, as well as planning the future of our young people's work and planning for the impact we would like to deliver based on the learnings of the current programme."*

Others, however, will reflect more long-term motivations – for example, one organisation noted that they had been shifting towards more social-action based activities over recent years, and that they wanted to use the Impact Accelerator programme as an opportunity to take stock and reflect on that evolution.

In a free text box, organisations were able to expand on these specific areas, which revealed a broader range of additional incentives for engaging in a structured improvement programme. One notable theme to come through these responses was a motivation to embed and extend youth voice into evaluation and programme delivery.

Reflections from cohort induction

Once accepted onto the cohort, and prior to the online introductory training, members of the Centre for Youth Impact team held one-to-one conversations with each organisation. These calls explored a range of questions that we hoped would help to build a strong, mutual understanding of the context within which organisations were operating and delivering youth social action and engaging with improvement work. This was part of our effort to ensure that support and accountability mechanisms were appropriate and proportional to organisational capacity and motivations.

For this report, we have included more detail on these initial conversations, to build on the previous #iwill Fund Learning Hub report, "Adaptation and Youth Social Action: The Impact of COVID-19", and to help build a picture of what might be needed to support a sustainable learning culture within youth

programme delivery throughout and beyond the pandemic. A summary of discussions can be found under each heading below.

Exploring the 'role' of youth social action within an organisation – how and where does it currently fit?

There continues to be a distinction between organisations within the cohort who feel that youth social action is more embedded across their work with and for young people (whether or not it is labelled explicitly as 'social action'), and those who do not. Some had already realised benefits from a social action approach and were thinking about how to integrate it with other projects, or how to reframe it to engage more young people (such as changing the language used to describe it from 'social action' to 'doing good for yourself and others'). For others, social action was seen as a more discreet offer. This perception and positioning are likely to influence the extent to which learning and improvement work through the Impact Accelerator is both resourced by organisations (for example, involving extra staff in a theory of change development process) and how it is applied beyond the activity that is nominated for the programme.

Where youth social action delivery is 'at', both in terms of COVID-19 disruption and response, and more broadly in terms of design and delivery.

As might be expected, at the start of the Impact Accelerator programme (and indeed for much of the ensuring period) most delivery had been moved online in response to COVID-19. Organisations reported opportunities for co-production with young people to determine what response work would look like, for example when deciding on content and platforms. A number of organisations had been making use of podcasts to support young people with responses to specific issues (Black Lives Matter, mental health and wellbeing, homelessness) and felt this was 'reflecting where young people were at, at the time'. These themes were prominent across multiple cohort members.

Plans were still being shaped at this stage; there was a sense that social action opportunities would retain their core focus (for example, campaigning on particular issues, or creating 'safe spaces' for young people) but that the delivery format would, inevitably, need to look different. Activities that were reliant on outreach or coming together as a group (for example, to cook) were being put on pause.

As with many working with young people, teams had been thinking about how to tackle digital poverty amongst young people, and meeting immediate needs and inequalities surrounding accessibility and resources. For others, there was an opportunity to encourage young people to apply skills that had been acquired through a previous project; for example, cooking, specifically during lockdown and through provision of recipe boxes.

Organisations shared confidence in ongoing delivery, but described the time as 'hectic'. There was a sense that youth engagement had been successful, where Zoom and other tools were used to keep in touch with youth forums or for more targeted work. Organisations were already thinking about blended approaches, mixing online and offline interactions. For those working with schools, however, activities were more likely to be on pause and project leads were thinking about alternatives, or other organisations to partner with. One organisation noted that SEN (special educational needs) schools were more willing than mainstream schools to 'let organisations back in.' This might be because more of the children and young people attending SEN schools would have still been in school, rather than learning at home.

More broadly, organisations were at different stages of delivery; some had recently completed pilots of their social action provision, whereas others were thinking about scaling or preparing for national rollouts.

Plans for September onwards – what might renewal and recovery look like?

Conversations took place in the summer of 2020 and there was, of course, much more to come in the way of lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions. At the time, there was a sense that online sessions would continue, with some tentative plans for in-person delivery, such as small group work. Some were focusing on maintaining 'safe spaces', on integrating youth social action within other activity streams, and on supporting young people to continue with campaigning work. There was a sense that things would not be back to 'normal' any time soon.

Again, some were feeling confident about new practices adopted during the lockdown, and that they could continue working towards desired programme outcomes. This was helped where organisations had been successful in securing additional funding for COVID-related work.

Some organisations were feeling less positive, uncomfortable with 'putting pressure on schools' and noting that young people were 'sick of online.' In some places, building-based activity was already on pause until Easter 2021, with the focus moved onto work with schools - though with a caveat that there were 'no definite plans of what things will look like moving forward', but a commitment to getting things back up and running as soon as possible and 'to keep having those conversations' to work out how that can happen. Others also noted that specific plans were still to be shaped by the young people that were engaging in opportunities. They key takeaway from these conversations was the level of churn and flexibility that everyone was having to navigate.

Learning and evaluation

As part of these conversations, we were also interested to learn more about who leads on learning and evaluation (a potentially broad remit) within the participating organisations, as well as clarifying whether the organisation might have already or planned to engage any external evaluators. From our previous experience, we found that this can potentially complicate matters when Project Leads are simultaneously progressing improvement work through the Impact Accelerator programme, and that it would be important to clarify any plans and expectations at the start to ensure that improvement work and support could be as aligned as possible.

Who leads on evaluation?

There were various different staff roles responsible for evaluation across the cohort, sitting across a range of levels of seniority (including at Board level). One organisation had an internal youth team that led on data collection. Those with a dedicated learning or evaluation role (four organisations) tended to be in the large organisation category, in terms of both income and/or staff team size. Five of the cohort had also previously engaged external consultants for evaluation work, three of whom were non-youth focused organisations and four of whom did not have dedicated in-house learning and evaluation roles. This work had focused on initial programme design, building an impact framework, and developing a participation strategy.

One organisation also noted how additional evaluation priorities were often determined by funders, sitting alongside a core organisational monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework.

Organisational confidence in sharing, learning from, and acting on data

We also explored how confident the organisations felt about their ability to share, learn from, and act on data. 'Organisational confidence' is a somewhat sweeping term – in practice it will be more about the confidence of those leading on data and learning efforts – but the broader aim here was to establish a sense of organisational culture and practices relating to ongoing learning and evaluation.

Confidence was highest around implementing feedback from young people and families, participatory approaches that involved young people in the design and delivery of activities, and in sharing both internally and externally, through networks.

Areas of development included acting on data that was collected - beyond just recording it or storing it on a database – and adopting more 'progressive' frameworks and evaluation approaches. Changing attitudes and culture was also a strong theme in these conversations: organisations noted a desire to have more time for learning and reflection, ensuring that learning affects decision making, to become

more evidence based as an organisation, to build engagement with (and acting on) data into staff expectations, and to establish more systematic approaches to using data.

Specific challenges in working towards these goals included building data and learning into strategic plans, and being able to demonstrate tangible changes from this, systems taking a while to set up, relying on specific staff members to drive changes or behaviours, working across different sectors (such as the arts) where there are different approaches to impact and evaluation, and funders having different requirements, which can make data efforts feel 'bespoke' and can even be felt to 'dominate' data work, particularly on outcomes.

Sharing with wider networks - who are they, what are the mechanisms for sharing, and how could they benefit from cohort learning on the Impact Accelerator?

Cohort organisations are already part of a huge range of networks focusing on different geographical areas, specific communities of interest (homelessness, mental health, refugees and asylum seekers, arts, health and wellbeing), cross-sector groups (educational partnerships, multi-agency networks, local authority networks and stakeholder groups), lived experience groups, funding related communities of practice, learning and evaluation groups, and one international partnership.

When asked about how wider networks might benefit from their learning on the Impact Accelerator programme, participants shared a wide range of responses, including problem solving, identifying opportunities for new areas of work, supporting other voluntary sector organisations to develop youth-led models, and working to establish quality standards.

Timeline and capacity

Finally, at this stage we also asked organisations about their perceived capacity and 'peaks and troughs' of activity over the course of the programme. We would usually ask this question at the start of the Impact Accelerator, to help with setting mutually agreed deadlines for key programme phases. For this cohort, however, there was the added complexity of lockdown and the pandemic, which meant that responses to this question were often a 'best guess'.

At the time (July and August 2020), a number of organisations were gearing up for launches or events over October and November. Other 'peaks' were around reporting deadlines and data requirements for funders, specific campaign weeks (such as Mental Health Awareness week), response work where organisations see specific needs of particular young people increase (such as a spike in exclusion in September), or sprints related to school partnerships - either during term time or holidays, depending on the nature of the partnership. Specifically, in relation to COVID-19, some were also anticipating an increase in workload in the run-up to Easter 2021 in preparation for restarting face-to-face provision.

Initial cohort training

Once organisations have been inducted to the programme through the one-to-one calls detailed above, the cohort is then invited to join group training to formally 'launch' the Impact Accelerator. Based on feedback and reflections from the previous two 'cohort retreats' – whereby participating organisations attended two-day, overnight training – and, of course, the necessary COVID-19 restrictions, this year's introductory training was moved online and broken up across a series of three weekly webinars. For more details on this, and on how it was received by the cohort, please refer to the report annex.

Insights from the calibration process

About the calibration process

Following initial training, the Confidence Framework self-assessment was undertaken internally by the Project Lead, who collected evidence and internal documentation to support the score they believed most suitable for each criterion. All organisations were offered support calls throughout this process, as a space to share any concerns or questions about the exercise, as well as another opportunity to reinforce the 'low stakes accountability' approach through which the programme is delivered. Very few people got in touch for support during the self-assessment period, however.

Evidence was submitted alongside form responses to the Centre for Youth Impact and an external Research Associate, who calibrated and moderated the assessments. Calibrated assessments, with commentary, were then provided back to organisations ahead of their improvement meetings.

As previously noted, the new Confidence Framework forms are 'in beta' for the third cohort and will be further refined in the light of feedback from Cohort Three organisations as they go through each domain. For more information and reflections on this, please refer to the report annex.

Insights

Areas of high and low confidence across the 'Design', 'Deliver', and 'Learn' domains of the Confidence Framework are broadly similar to those in Cohort Two, with some differences both in terms of practice (for example, whether or not an organisation is doing a certain behaviour such as setting targets for attendance) and in awareness of practices (for example, knowing whether or not they had effectively defined markers of quality for delivery). Cohort Three organisations have so far only completed the

first three domains of the Confidence Framework ('Design', 'Deliver', 'Learn') as the previous two cohorts have demonstrated that this is where the majority of immediate improvement efforts will be most impactful. We will revisit calibrations for the updated 'Outcomes' and 'Sustain' domains in the final report for Cohort Three, depending on how many organisations progress to this stage.

Below, we build on specific areas of the first three sections of the Framework in more detail, comparing Cohort Three calibrations with those from both Cohorts One and Two.

Theory of Change

Organisations in Cohort Three were slightly less confident in determining whether or not they had a theory of change (10 out of 19, versus three out of eight), although calibrations show similar numbers did in fact have them (two out of 19, versus one out of eight). This further highlights this area as a key priority for improvement and builds on our recommendations for Match Funders at the end of this report.

Those that already have theories of change can strengthen them by adding in 'mechanisms of change' - the experiences that young people have in provision that affect a change in outcomes. They are often referred to as the 'active ingredients' and are markers of high-quality delivery, and critical to influencing impact.

Organisations can also benefit from adding in an 'accountability line'. This is the point beyond which it is difficult to know if a something happened as a direct result of your support, and is likely to come about as a result of other factors too, including the agency of young people themselves. When building a theory of change, it is crucial to set out what changes lie beyond this line. This means you will be able to distinguish between the things you are measuring - and holding yourselves accountable for achieving – from the things you hope to happen in the future.

Target Population

Having a clear perspective about who is most likely to benefit from provision is a really helpful element of programme design. More Cohort Three organisations reported that they have identified a target population (15 out of 19 versus seven out of eight), but half as many (two out of eight, versus 10 out of 19) had evidenced this. Subsequently, the proportion of organisations in Cohort Three who were downgraded from documenting a target population was much higher (five out of seven) than for Cohorts One and Two (five out of 15).

This reflects the trend across cohorts of higher self-ratings being less accurate, where almost all changes to ratings are to downgrade them. However, it may be a consequence of the tighter rules

about documentation, where for theories of change it is simpler to document and thus is not subject to this.

Discussions at improvement meetings clarified that many organisations had gone some way to defining a target population, but that this often lacked details about eligibility criteria or any evidence about why their provision was suitable, and particularly beneficial, to a particular group of young people. This makes it difficult for organisations to a) set targets for recruitment and engagement and b) assess whether or not those targets are being met. This also makes it difficult to act on data, for example making changes to increase the reach of the programme. These practices also rely on the collection of high quality user data, which was not always evidenced across the cohort.

One organisation was able to demonstrate how they had narrowed their target group by reflecting on who the activities had worked **less** well for in past rounds of delivery, and why. They also used this data to establish who would be less likely to benefit from taking part in the specific social action activity but better suited to other opportunities within the wider organisation. By digging into mechanisms and refining theories of change, other organisations may benefit from asking similar questions and establishing a tighter understanding of how their social action opportunities fit into their wider offer for young people.

Programme Codification

Codification involves setting all of the relevant details of the provision that is being delivered, including which elements are 'core' (all young people *must* access them), and which are 'flex' (valuable additions to the core). This is an extension of design work - turning a theory of change and evaluation plan into a comprehensive 'recipe' for all staff to follow. Having this in place also enables organisations to gather evidence that all staff understand it, and that they can consistently follow it correctly.

More organisations in Cohort Three reported that they had codified their programme (seven out of eight, versus 14 out of 19). While a majority (12 out of 19) of the organisations in Cohorts One and Two provided evidence that they had partially codified the programme, very few (two out of eight) of Cohort Three had done so. They were also either less accurate in their perception of whether the activities were codified – only one organisation that reported partial codification provided evidence – than the other two cohorts (17 of 19), at least based on the evidence that was provided. In some cases, improvement meetings revealed more activity materials and resources, however there was a lack of cohesive manualisation on the whole (bringing together all materials and resources in one place). It was also common for at least some design elements to be held in people's heads, which poses a risk for quality and fidelity especially when key staff members move on.

Evaluation plans

A useful evaluation plan should answer questions such as:

- What data do you collect and how?
- When do you collect it?
- Ethical considerations
- What analysis do you do, and when?
- What processes are in place to act upon the analysis that you do?

Evaluations for pilot programmes are likely to focus more on establishing whether activities are likely to achieve desired outcomes, are feasible and practical, and ready to be scaled up (for example, are there systems and documents in place?) Evaluations for established programmes will look more closely at monitoring and evaluating intended outcomes (change for young people and communities), and monitoring and evaluating the process (fidelity and quality).

Whilst most organisations are using various (in some cases, validated) tools to evaluate their activities, most had not mapped these out within a formal evaluation plan. For those who had, there was a need to refine the contents – for example, distinguishing between outputs and outcomes, and better defining and describing outcomes to ensure they are measurable and specific. Improvement work on theories of change will support the development or refinement of evaluation plans. For some organisations, it is also recommended to develop an evaluation plan specific to the social action activity, and for others it is more a case of developing organisational wide evaluation plans in order to ensure social action provision is appropriately encompassed within those.

Insights from improvement meetings and plans

About improvement meetings and improvement planning

Improvement meetings are held online, using Zoom, and involve the Project Lead and any other staff members from the organisation who wish to participate, along with a representative from the calibration process and a scribe from the Centre for Youth Impact. The team spends approximately 90 minutes walking through each section of the calibrated assessment, discussing individual areas in more detail as required, and pulling out specific areas for improvement. If helpful, the meeting can also involve an 'urgency versus importance' prioritisation exercise. Detailed notes are then shared back with the Project Lead to aid with the completion of an improvement plan template, from which specific areas of improvement work support are agreed with the Centre.

Emerging questions and priorities – practice

From the improvement meetings conducted thus far, the emerging and immediate improvement recommendations focus on:

a) Developing or refining theories of change - this might include exploring multiple theories to focus on different aspects, such as young people's and community outcomes (rather than feeling like everything needs to be squeezed into one)

b) More clearly defining which target groups of young people will most benefit from the social action opportunity. In practice, this might lead to a set of inclusion or exclusion criteria.

For organisations who do not primarily work with young people, initial improvement plan priorities currently focus on developing theories of change specific to their youth work. For those whose primary focus is already to work with young people, the improvement focus is to develop a youth social action specific theory of change.

These priority areas build on our previous recommendation that organisations must focus on the fundamentals in order to provide a framework for understanding what evidence they can and should be collecting (i.e. with an evaluation plan). For example, without articulating mechanisms of change, it can be difficult to develop a definition of what 'high quality' looks like and how to ascertain whether or not high-quality provision is happening from day-to-day. Without having a clear sense of which young people will most benefit from specific programme activities, it can also be more difficult to define what those mechanisms of change look like, and what targets should be for enrolment and attendance.

Building on this, the next recommendation is often to develop a clear evaluation plan, that sets out what is being measured, how, and when – ensuring that it is systematic and that there is a plan for how data will be used. A good evaluation plan should possess the following qualities:

- Embedded into the fabric and culture of the organisation, not 'bolted' or 'layered' on
- Goes with the grain and enhances practice rather than detracting or undermining it
- Generates actionable insight rather than extracting data to be passed on
- Promotes ownership amongst practitioners
- Prioritises learning and reflection over 'proving'
- Asks 'evidence of what and for whom?' rather than applying blanket standards
- Starts with asking good questions

Evaluation planning will also include looking at specific tools and approaches, such as observational methods, and making decisions about which are most appropriate.

Other, related improvement recommendations focus on developing tools to support staff with implementation fidelity (for example, onboarding training and delivery checklists), as well as linking staff profiles and job descriptions with work on quality (for example, what skills are needed to deliver an activity as intended?) Often, these elements can be brought together alongside the theory of change and evaluation plan, in a programme **manual**. Manualising is often a case of 'getting things down on paper' and ensuring that activity plans are written up clearly. In other cases, more of these materials already exist, and the job is to bring together various resources that are held in different places.

So far, organisations have prioritised these four areas – developing theories of change, refining target groups, developing evaluation plans, and manualising – in their improvement plans. Several organisations have also included **developing a quality framework** in their improvement plan. Building an understanding of what quality 'looks like' is likely to be a more realistic starting point here, and will rely on progress towards the priorities noted above. However, organisations are encouraged to look further than the scope of the Impact Accelerator programme when listing improvement goals, and to map out a set of progressive priorities. When planning for quality, organisations also want to explore what quality looks like for specific activity contexts, such as the arts, or working with young people who have lived experience. More guidance on defining and assessing quality can be found in the Centre's [Asking Good Questions guide](#), under Question Three.

These overarching priorities are broadly in line with those identified by Cohort Two. In the final report for Cohort Three, we will report against cohort progress towards identified improvement priorities, and on any learning and insight that emerges directly from this work.

Bigger questions for organisations to explore include identifying clearer programme aims (perhaps distinguishing between tackling a social issue directly, or creating more politically active young people), and better defining 'activism' elements and what specific skills young people are supported to develop through social action activities. These questions will be answered, in some part, through the theory of change process.

Specific 'risks' identified through improvement meeting conversations include: how to 'manage failure', especially when young people have experienced the problem being tackled first-hand; encouraging positive relationships with other institutions and staff that the young people interact with (when encouraging young people to advocate for change could also encourage tensions); and how to effectively engage families or other stakeholders in evaluations – for example, not asking parents or staff to make judgements beyond what can be observed for the purpose of evaluation.

Emerging questions and priorities – process

A number of questions and concerns arise at improvement planning stage, with key themes including:

- How to manage capacity and expectations for improvement priorities;
- Aims and outcomes being previously quite funder-led, with an ambition to spend more time reflecting on what these mean for the young people involved;
- If and how the improvement process might be applied to other areas of the organisation's work;
- Knowing know to assess whether or not an improvement action has been impactful;
- How to align improvement work with a wider strategic review; and
- Developing an evaluation plan that doesn't mean young people have to fill in lots of paper forms.

We will support organisations to explore and reflect on these challenges throughout the remaining phases of the programme.

Recommendations for Match Funders

As the Impact Accelerator moves through the delivery of the third and final cohort within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, our aim is to support Match Funders to benefit from the collective experience and learning of both participant organisations and the Centre.

At this stage, our recommendations for Match Funders remain consistent with those made in previous reports. These are:

- To provide access to consistent training in theory of change and other core concepts. **In addition to this**, it may be helpful to support organisations in thinking about and protecting time to codify programme activities and resources as part of the ongoing delivery cycle
- To provide support for the long-term nature of the learning and improvement process, by resourcing delivery organisations to continue accessing support and engaging in reflection activities, and by funding an open, collective improvement offer for youth sector organisations
- To underpin this approach and support wider culture change by working collaboratively with other funding partners to adopt consistent grant management processes that focus on key 'learning indicators', in place of more traditional monitoring questions – in order to streamline data requirements and avoid adding to overall reporting burdens.

We also still believe that it would be powerful for funders to apply such questions to their own work, to model the behaviours they wish to see manifested amongst their funded partners.

Building on these recommendations, as some #iwill Fund supported projects and activities come to a close, it might be helpful for Match Funders to support organisations in asking key questions about how social action has contributed to wider organisational aims, for example:

- [How] has social action contributed to existing or new outcomes for young people? What mechanisms of change can be identified within youth social action activities, and how might these align with or contribute to the organisation's wider provision?
- [How] have young people contributed to an organisation's existing community outcomes?

Finally, in light of COVID-19, Match Funders might also support organisations to reflect on how ongoing learning and reflection behaviours can support 'response and recovery' efforts, to ensure that decision making is based on learning and evidence, and that sufficient time is built in for embedding practice and behaviours that support effective learning and improvement work.

The future of the Impact Accelerator

In our previous [Initial Insights Paper](#) and [Final Insights Paper for Cohort Two](#), we identified three areas of development for the Impact Accelerator: bringing the Confidence Framework online, developing a community of practice, and providing greater consistency of external support. We update on our progress towards these priorities below.

Confidence Framework online
Building on the developments discussed throughout this report, the Centre's focus will now be on responding to feedback from Cohort Three organisations using the revised tool, and on developing the Confidence Framework as a tool that could be used as a 'self-service' process for organisations, allowing for light touch support at a far greater scale than is possible within a programme such as the Impact Accelerator. Additional resources may be developed in order to support this offer.

Confidence in Community
As previously mentioned, the nature of the COVID-19 crisis has made it impractical to make progress in our ambitions to foster a community of practice, built around 'graduates' of the Impact Accelerator.

We will be drawing together learning from the third cohort's revised focus on sharing back with existing, external networks, and considering opportunities to bring together the current cohort on specific topics (for example, a group training session on implementation fidelity), in order to shape a future 'community offer'. Feedback from this cohort's introductory training and ongoing conversations with cohort organisations indicates appetite for more opportunities to connect with peers on the topics explored through the Impact Accelerator process, but this sits within a wider context of competing

demands for time, and a need to systematise ongoing learning and improvement behaviours internally.

It also remains the case that any aspiration to draw together the collective continuous improvement experience, challenge and ambition for the sector needs to be reinforced by a combination of accountability, recognition, and access to resources.

Consistency of external support

Our approach for providing improvement work support for this third cohort has been shaped by key learning and insight from previous cohorts:

> *It remains the case that the improvement needs of most organisations are fairly foundational – that is, the majority of organisations do not have a theory of change (or at least an up-to-date version). Where organisations do have a theory of change, there was a lack of confidence in how to develop and use this. As indicated above, support is needed to articulate some core elements of programme delivery, such as eligibility or targeting, or the central 'offer' to young people. More support is also needed with identifying logical connections between the different elements of an organisation's theory of change. This is the work that needs to inform developments in data gathering, defining outcomes and articulating impact – though these are often the areas that are uppermost in the minds of participating organisations at the start of the Impact Accelerator programme. In reality, setting improvement goals often involves taking several steps back from where organisations believe they were starting, and managing expectations carefully.[2]*

In the first instance, Cohort Three organisations will be offered the opportunity to attend a dedicated theory of change and/or evaluation planning workshop delivered internally by Centre for Youth Impact staff, which is to be followed up with a review and feedback on the developing theory of change and/or evaluation plan. We are also exploring the potential for a group session on implementation fidelity or facilitated peer support on this topic (for example, sharing tools for manualisation). This approach will support organisations to attend to foundational improvement priorities, and underpin any independent work alongside future, longer-term and ongoing improvement efforts. Other, more unique support requests will be discussed on an ad hoc basis.

Next Steps

As we approach the end of the final Impact Accelerator cohort, these three strands will come together to inform the Centre's work to develop the Impact Accelerator programme as a model that can be a key part of the legacy of the #iwill Fund and the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. Key to this process will be

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[2] https://www.youthimpact.uk/sites/default/files/2021-02/iwill%20Learning%20Hub%20Impact%20Accelerator%20Cohort%202%20Final%20Report%20FINAL.pdf

to identify appropriate 'pathways' for organisations, with varying levels of support provided according to need and capacity.

Appendix 1

I) Recruitment and selection process:

About

The Impact Accelerator recruitment process was designed to build and validate demand for the scheme, by communicating the value of taking part to prospective organisations and ensuring that the full obligations of taking part are known from the start.

Recruitment began in December 2019 in discussion with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub and Steering Group, with final invitations to apply sent to organisations in July 2020.

- Match Funders were provided with the selection criteria agreed with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub Steering Group, and asked to identify grantees who met the learning criteria
- Organisations were then invited to attend a phone call with a member of staff from the Centre for Youth Impact to discuss the programme structure and how this might support current organisational priorities. After these calls, they were invited to complete an expression of interest for taking part in the third cohort, confirming that they met our requirements for taking part in the scheme, and providing information to aid the selection process
- We assessed organisations against selection criteria agreed with the #iwill Fund Learning Hub Steering Group in order to determine which organisations would be chosen
- Successful and unsuccessful organisations were notified.

Organisations were informed that the Impact Accelerator would focus on just one programme that they offer (if they deliver more than one), or one discrete aspect of their services that involves social action (if their services are not defined into 'programmes').

The agreed selection criteria looked at three areas of consideration:

1. Primary eligibility

YES / NO criteria was applied to ensure that only #iwill Fund grantees delivering in England with capacity to take part over a 12 month period were considered for sponsorship by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

2. Strategic areas of focus

Organisations were then categorised as to whether they fit into five strategic learning areas put forward by the Steering Committee:

1. Community outcomes focus
2. Delivering at scale
3. Potential to be replicated across a setting
4. Younger age range focus (under-14s)
5. Targeting participants from lower socio-economic groups.

These learning areas were chosen with the goal of identifying transferable learning about practices that can be replicated widely, beyond the cohort organisations that took part in the scheme.

3. Organisational characteristics

In order for organisations to benefit from participating in the process, they should also have:

- Designed a youth social action service or programme, with delivery about to commence or already underway
- Secured stable income for the next 12 months for this service or programme

- Allocated at least 2 full time members of staff involved in programme delivery

There should also be a clear commitment within the organisation to understanding and improving their impact. This can be demonstrated in a variety of ways: a track record of programme improvement; a dedicated learning/impact/evaluation role; clear, public statements from senior leaders.

At this stage of the programme and of the #iwill Fund, we recommended that organisations are confident that delivery of their youth social action opportunity will continue beyond 12 months, to ensure that all learning and improvement work can be as valuable as possible. We also recommended that delivery of the youth social action opportunity was already underway, as organisations will find most value from the programme when initial design work has been completed and is ready to be assessed and refined. Organisations may have long established youth social action programmes or be delivering this area of work for the first time.

Result

18 #iwill funded grantees were nominated to join the scheme, of which 11 applied and were selected. Several organisations expressed interest in the early stages of recruitment and joined phone calls with the Centre for Youth Impact team but did not follow-up with expressions of interest, for example due to staff being too busy responding to lockdown on the ground. All 11 organisations were approved by the Steering Group and started the scheme with induction calls over July and August 2020.

Appendix 2

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Key changes and adaptations to the Impact Accelerator programme included:

- Redesigning and refining the Confidence Framework, and moving it online to allow for easier and, if required, staggered completion;
- Building in time during recruitment and induction calls to discuss how the 'role' of youth social action might have shifted in light of the pandemic, and to consider how quality improvement work might align or support with response and recovery efforts; and
- Breaking down initial programme training into modules and moving all key support and interactions online.

INTRODUCTORY TRAINING

As mentioned in the main report, based on feedback from previous cohorts and the need to shift key training online, introductory training for Cohort Three was broken down into a series of three weekly webinars. These sessions covered the following topics:

- **Welcome and introduction**
  - Getting to know the cohort
  - Reflecting on how COVID-19 has disrupted youth social action
  - About the Impact Accelerator programme
  - What does it mean to get (even) better?

- **Core concepts**
  - Six types of data
  - [Asking Good Questions framework](#)
  - Theory of change
  - 'Core and flex'
  - Implementation fidelity

- **Taking Part**
  - Doing a self-assessment
  - Undertaking an improvement journey
  - Confidence Framework walk-through

The aims of a modular approach were to reduce feelings of overwhelm and 'information overload', as had been fed back from previous retreats (see Cohort Two Final Report). It also introduced more foundational concepts, such as 'core and flex' and the six types of data, that are explored in the Confidence Framework. This latter change was in response to a suggestion and feedback from Cohort Two participants.

We hoped that having shorter (90 - 120 minute) sessions spread out over three weeks would make it easier for organisations to participate amid programmes re-starting and the ongoing demands of managing lockdown and response work. In the end, we had around 25 attendees taking part in each session, including staff from four Cohort Two organisations – a mix of returning project leads (who had led the programme in the previous cohort) and new staff members at those organisations, who were being brought into ongoing improvement work. One Cohort Three organisation was also able to support their Youth Ambassadors to engage with the training. To help with this we shared slides in advance so that the Project Lead could go through key content with the Youth Ambassadors ahead of the sessions and work together to 'bring it to life' with examples from their own projects.

At the end of each webinar, we asked for feedback on both delivery format, and key learning outcomes. Average scores for the delivery format increased over each session, although we did not receive enough feedback for session three for comparison so have not included average scores from these below.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Average score (out of 5) for Session One	Average score (out of 5) for Session Two
The webinar was sufficiently interactive	4.1	4.7
The webinar content felt relevant and helpful	4.4	4.6
The webinar allowed me to talk to others as much as I would have liked to	3.4	4.5
The webinar was well paced	3.7	4.5

Multiple comments following the first session noted that participants would like more discussions, more input from peers and hearing from other participants, more time for group introductions, and more networking. Feedback also flagged a need for more explanations of terminology, as well as more time for the session overall. We adapted the following sessions in response to this feedback to build in more time for discussion between the group. Comments following the second and third sessions mostly focused a need for more time, links to further reading, and more opportunities to return to the same groups throughout the session (rather than random, mixed up groups), as well as more opportunities for interaction and more 'visuals' rather than text-heavy slides or descriptions. Specific feedback comments further indicated that organisations would like more time to build relationships and get deeper into conversations with peers:

> *"It was great to meet but more time to explore what other organisations are doing would have been great."*

> *"I would have liked more input from peers, breakout spaces were hard going. So either one staff member per breakout space to facilitate (not sure if capacity allows) or more time for ice breakers and chatting before delving into deep conversations."*

"Great session - it was sometimes hard to build relationships/dialogue between new people as it was the first time we had met. Looking forward to further working with everyone and learning!"

Interestingly, average scores for the key learning outcomes decreased from after the first session to after the second.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Average score (out of 5) for Session One	Average score (out of 5) for Session Two
As a result of attending the webinar, I have a better understanding of what to expect from the Impact Accelerator process	3.7	3.4
As a result of attending the webinar, I feel more confident about taking part in the Impact Accelerator process	3.9	3.6
I am looking forward to taking part in the Impact Accelerator process	4.3	3.9

Again, unfortunately we did not receive enough feedback to draw a comparison with the third session, although the few responses that we did receive indicated a notable increase.

As detailed by the training description above, the second session is where we introduce the more technical concepts – it is quite possible that as awareness and understanding increases of these, confidence dips. As we noted in the final report for Cohort Two:

A 'lower stakes accountability' approach for the Impact Accelerator is essential, as many organisations find that they need to take a number of steps back from their original plans in order to make progress on their improvement plans. This can be demoralising, and the prospect of embarking on an improvement journey – particularly one that is even longer than anticipated - can feel overwhelming.

Overall, comments indicated that participants felt positively about the training and support that was on offer at the start of the programme, and the wider cohort approach:

"Staff [were] dedicated to ensuring questions were answered and follow up of areas that need further exploration."

"Very great session today and loved the approach including using the bread making which worked very well. The group conversations were also just right and [the] mix of new and old participants was great."

"Great session. Great to continue with the group we got to know at [the] beginning - helped us get deeper into projects and make connections."

"Today's sessions felt easier to engage with because I had a better idea of what to expect and the language felt more accessible. I love the metaphors, group discussions and hearing about other people's settings / work. Thank you."

AN UPDATED CONFIDENCE FRAMEWORK

Having previously been contained within an Excel spreadsheet, the Confidence Framework has been reconfigured into a series of online forms: one for each of the five 'domains' of the Framework. The

rationale for splitting the process into separate modules is to allow organisations greater flexibility: to complete one at a time, and pause and review between each, or to run through several at once. This was an aspiration pre-pandemic but has been particularly valuable over the past 12 months.

We have also developed more specific guidance about the types of evidence that will be most useful and relevant to provide and limited the total amount of evidence that can be submitted. This is to reduce the burden of completing the process, both for organisations and for calibration by the Centre team. The experience of Cohort One and Two organisations going through the process established that much of the evidence submitted was not directly relevant, and in some cases was spread over multiple documents, making it hard to navigate and identify key information.

Finally, we refined the language and terminology used throughout the tool in response to feedback from participants about clarity, and accessibility for different members of staff joining the process. This refinement is complemented by revised introductory training, covered in more detail in the latter sections of this report, which better scaffolds the core programme principles and approaches. It also ensures that language is used more consistently across both the training and the Confidence Framework tool.

Broadly, the updated forms and modular approach seems to have simplified and sped up the initial self-assessment process. A number of organisations from both Cohorts Two and Three have highlighted that the visualisation element of the older framework – being able to see a 'heatmap' of Confidence Framework scores – is potentially helpful for the process. One of our intentions for the revised Framework was to remove the focus away from the 'reds and greens' and towards the details of specific improvement goals, however we understand that being able to visualise performance and progress can be really helpful in maintaining momentum and being able to map out a 'journey' towards higher quality practice. We will be exploring what a visualisation element might look like as we continue to refine the core tool.

It is also worth noting that the revised tool limits the number of evidence documents that an organisation can support, with a maximum of five documents per form or 'domain' (Design, Deliver, Learn, Outcomes, or Sustain). This was in order to reduce the burden of completing the process, both for organisations and for calibration by the Centre team. The experience of Cohort One and Two organisations going through the process established that much of the evidence submitted was not directly relevant, and in some cases was spread over multiple documents, making it hard to navigate and identify key information. This may, however, impact on the calibration 'scores' for the third cohort, should they not be able to evidence all elements of their design and delivery. We intend to respond to this in future by being even clearer about a core set of documents (or 'evidence') that could be provided for each domain, rather than leaving this more open to interpretation – and thus the risk that some organisations perceive themselves to have been limited in how much they could share.

With this considered, however, it is still very possible that many organisations will find that key details sit across multiple documents and, often, in key staff members' heads. There is a strong case to be made for having a limited, comprehensive, and streamlined set of documents that brings together these details: to encourage staff to be aware of them, refer back to them, and to reflect on how it relates to their practice (the 'why', that 'what', and the 'how' of what they do). This will also help with project sustainability and quality, to ensure that core delivery information and learning is retained as and when key staff members change.

Organisations provided the following feedback on the self-assessment process:

- The forms were straightforward, but finding evidence was harder. A lot of time evidence was felt to exist only in staff members' heads, or the process of gathering documents took a while. Participants noted a desire to 'share the right thing' along with 'not wanting to create something new.'

    > "[We were] struck by how much information was held in different places, and also in people's heads!"

- One participant found that the Centre's [Asking Good Questions guide](#) complemented the process really well. They noted how when planning and developing projects, they don't necessarily have any framework to go through, and that a lot of decisions are often made at the time 'because it felt like the right thing to do'.

- It felt positive to start this process with a project that is not fully established, and to develop examples of best practice in programme design at an early stage. Conversely, another staff member found the process incredibly useful when coming into an organisation at the end of a piece of work that has been led by different staff members over a number of years.

- The tool provided helpful questions that encouraged self-reflection, and 'asked questions we wouldn't necessarily ask ourselves'. They felt that it captures the 'things that are often missed' and that resulting conversations were really helpful in understanding where everything fits into place.

- Completing the process had been a group effort involving other staff members beyond the Project Lead.