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# #iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream

New Directions for Youth Social Action  
Dartington Service Design Lab  
June 2020

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## About this report

In March 2020, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub organised an event to present some of the directions youth social action has taken as a result of the #iwill Fund. The agenda brought together Match Funders, delivery organisations and evaluators to discuss the work they were doing, the lessons they were learning, and the potential next steps they had identified.

In particular, the event was to focus on two specific strands of work emerging from the #iwill Fund:

- Work to trial youth social action in organisations without a track record of working with either young people, or social action, or both. Why had these organisations taken the decision to enable youth social action, and what were they learning as a result?
- Work to develop youth social action within, or alongside youth work, delivered by organisations with a traditional focus on youth development, sometimes working with young people with specific needs. Why had these organisations developed youth social action opportunities, and how were these sitting alongside their existing work?

As well as deepening our understanding of the work done within the #iwill Fund and its effects, the event aimed to introduce attendees to the ways in which youth social action can be introduced to new organisations, the challenges and opportunities it presents, and the experience of their peers who have already taken this step. These experiences can be useful for delivery organisations considering youth social action, and those who fund them.

The event was cancelled due to COVID-19. However, we believed the content is important, and should be shared. Therefore, interviews with the speakers were carried out, and their stories are presented within this report, alongside some reflections and conclusions from Dartington Service Design Lab, the lead partners in the #iwill Fund Learning Hub.

## 1. Youth Social Action within organisations

This section explores examples from within the #iwill Fund where organisations have been supported to develop youth social action opportunities for the first time, or in a new way. These organisations are often motivated by the desire to see whether youth social action can help them meet their existing mission, or impact aims.

## Pears Foundation and NHS Hospital Trusts

*This is drawn from an interview with Annie Caffyn, Researcher at IVAR, which is the learning partner for Pears Foundation on the #iwill Fund. Pears Foundation and the #iwill Fund are supporting 30 NHS Trusts to develop youth social action programmes.*

'Pears Foundation has a long history of supporting young people to get involved in youth social action – with a focus on ensuring the sustainable growth of high quality opportunities. This focus led the Foundation to work with the #iwill campaign and NHS Trusts on developing high-quality and inclusive ways to engage young people in health and social care.

'The 30 Trusts in the Pears #iwill network are all working in different ways to initiate or develop youth engagement – some are early on in their thinking about how to embed youth volunteering across the hospital, others are building on years of experience. Pears are keen to grow the number of opportunities for young people within the NHS structure, and to raise the profile of this engagement – but NHS Trusts aren't required to deliver specific outcomes. They develop their own goals depending on local contexts and priorities. One Trust commented on how the Pears fund *'allows organisations to have a flexible approach within the funding framework and acknowledges that young volunteers benefit from dedicated support. We were able to customise our young volunteer projects to local needs and practice. This has been a key element of our success so far.'* The collaborative nature of the network – sharing processes, approaches and resources between Trusts – has also been key to growing opportunities for young volunteers.

'The benefits to Trusts are wide ranging. Volunteer coordinators have mentioned how young volunteers' presence in the hospital – throughout wards, at the welcome desk – benefits staff and patients. Sometimes the benefits are subtle. But the value can be profound. Some Trusts see a tight link between youth volunteering and recruitment later on. For others, it's about ensuring their volunteer workforce reflects the community. But there is also a role that young volunteers play to increase efficiency, which mustn't be underplayed. Many of the Trusts need to demonstrate how young volunteers contribute to the strategic interests of their Trust, to be able to secure future funding.

'Benefits to staff often become more obvious over time – as volunteers take designated roles off their hands. One Trust explained to me that when young people spend 1:1 time with patients, this usually improves a patient's mood – and then it's easier for staff to give medical care. The benefits to staff and patients is often cyclical. Embedding youth volunteering has been very gradual in some Trusts – starting small and building up, involving staff in the process, and demonstrating one ward at a time how young people are making a difference.

'Some young people might feel uncomfortable in particular roles that others thrive in, given the right support. It takes a culture change to be open to this kind of flexibility; it means not seeing a

young volunteer as an unpaid staff member who does a concrete, pre-defined role. One volunteer coordinator said it's about having *'enough structure but with flex'* – adapting, not reinventing existing structures and systems to make them suitable and safe for young volunteers.

'There have definitely been challenges amongst the Trusts – from shifting staff perceptions of young people's reliability and commitment, through to staff not always knowing how or when to work with young volunteers. Negative experiences of training people who don't stick around often has a knock on effect. It helps to have staff who really "get it" to be champions with their colleagues – then other staff will take it seriously when they see it working. Of course, when schemes depend on individuals you are still vulnerable to staff turnover, but some Trusts are working to overcome this.'

'Sustaining this work beyond the #iwill Fund is something the Trusts are thinking about. Understanding what motivates each Trust's senior teams and how to align aspirations plays a big part in this. It's worked well to start small – maybe one ward – and build from there. Within some Trusts, young volunteers are no longer an add-on for their volunteer practices – for many it's become organisationally embedded, rather than programmatic. One Trust reflected on how *'network colleagues have highlighted the value of focusing on quality not quantity as the foundation for embedding young people into the Trust's mainstream volunteering.'*

### **The Woodland Trust and the Young People's Forest**

*This is drawn from an interview with Jules Acton, an Ambassador for the Woodland Trust. The Woodland Trust has been funded by Pears Foundation and the #iwill Fund to develop the Young People's Forest.*

'Before the Young People's Forest, The Woodland Trust had worked with young people, but not in this way. We run the Green School Trees Award; we enable schools to plant trees through our Schools and Community Tree packs and we run community activities such as planting days. Those are about inspiring people to learn about trees and making woodland accessible.

'We knew we wanted to work differently with 10-20 year olds and involve them more – but we didn't know how much interest there'd be, and teenagers are busy! We started by working with Derby College very near the proposed site for the new forest– many of the students were excited as they'd always lived near the site as an open-cast mine. We did some 'symbolic' tree-planting early on as a celebration which built energy and enthusiasm. Now 40,000 trees are planted.

'This initiative has turned the normal ways of working with young people on their head – we've created the conditions which allow young people to lead and do as much as they want within the right framework. Young people have led on tree-planting, film making, and designing way markers as well as getting involved in on-site activities such as yoga and bush-craft. We've created the

parameters for young people to have the ideas about what should happen within the Forest, and put them into action.

‘We always wanted young people to lead the communications about the Forest, but it’s feeling more authentic the longer we’ve gone on, and some people are really seizing the opportunity. The good thing is that people find their own roles if you provide the structure – you can’t predict what they’ll be. There are lots of different ways of engaging in nature and the young people find have found them – organisation, design, waymarking, research into wildlife.

‘We wanted to enable young leadership, and I think we are doing that, but creating a forest is a very complex, big thing involving site acquisition and environment impact assessments – we’re still learning how to ‘get out of the way’. Maybe the next Young People’s Forest will be even more youth-led from the start.

‘Our mission is to protect and restore ancient woodlands, and create new ones – so this is totally mission-aligned for us. Woodland creation by communities is not new but this has challenged us positively to think about how we can engage a new, and specific group in that. By engaging young people we’ve also opened up new sources of funding which is important.

‘There’s no doubt that setting up the Young People’s Forest has been time-consuming and involved a lot of decisions. But as well as all the other benefits it has helped make us more open and responsive to opportunities. I think we’ve got better at assessing opportunities, and understanding the impact on the organisation.’ The project is ongoing, we are still learning. Being part of it is also a great joy.’

### **Sport England and the ‘Potentials’ Fund**

*This is drawn from an interview with Kristen Natale, Head of Volunteering at Sport England, about their Potentials Fund which has made awards to 18 organisations as part of the #iwill Fund.*

‘The #iwill Fund came at an important time for Sport England: previously we’d seen volunteering as a means to an end to get more people involved in sport. Our new strategy was focused on double benefit from the start – how could volunteering & social action more broadly achieve additional benefits from sport and activity for both those taking part and the wider community. Those benefits include mental wellbeing, social inclusion, and community development

‘We also wanted to work with different types of organisations, including beyond the sport sector. By doing this we wanted to reach people our funding doesn’t normally reach – the ‘unusual suspects’. Our partnership with the #iwill Fund and campaign really helped us do this.

'We ran a fairly open grant-making process – the first stage of the open fund was just 'tell us your idea'. Next stage we held a workshop that was as important for us as it was for grantees. We were new to youth social action and so were many of the potential grantees – we needed to develop a shared understanding of what it is, and start to share insight and evidence about what it can do, and how it should be delivered. We created an insight guide which drew on existing data and evidence on youth social action; including the National Youth Social Action Survey, and the six quality principles. This guide has been a touchstone for the Potentials Fund and provided all of us with a shared language and understanding. This helped to inform applications and the design of projects and youth social action opportunities in the fund.

'We've learned that building an evidence base for why youth social action could be effective helped us convince our board and senior leadership teams about how it could align with our strategic priorities. It also helped grantees feel confident to make the case for youth social action in their own organisations. It helped us, and them, see how it could link to, and support our existing outcomes and aims.

'We have also seen grantees make a real link between outcomes for young people and outcomes for the community. For example, British Blind Sport have been supporting young people with sight loss to become volunteers and leaders within mainstream sport settings. Their 'See My Voice' programme has been shaped by the views of these young people – they said they were given options of things they could do, but these weren't opportunities they could shape themselves.

Throughout the See My Voice project young peoples' views have informed branding, messaging, and the activities young people are doing - from training and qualifications in leadership, creating new volunteering opportunities where they are leading sport and physical activity. There is also a strong campaigning and advocacy element of the project where young people with sight loss are making their voices heard to make sport more accessible. This in turn benefits others. British Blind Sport have been on a journey of realising how youth social action helps them achieve their mission and are now seeking to embed youth voice further in their work and share their learning with the wider sport sector.

The Potentials Fund and the 'test and learn' approach we committed to has been really important for us as it gave us the permission to test stuff out and really see what works. This has been especially apparent in developing activities and social action opportunities for the younger age group. In our work with Play Gloucestershire and Laureus Sport for Good, we didn't really know if 10-year-olds would want to help others, would have an understanding of social action or would be able to play a role in designing their own activities. Now we've seen it happen – conversations start about helping people in your family and then move on to something bigger like wanting pupils to feel safer walking to school. Then they think about visible clothing and buddying as ways in which their ideas can help benefit others in their community; getting them to feel safer and more active by walking to school. Seeing that happen has been eye-opening for Sport England and

has led us to start exploring more what role social action could play in the experience of physical activity for children and in creating a positive habit for the future.

We've also learned that working beyond sport and with new and different partners opens up huge opportunities to support Sport England's aims. We want people to be more active, but if we just offer more of the same opportunities to participate, led by the same people there will always be people we can't reach. We need to dismantle barriers to activity we can't necessarily see, like self-esteem and body confidence. Engaging young people through youth social action has helped us understand and tackle these barriers a bit more and to engage young people in shaping the type of sport and physical activity that they want to take part in.

## 2. Youth Social Action & Youth Work

This section explores how organisations within the #iwill Fund have adapted and extended practices from youth work to involve youth social action.

### UK Youth & EmpowHER

*This is drawn from an interview with Patrick Shaw-Brown, Director of Programmes at UK Youth. UK Youth deliver the EmpowHER programme with funding from Spirit of 2012 and the #iwill Fund, and in partnership with other delivery organisations.*

'Spirit of 2012 and the #iwill Fund created a funding pot to mark the centenary of some women winning suffrage. They wanted to support young women to lead positive change in their community. We were interested because of the focus on young people and wellbeing, and we could see a fit with our Social Development Journey for young people. This is a four-stage process for developing young people: social engagement, social learning, social action, social leadership.

'We also thought that we could reach young women who maybe wouldn't take part in social action through mainstream programmes and formal education. We wanted to reach people new to social action and with a low sense of wellbeing.

'We were clear from the start we didn't want to go into this alone, and sought input from specialist partners. UK Youth are very experienced at working with young people but we can't offer social action within an existing national infrastructure. We partnered with British Red Cross so we could plug into their volunteering expertise and opportunities (from charity shops and first aid to emergency response and refugee services), and with Young Women's Trust for their gender-specific expertise.

'Delivery of the EmpowHER programme itself is carried out by local partners belonging to the UK Youth Movement, which reaches of 5,500 youth work organisations. Delivery through our Movement brings us extensive reach into local communities on a national scale, utilising the youth workers' personal and trusted relationships with young people. That also means the skills and relationships established through the programme are sustainable – it's not being delivered by a new organisation parachuted in that leaves when funding ends.

'Our role as UK Youth is to complement the skills of youth workers – we provide programme design, evaluation, reporting and governance, as well as guidance on delivery and quality. We work with a dedicated British Red Cross worker on the ground in every region to provide support for our 14 local partners, leaving the youth workers to concentrate on engaging and directly supporting the young people who need it most.

'It's a 30+ hours programme and sometimes parents and teachers can be sceptical about that level of involvement for young people, particular where the young people don't currently attend their local youth organisation or haven't done social action before. Our experience is that involving nationally-known organisations like UK Youth and British Red Cross lends credibility to the programme which a local youth club might not have on its own.'

### **British Red Cross & EmpowHER**

*This is drawn from an interview with Mairi Allan, Head of Youth Engagement at the British Red Cross. British Red Cross partner with UK Youth to deliver the EmpowHER programme.*

The British Red Cross is committed to supporting people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are. Whether it's tackling disasters, addressing health inequalities, or supporting displaced people, we are helping people through personal crisis and building more resilient communities. As part of a powerful movement of kindness, BRC always engaged with young people – when we started to deliver EmpowHER 15% of our volunteer workforce was already made up of 15-25 year olds in formal volunteering roles. Developing an explicit focus on youth social action was a natural progression and has helped us to open up more flexible opportunities for young people – something that young people were asking us for.

Although we had no problem attracting young women as volunteers we had noted proportionally fewer young women taking up leadership roles. We felt we had something of a gap in terms of our work to support gender issues with young women and girls and we wanted to develop this. We reviewed volunteering opportunities across the whole of BRC to look at how they could be made more attractive to girls and young women. We particularly wanted to consider how, through volunteering or social action, we could support young women to develop their self-efficacy, and



they could learn about the voluntary sector more widely and understand that they were indeed able to make change.

'The EmpowHER programme recruits young women and provides opportunities for them to engage with and lead. The young women are supported by the UK Youth network to understand how they can act in the service of causes they care about, and how that can boost their own wellbeing and resilience. Then they put this into practice through social action opportunities which we enable, but they shape and lead. So it is a structured programme, but the young people determine what is 'delivered' at the end.

'We had limited experience of working with under-15s – this was a risk for us as we had to adapt more formal volunteer opportunities into shorter, more flexible social actions. Close work with UK Youth and the Scouts has helped us understand the structures we needed to have in place to work with the younger age group. We also were aware that it would be easy to corral young people only into 'young people's projects'. That's made us think about how we can engage young people across all of our work. We've really looked at how we 'do' volunteering and social action through recruitment, training and support from young women's viewpoints.

'It's having a knock-on effect on the rest of the organisation too. Our volunteer experience team are also looking at more flexible ways for people to take social action. More under 25s are getting involved outside of formal volunteering roles, through partnerships or one-off projects. Our intergenerational approach leads to people of all ages working alongside each other which is really energising. It is the case also that young people we engage with tend to be more diverse. This has had a very positive impact.

'We have learned that there is significant value in having a dedicated staff team which specifically drives the youth social action offer within the organisation. A well defined programme has been important in helping us achieve our aims. We are committed to doing everything we can to retain this skill set within the organisation and are looking at ways we can fund this for the longer term.

### **Centre for Youth Impact and the Impact Accelerator**

*This is drawn from an interview with Ed Anderton, Director of Practice Development at the Centre for Youth Impact. As part of the #iwill Fund's Learning Hub work, the Centre for Youth Impact delivers the Impact Accelerator programme, supporting organisations delivering youth social action to improve their programme design and delivery over time. Many youth work organisations have taken part.*

The Impact Accelerator programme is about supporting teams to reflect on what they're doing. Rather than looking for 'perfect Theories of Change' – we want to support organisations to establish a consistent cycle of learning and improvement.

There are concepts that all participants find useful. Firstly, a focus on 'low-stakes' accountability: the idea that an organisation's primary accountability is not to its funder, but to those served, and to those within the organisation. This is a powerful concept for driving meaningful change within, and by, and organisation. This leads onto the question of what an organisation should be looking to 'prove' about its programme. A funder may be asking about long-term impact, but first organisations need to concentrate on tracking the key details, week-by-week: who's attending and how they are engaging. This is something we commonly see in our wider work across the youth sector.

When we are able to get into the sweet spot of helping organisations identify what's practically possible for them to do and improve, we have lots of 'aha!' moments. We can talk about the value of organisations keeping close track of how young people are engaging, what they're doing, and how things are changing: establishing this as a repeated cycle of reflection. Regularly gathering information on these things, as part of a process to reflect on and respond to opportunities to improve is the foundation of creating a durable culture of learning.

We've seen common issues amongst organisations going through the Impact Accelerator – many of whom come from a background of more traditional youth work. One is around 'double benefit' – the intention to generate outcomes for young people *and* 'the community'. The latter can often feel quite nebulous and organisations struggle with what information to collect.

For example, when working with organisations who support campaigning opportunities, common questions come up – does the campaigning support young people's personal growth, or is the benefit in developing the next generation of campaigners? For one organisation, they were clear their priority was the latter, so they want to know whether their programme enables young people to step into campaigning roles as they start their careers. That means for them, the community benefit they want to capture and articulate, over the long term, is for those whose lives are hopefully affected by the campaigns.

Across both cohorts of organisations engaged in the Impact Accelerator, we've observed that organisations newer to youth social action have had to engage with the challenge of integrating social action into their overall identity. This has worked best in those cases where there has been broad involvement of staff – beyond just those directly involved in the youth social action 'project' – in the development of either a Theory of Change, and/or the early stage design and iteration of the service itself. Within this, a commitment to collecting - and responding to - feedback from young people has been a key factor. In some cases, this has been a broader cultural challenge across the organisation as a whole, which this experience has helped them to highlight (if not always overcome).

For those who entered into this process identifying as ‘youth social action organisations’, the opportunity has typically been one of reviewing and refreshing their sense of why they do what do, and more tightly defining what they do (for example, what constitutes ‘high quality’). Particularly for some of the smaller, younger organisations, this process has allowed them to move out of an exploratory, ‘starting up’ phase, and developed a more assured, structured approach to their work.

## Insights & Conclusion

The examples featured in this report yield insights for organisations new to youth social action and funders which may wish to support them:

- Organisations developed an understanding of the full effects of youth social action (for young people, for communities, and for the organisation itself) only after delivery had begun – they entered delivery with an existing impact case, but found other, or different, benefits as they went along. This is in part due to the fact that youth social action was new to the organisations, but also to the youth-led nature of youth social action which meant young people took on different roles and activities than predicted.
- Related to this, we see that organisations which are used to working with adults need to be comfortable with the fact that young people may not fit into the same roles – indeed, in many of the examples in this report, it was not possible to specify in advance the roles that young people ended up taking. This is a challenge to traditional grant making and delivery, but it’s also part of the value in bringing youth social action to a new organisation.
- The flexibility required does not mean structure is unimportant – interviewees agreed that it was essential for safeguarding, but also to give organisations confidence as they introduce youth social action.
- Youth social action is something all young people can participate in. However, it is also possible to enable opportunities targeted at specific groups (for example, young women with low levels of wellbeing) and addressing specific needs for these young people. This is done by tailoring the support given alongside the youth social action.
- For youth work organisations, many of the steps needed to enable quality youth social action are the same as in traditional youth work. In particular, paying close attention to the engagement activities, and development of young people which allows the organisation to flex and respond during the programme.
- Youth work organisations are expert in outcomes for young people, but not in benefits for communities. Funders can support these organisations to develop their Theory of Change in this area – they can also support partnerships with organisations who already have a

strong understanding in this area, and may benefit themselves from enabling youth social action.

- Establishing a regular, 'low stakes' cycle of reflection, week by week, is a key enabler for organisations to develop and sustain an effective learning culture. For organisations newer to youth social action, embedding this as an approach is supported by involving as broad a range of colleagues as possible, beyond those involved directly in the work
- Funders should be aware that making money available can create an incentive to develop youth social action, even if it's not right for an organisation. Building a relationship with potential grantees can help organisations explore whether there are shared aims which will enable quality youth social action, but also meet existing missions.
- Organisations did not necessarily develop youth social action opportunities as a means to increasing 'youth voice' and participation in decision-making within their organisation; however, this has been an effect for some.

The organisations we interviewed had diverse motivations for enabling youth social action, which did not stand alone from their other work. For other organisations considering this, it is therefore important to think about how young people can contribute to meeting *an existing mission*, rather than creating an entirely new set of aims. There is not yet a large evidence base addressing how organisations can do this, so examples from the #iwill Fund provide inspiration and practical guidance.

It should be noted that the investment drivers of the #iwill Fund do not specifically include developing youth social action in new organisations, or supporting partnerships with youth work. Rather these are emergent outcomes from the #iwill Fund which have come about through the creativity of Match Funders and delivery partners. They point to ways in which youth social action may be sustained or extended after the #iwill Fund.

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