#iwill Fund Learning Hub
Systems Workstream

Report on the second #iwill Fund Learning Hub
Labstorms
The Centre for Youth Impact
March 2020

Introduction

LabStorms were adopted, within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, to foster ongoing, deeper collaboration between Match Funders, with the aim of enabling a system of effective youth social action funding to be continued beyond 2023. Success for this workstream includes stronger, more enduring collaboration across funders, and a shared sense of common challenges and potential solutions.

The Centre for Youth Impact is facilitating a series of 'LabStorms' as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. By sharing insights across the sector, the LabStorms will also contribute to the sharing of learning, data and insights. Each LabStorm will create a dedicated space for the #iwill Fund Match Funders to come together to collaboratively frame and respond to a problem or challenge that they have identified as pressing in their work.

This report draws out the key themes from the second round of LabStorms for the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, which took place on 4 February 2020. We would like to thank Jayna Patel, Lynsey Edwards and Justin Watson for leading discussions, and all the Match Funders who participated on the day.

As LabStorms take place under Chatham House rules, the themes and reflections in this report cannot be attributed to any one person or organisation; nor should they be seen as representative of an 'average' or consensus view in the room. Instead, they should be understood as providing kernels of insight and conversation that exist within the Match Funder community. In the sections below, we first provide a summary of the discussions held on 4 February, before highlighting what emerged as the key insights generated from the discussion and identifying some potential opportunities for funders moving forwards.

The first round of LabStorms took place in June 2019, and a similar report was produced to draw out the key themes. The first round of LabStorms included a session led by the Pears Foundation that focused on understanding and communicating community benefit, and a session led by the Act for Change Fund (a joint initiative between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation), focused on developing a habit of social action.

What are LabStorms?

LabStorms are collaborative problem-solving sessions designed to help generate and explore actionable responses to challenges with which organisations are wrestling. They are an approach developed by Feedback Labs, a US based consortium focused on identifying the best ways of using feedback to make programmes and institutions responsive to the needs of their constituents.

How do LabStorms work?

Conducted under Chatham House rules, LabStorms are designed to create space for deep discussions between stakeholders who value collective approaches to problem solving. Each LabStorm begins with an individual giving a 15-minute presentation that covers both their work in general and details of a specific challenge that they're facing, with which they would like support and guidance. The presenter sets out what they have tried so far, and two or three specific questions that they would like help with from the attendees. Then, via a group discussion, attendees work together to support the presenter in finding answers or responses to their challenge. This can range from offering specific advice or suggestions to asking open questions in order to help the presenter reframe their questions and find new insight. Whilst the discussion remains confidential, the learning from each session is written up and distributed for the wider community to benefit from.

How can I take part in future LabStorms?

The Centre for Youth Impact will facilitate a round of LabStorms as part of the #iwill Learning Hub approximately every six months until from 2019 until 2021. If you would like to be involved in a future LabStorm, or if you wish to discuss any aspects of this report, please contact Bethia McNeil (bethia.mcneil@youthimpact.org.uk).

Discussion 1: Embedding high quality opportunities for youth voice

The Premier League Charitable Fund (PLCF) was set up in 2010 as the charitable arm of the Premier League. The aims of the PLCF are to build stronger communities where everyone can achieve, to enhance physical and mental wellbeing, to develop personal skills and positive relationships, and to increase sporting, educational and employment opportunities.

In 2019 the PCLF became an #iwill Match Funder, launching a £3 million fund working with over 90 Club Community Organisations (CCOs) to deliver programmes using sport and football as a way to engage young people who were disadvantaged and disengaged from existing support. As part of the skills development aspects of these programmes, opportunities are provided to engage young people in social action, including a primary school programme, a skills development programme for young people with risk factors at key transitional points, and a sports outreach programme delivered in community settings.

For the day's first LabStorm, Jayna Patel and Lynsey Edwards from the PLCF led a conversation on youth voice. The following questions were used to frame the discussion:

- *How can the Premier League Charitable Fund support Club Community Organisations (CCOs) to embed high quality opportunities for youth voice?*
  - *How do we encourage this to be authentic with greater intent?*

The PLCF used the LabStorm to explore how Match Funders can support community-based delivery partners to create opportunities for youth voice, influence and action that are embedded, high quality, and well-suited to individual organisational circumstances. The following themes emerged from the discussion.

1. The relationship between youth social action and youth voice

Most participants of the LabStorm felt there is consensus across the #iwill Fund that high-quality opportunities for youth voice are something that the funded delivery organisations, and the whole youth social action sector, should be working towards, to ensure that all activities are informed by young people's interests, desires and experiences. Indeed, empowering young people is a core component of youth social action, meaning that they should have a say on what types of community benefit they want to support, and how they want to create change for that cause.

The discussion acknowledged that there is much diversity in youth social action projects across the #iwill Fund: a key reason why young people's voices need to be incorporated is precisely so they have a say in what youth social action looks like in the unique context of each project and community. This is particularly the case for delivery organisations where youth social action is a relatively new way of working, prompted by the #iwill Fund. It can be a challenge for these organisations to avoid the risk of trying to 'cram' youth social action into their programmes

Proudly supporting
youth social action

#iwill

Department for
Digital, Culture
Media & Sport

COMMUNITY
FUND

THE CENTRE
FOR YOUTH
IMPACT

without it being meaningful or genuine. To avoid this, young people must be involved in the design of youth social action programmes, so that young people feel motivated to take part even when the activities are likely to differ and/or expand on the organisation's previous offerings. In this way, creating genuine opportunities for youth voice is not only important for the empowerment of young people, but it is also a fundamental component for the underlying, long-term success of youth social action projects.

However, directly asking the question 'what charity or community project do you want to support?' may not always foster meaningful engagement from young people, particularly where they have not previously been regularly engaged with youth social action. In some circumstances, listening to young people may start with activities that are relatively light-touch, such as staff having an open conversation with young people about how they feel within their local community and what they have noticed about the surrounding area. Ultimately, opportunities for youth voice will look very different across the #iwill Fund, depending on the individual organisational circumstances and history of the project. For some, this will be a long-term process that will start light-touch and then build up via structured, regular engagement, where over time young people can help to define what youth social action means in that context.

2. How can funders support delivery organisations to embed youth voice?

A second aspect of this discussion focused not on *why* embedding youth voice is important for youth social action, but on *how* organisations can take steps towards achieving this. Participants in the LabStorm recognised that there is a lot of 'groundwork' that delivery organisations must undertake to create the conditions for young people to effect change in the first place. For instance, for youth voice mechanisms to be genuine, young people will need to have agency over what these mechanisms look like from the outset, and therefore delivery organisations must undertake an active process of co-design with young people. Additionally, some delivery organisations will need to work with young people to build their capacity to express their voice, as they will not necessarily be used to an environment where they are asked to provide views and opinions. Furthermore, prior to asking for input from young people, a delivery organisation will need to make sure they are in a position to be able to respond to and act on the feedback that is received in a meaningful way.

All of these factors highlight that developing opportunities for youth voice is no mean feat, and that it requires additional capacity and resource on the part of delivery organisations. Part of the challenge, from the perspective of the funder, is to ensure that organisations feel they have the capacity and resource to take this on. An open approach to communication is therefore critical, so that the funder can understand existing barriers to embedding youth voice, and how they might be able to support the delivery organisation to overcome them. Additionally, funders must respect that delivery organisations are all at different starting points and that some may not be in a position to focus on youth voice as a priority at this present time, as part of a culture of openness and honesty. In an environment that is high-stakes and pressurised for delivery organisations, the resulting youth voice opportunities are more likely to be low-quality and tokenistic.

3. Sharing learning and good practice on youth voice

Another critical role that funders can play is finding effective ways to bring delivery organisations together to explore and share what they are already doing on youth voice. Some participants of the LabStorm were aware of delivery organisations that have developed their approach to youth voice and felt there is scope to use them as 'champions' of good practice. This shared learning could be especially helpful to delivery organisations that are smaller and/or new to youth social action, so they are not trying to tackle what are potentially common challenges in isolation. However, for others participating in the LabStorm, identifying organisations with the experience, inclination and capacity to act as youth voice 'champions' is more challenging, as they do not always have the relevant information or necessary level of detail for all the delivery organisations they work with.

For some participating in the discussion, sharing learning on youth voice, such as through stories, case studies, and toolkits, is often not as impactful as they hope or expect it to be. This may be because a broader cultural shift is needed within delivery organisations for them to embed youth voice opportunities in the long term. One way that funders may be able to support this shift is to identify the 'core' aspects of high-quality youth voice (i.e. those aspects that are more replicable across settings) and the 'flexible' aspects (i.e. the elements that are likely to change depending on the local context). In doing so, funders can support all delivery partners to embed consistently high-quality youth voice practices, whilst also allowing space for each to adapt their approach to individual circumstances.

The discussion recognised that opportunities for youth voice will also look different across different 'types' of organisations involved in delivering youth social action, such as youth clubs, sports organisations, or schools. For instance, in an educational setting, there is more likely to be an established, consistent mechanism such as a student council, whereas, in a community or youth work setting, youth voice activities are more likely to be ad hoc and flexible. For some participants, sharing learning between different types of delivery organisation could be a particularly useful avenue for generating new ideas and insights, which has not yet been focussed on.

Discussion 2: The concept of 'place' in youth social action

Our second discussion was led by Justin Watson, Director of Young Manchester, an organisation that increases opportunities for children and young people across the city of Manchester by commissioning projects that respond to their ever-changing needs, alongside sector infrastructure support. In 2017, Young Manchester launched the Youth and Play Fund, a £4.5 million #iwill Fund programme aimed to make youth social action business-as-usual for organisations across Manchester by 2020. A further £3.2 million has been launched for the Youth and Play Fund for 2020-2022.

Young Manchester delivers the Youth and Play Fund through a network of voluntary and community sector organisations, as well as businesses, schools, universities, health and housing providers, to embed social action within open access youth and play provision and into the lives of young people. Young Manchester focuses on place-based working, to ensure that funding decisions reflect the strengths, opportunities and challenges of places as a whole.

In preparing for the LabStorm, Justin Watson felt that he had been a strong advocate of place-based working for several years, but that this approach has not necessarily gained traction or wide recognition in the youth social action landscape. Starting from this basis, the second LabStorm was framed around the following set of questions:

- **Should Justin stop banging on about place? Or...**
  - **By not 'doing place' are we missing something?**
  - **Can the benefits of place-based funding be achieved in other ways?**
  - **How can national funders best invest in places? Are there models, principles and frameworks which we can all learn from?**
  - **Is there more to learn on *how* we invest in social action, not just *what* we invest in?**

The following themes emerged from the LabStorm.

1. What is 'place'? (And how useful is this question?)

Early in the LabStorm it became clear that there remains a strong interest in the idea of place and a sense that there is potentially more that Match Funders could be doing around the concept to support the outcomes of the #iwill Fund. At the outset, participants were naturally drawn to question what we mean when we talk about place, and associated concepts like 'place-based funding'. The group reflected on historical trends towards funders and commissioners identifying groups or organisations they considered to be doing effective work, and funding them to replicate it elsewhere. Place-based funding pulls away from that trend, recognising that work to support young people cannot necessarily be replicated or scaled easily, as investment in one place may be meaningless somewhere else. Place-based approaches require local actors to convene

meaningfully and to carefully consider whether something can work on the ground in a particular context.

Whilst this provided a useful framing for the discussion, some participants also felt that one of the core barriers to practical action around place-based approaches is that conversations rarely get beyond conceptual debates about what 'place' means. It is very easy to 'get lost' in talking about the meaning of place, which can be highly theoretical and not necessarily helpful in practice. This is heightened by the fact that place is considered a 'big topic' that may have become a catch-all for too many different conversations. It also has confusing associated terminology, such as knowing how to distinguish between place-based, place-informed and place-focused. Therefore, those participating in the LabStorm agreed that, for the sake of this discussion, it was helpful to not spend too long on the question of 'what is place?', and instead to focus on surrounding questions, in particular: what value can place-based approaches offer to youth social action?

2. What is the role of national funders in place-based approaches?

A second theme that emerged from the LabStorm was focused specifically on the relationship between national funders and the concept of place. The group wondered 'do any of us work in a non-place-based way?' Some considered that everyone's work is inherently place-based, but the extent to which place is seen as a valuable mechanism to inform one's work will differ. Place-based thinking is relevant to a national funder because it encourages them to take steps to understand the local context in which they are working, and to make decisions through local partnerships, reducing the tendency to 'parachute' in. Therefore, even if a national funder would never consider itself to take an explicitly place-based approach (because they have particular thematic or topical interests, for example), the concept of place should still deeply inform their work. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognise that effective place-based funding is a resource-heavy and a long-term process, and it is possible for national funders to 'do place badly' if they do not take proper steps to engage with a local context.

There are, however, some instances where the concept of place is less relevant to youth social action funding. For example, some young people are actively looking for youth social action opportunities that take them out of their current area and the importance of place can take on different meanings here. Additionally, some young people want to connect to wider networks of youth social action that have a recognisable brand or hallmark on national or regional scales, rather than a more local initiative. In other words, there are some intentionally non-place-based forms of youth social action which must also be valued and respected.

3. Does place trump other signifiers?

The final theme of the LabStorm considered whether there are some instances where place is 'trumped' by other signifiers, because young people are connected in a non-geographical way. Youth social action projects that target young people through social, religious, ethnic, or sexual identity are an example where this may be the case. In these instances, what works effectively in one city or region may work very similarly in another city or region, because the young people

targeted may have similar backgrounds and needs. The discussion wondered whether more targeted, identity-based work is an exception to the value of place-based thinking, because place is not the main signifier of that community. However, this may also stem from a misconception that place-base approaches view everyone in a place in exactly the same way: in reality, place-based approaches do not view everyone in a place homogenously, but rather aim for a deep understanding of a place and the people within it. Nevertheless, this highlights an important point that place-based approaches must accept that not everything in a place is unique (in the same way that not every place may be unique) and there are some things that need to be factored in across areas. It can be self-defeating to reject a particular way of working just because it was not specifically designed for that place, even when there is evidence to support the effectiveness of an approach. This phenomenon can be referred to as 'terminal uniqueness' (the idea that every place is so unique you have to start all over again each time a new programme or project starts). In this way, the concept of place can become a 'blocker' to implementing tested approaches or sharing learning. More debate is needed on how to find a balance between appreciating and embracing uniqueness of each place, whilst also allowing space to learn from and take advantage of other's experiences.

Key Insights and Opportunities

1. **The relationship between youth social action and youth voice**: Understanding and acting on young people's voices is important for developing youth social action projects that young people are motivated to engage with, and is therefore is key to the long-term success of projects. This report was produced by the National Development Team for Inclusion as part of research the #iwill campaign, which it shares findings from a study of evidence about 'what works' in enabling the full participation of young people in social action and decision making, particularly those who are at high risk of being excluded and whose voices are seldom heard.

2. **How can funders support delivery organisations to embed youth voice?**: A starting point for funders could be to obtain feedback from delivery organisations to determine whether they feel motivated to develop their youth voice practices, and to gather information on what mechanisms they have in place already. Additionally, it may be beneficial for funders to review their communications with delivery organisations, to consider whether they feel they can be open about the barriers that are stopping them progressing on youth voice. Developing an open dialogue is an important first step for providing delivery organisations with the necessary support to take practical action.

3. **Sharing learning and good practice on youth voice**: Funders can play an important role in drawing out and sharing learning on youth voice. As a starting point, it may be helpful to look at existing examples, such as this Youth Social Action Toolkit from the Careers and Enterprise Company, which provides 'at a glance' ideas of youth social action activities, with a number of examples that directly incorporate youth voice opportunities. While sharing learning is valuable, individual organisations also need to have ownership over how to incorporate young people's voices into their work. Funders can support this by identifying the 'core and flex' in high-quality youth voice practice. This could be part of building a broader quality assurance model on youth voice in youth social action.

4. **What is 'place'? (And how useful is this question?)**: As many organisations do not feel confident in understanding the meaning of place, exploring this is a helpful starting point to consider how the concept is relevant to their thinking and practice on youth social action. This blog post from Renaisi, an organisation in the #iwill Learning Hub, takes a plain-spoken approach to explore why the concept of place is worth talking about, and outlines five different ways of understanding 'place-based change'.

5. **Place has relevance to national funders**: This report from Renaisi expands on the above blog, laying some detailed groundwork to define the concept of place, exploring why it matters for youth social action, and outlining four fundamental ways that Match Funders can use the concept to influence their work on youth social action.

6. **Does place trump other signifiers?**: Place-based thinking should not be used as a reason to limit collaboration and shared learning. Match Funders may be interested to read this report from Renaisi that outlines some initial learning from the 'Place Based Social Action Programme'. This project is jointly funded by DCMS and the National Lottery Community Fund and aims to support communities to put youth social action at the heart of plans to make a difference to the local area. The report highlights that organisations involved in the

programme are keen to share experiences with other organisations and to learn more about what is happening nationally, further emphasising how place-based approaches should not result in or encourage siloed working.

Feedback and Reflections

To understand how the Match Funders experienced the second set of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub LabStorms, we collected informal feedback on the 4 February, and additional feedback via a follow-up survey. Below we have summarised the overall themes from the feedback we collected, including some comparison to the first round of LabStorms in June 2019.

LabStorms as a mechanism for discussion

We were pleased that when asked "How likely is it that you would recommend participating in a LabStorm to your peers?", where zero represented "extremely unlikely" and ten "extremely likely", the Match Funders responded with an average score of 9.4 (compared to a score of 8.9 after the first round of LabStorms).

In terms of process, participants felt the LabStorms was well facilitated, particularly as steps were taken to ensure that everybody in the room had the opportunity to speak and to share their views. This is important many felt that one of the core values of the LabStorms is that it allows you to hear thoughts on one topic from the many different angles and perspectives of different stakeholders. Additionally, it was noted that there are few constraints or restrictions on what questions are discussed during the LabStorm. This is beneficial as allows the presenting Match Funder to explore a topic that is fundamentally important to them. Also, this meant that both the topics on the day of the LabStorms were quite different from one another, which helps create balance and maintain interest throughout.

The value of holding LabStorms

The most consistent aspect of the feedback that we collected, in both the first and second round of LabStorms, was the value that participants felt the session generated in terms of creating an honest discussion, which enables an open and rich learning environment. One attendee reflected that a level of trust is required to create this environment, which is enabled practically by the Chatham House rules, and is further supported by the accepting and respectful attitude of all the participants going into the session.

Other attendees noted that, as well as being practically helpful, the LabStorms are symbolically important in driving home the fact that the #iwill Fund is a collaboration and that funders have more to gain from learning with one another than working in silos.

Areas for improvement

A final aspect of the feedback was suggestions for improvements. Similar feedback was given as in June 2019, where some Match Funders felt they would have benefitted from information and case materials being sent in advance. This is so they can come prepared to give more tangible advice, and to minimise the time spent by the presenter in explaining their programme, thus allowing more time for discussion. We will look to identify opportunities to address this concern for future rounds of LabStorms, while keeping in mind that not all participants will have time or capacity to engage with long materials in advance, so these resources should be kept succinct.

Proudly supporting
youth social action

#iwill

Department for
Digital, Culture
Media & Sport

COMMUNITY
FUND

THE CENTRE
FOR YOUTH
IMPACT

One attendee reflected they would have enjoyed having more people in the room, to hear a greater array of reflections and to have others listening to the productive conversations as they are happening. We agree it would be great to have as many voices represented as possible, but we also recognise there are also practical challenges in enabling an inclusive and smooth discussion if the group gets too large. We will continue to reflect on the number of participants throughout future rounds of LabStorms to consider and identify the optimum number of attendees.

Appendix A: About the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

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

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

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

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

1. Systems

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

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

(b) Funder Collaboration
A series of 'LabStorms' will be offered to Match Funders to enable a collaborative approach to identifying common challenges and finding and sharing actionable responses to them. The LabStorms will support Match Funders to fund as effectively as possible (April 2019 – April 2021).

2. Sector Evidence Plan

This work will build on our understanding of what youth social action achieves; how to reach under-served groups and how to sustain youth social action (Aug 2018 – ongoing). It will draw on 14 these four information sources to develop and evolve answers to key questions:

- Intra-fund evaluation aggregation

- Extra-fund research aggregation

- Match Funder returns to the #iwill Fund and data from Information Management System

- Results from other workstreams.

3) Quality Practice

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