



Leaders of the Future: Youth Social Action & its Role in Youth Work

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Executive summary

Engaging young people in social action is like lighting a fire within them. Social action raises confidence and wellbeing, it provides the opportunity to learn, and it shows young people that they can be leaders in their community. Furthermore, social action provides benefits for the youth organisation delivering it, most importantly, by giving the organisation a vehicle to further embed themselves in their community.

This report presents the findings from a research project commissioned by the #iwill Fund and Spirit of 2012 between July 2020 and September 2021 that sought to understand the benefits of youth social action for the organisations delivering it, as well as the journey that the young people, in particular, women and girls, go on while receiving those benefits. Social action refers to activities that young people undertake to do to make a positive difference to others or their community. It can mean formal or informal activities, which can include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers.

The core research questions for this study are:

1. What is the strategic benefit of providing youth social action for the delivery partner/youth organisation?
2. What is the journey of participants following their engagement with youth social action?

This report builds on the findings from the evaluation of the EmpowHER programme. EmpowHER was launched in 2018 to address the low levels of wellbeing amongst young women and girls in the UK and to support them to give back to their communities through social action.

Youth Social Action in the Youth Sector

The research study investigated how the delivery of youth social action effects the youth organisation, specifically whether there is an added benefit when compared against their operations before they started delivering youth social action. Reviewing the challenges and barriers experienced in embedding sustainable youth social action.

Social action is an immensely important part of youth work. This report found that on average, youth organisations dedicate **53%** of their youth work time to delivering social action with young people. **46%** of youth workers told us that they have been delivering social action activities for over five years. While **95%** of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the delivery of youth social action influences other aspects of their work or services.

This report found that social action brings a double benefit for youth organisations and the communities they sit in. While this benefit is replicated for young people. The mutual benefits felt by youth organisations and young people is a heightened sense of belonging by taking action in their communities, and communities benefit through enhanced relationships with young people. However, social action does not happen by accident. A greater impact for communities and young people alike comes when there is support for social action from youth organisations.

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The strategic benefits of social action for youth organisations

This report found that social action has three main strategic benefits for youth organisations. These benefits focus on the new and enhanced relationships social action leads to, a more engaging offer for young people and access to professional development for youth workers.

The most important relationship to develop from social action is that between the youth organisation and their community. 75% of youth worker survey respondents reported an increase and strengthening of networking with partners and local agencies. Another core relationship that is strengthened by social action is between the young people and youth workers. A further benefit to youth social action is that it represented a more engaging offer for young people. One young woman told us of her social action programme "I quite liked it. It was really fun and enjoyable." Simple happiness at doing social action was reported by other young women as a reason for continuing it. Finally, a benefit from supporting social action programmes for youth workers is that it provides professional development opportunities. 62% of youth worker survey respondents reported that their organisation had increased its internal skills and capacity development due to delivering social action programmes.

The strategic benefits of social action for youth organisations

The study explored the longer-term outcomes and experiences of participants following their engagement in youth social action; whether participants progress into other activities, identify pathways and progression routes including those beyond the primary youth organisation and understand social action habit formations.

This report found that there were three main longer-term benefits for young women and girls following their engagement with social action: it strengthens their relationships in their community, grows their confidence, leadership and wellbeing, and gives them transferable skills. These benefits powered, inspired and equipped them for their journey after the social action programme ended. A key aspect of the social action journey are the friendships made through it. The friendships that the young women made had a positive impact on the outcomes for young women who face barriers or vulnerabilities. These improved relationships also stretched to the community. **93% of youth workers who took part in the survey done as part of this research thought a key benefit from social action is the enhanced relationships between young people and their local community.** Furthermore, social action improves the wellbeing of young women and girls by giving them a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth. Social action gave young women and girls the confidence to speak up and a safe space to discuss their wellbeing. Furthermore, this report found that social action can help to narrow the attainment gap by improving young people's attitudes towards school, their social and emotional skills motivating them to study and attain better grades.¹ Finally, young people told us how they learnt to work together with others and developed practical skills during their social action journeys, providing them with transferable skills beyond the programme.

¹ Birdwell, Birnie & Mehan, 2013; Demos (2015); DfE (2012); Ofsted, 2018; Boeck et al. 2009



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Barriers to Social Action

Despite the clear benefits from social action for both youth workers and the young participants, this report found several barriers preventing young people from accessing social action and youth organisations from delivering it. They include:

- **Personal Circumstances** – Barriers to social action that young people face are often small in scale, but significant to them. They but have a huge impact on engagement levels. For example, young people struggling to access youth centres because of the cost of travel.
- **Lack of Local Infrastructure** – Larger scale logistical barriers were grounded in a lack of local infrastructure. A lack of systems of collaboration, resource or knowledge of appropriate community stakeholders were cited as barriers to social action for youth organisations.
- **Available Opportunities** – This report found that young people are often not finding the opportunities to take part and continue in social action, at a local level² This is entrenched by a lack of consistent language around what social action is, leading to confusion among young people and community stakeholders.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has shown that social action delivers a double benefit for youth organisations, young people and their communities. Driving this is three main themes, which are the relationships that social action leads to, the wellbeing that grows from it and the skills that young people and youth workers gain. While this report looked at the journeys that young women take after social action, too complex and individual a picture was uncovered to make fair generalisations from the data. But, a number of united factors were unearthed, such as work-ready skills, the power of friendship and a growth in confidence.

Considering the findings of this report, and the barriers discussed, this report recommends the following to enhance, encourage and enable further the social action journey with young people, but especially young women and girls.

1. Social action-focused youth work built by consensus

This research has shown that social action works best when it embraces the autonomy and leadership of young people, but that the leadership of young people flourishes best when communities are engaged and included in discussions with funders. Therefore, this research recommends that social action programme design should be driven by consensus. Through bringing together young people alongside the needs of community stakeholders and funders, social action would become truly embedded, and the full benefit would be felt by all.

2. Creating pathways for continued social action journeys

This research has shown that social action works best when it embraces the autonomy and leadership of young people, but that the leadership of young people flourishes best when communities are engaged and included in discussions with funders. Therefore, this research recommends that social action programme design should be driven by consensus. Through bringing together young people alongside the needs of community stakeholders and funders, social action would become truly embedded, and the full benefit would be felt by all.

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3. Creating safe spaces for women and girls

This research noted that, for many young women and girls, social action was possible because the programme was delivered in single gender space. Their post-social action journeys would likely have looked much different without these safe spaces. This report recommends that this remains a priority.

4. Recognition of young person social action

The report illustrates the powerful insight which is created from young people telling their story. Therefore, the final recommendation is that youth organisations, funders and all stakeholders work closely with young people to ensure that young people take their rightful place as leaders.



² Ipsos MORI, (2015). "Youth Social Action in The UK – 2015" <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/youth-social-action-uk-2015>

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1. Introduction

Research scope & objectives

This report presents the findings from a research project commissioned by the #iwill Fund and Spirit of 2012 between July 2020 and September 2021. This project that sought to understand the strategic benefits of youth social action for the organisations delivering it, as well as looking at the journey that the young people go on after doing social action

The research draws together and builds on learning from evaluations of the Spirit of 2012-funded EmpowHER programme and looks at youth social action in the broader context across the youth sector. EmpowHER was launched in 2018 to mark the centenary of women’s suffrage. The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department of Culture, Media & Sport each invested £25 million seed funding to create the #iwill Fund. Spirit of 2012 is acting as a match funder and awarding grants on behalf of the #iwill Fund. EmpowHER is jointly funded by the #iwill Fund and Spirit of 2012, and delivered in partnership by UK Youth, British Red Cross and the Young Women’s Trust. The programme addresses the worryingly low levels of wellbeing amongst young women and girls in the UK and supports them to give back to their local communities through inclusive and meaningful social action opportunities.

Definitions and scope

It is important to frame this piece of work in what we understand as “youth social action”, “youth workers”, “youth organisation” and “youth work”. These are core definitions that will shape the scope of this research and set some limitations upon it.

Youth work is defined by the National Youth Agency (NYA) as “a form of education pedagogy; it provides non-formal education and offers informal learning opportunities.”³ There are varying definitions of what or who a youth worker is; however, criteria suggested by the NYA provide a helpful picture of what youth work practice entails. The NYA suggests that a youth worker is someone whose “work seeks to promote young people’s personal and social development and enable them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society as a whole. It builds resilience and character and gives young people the confidence and life skills they need to live, learn, work, and achieve.”⁴ Youth workers often hold formal qualifications and are employed by a youth organisation. However, they can also be volunteers, those who work at youth organisations without formal qualifications or do youth work at community centres that work with more than just young people. A youth organisation is a non-profit, often charitable organisation that runs programmes, activities or simply provides space for young people.

For many youth workers, social action is identified as a key component of youth work practice. It is a concept best defined by the #iwill Fund, which is the definition used by UK Youth to define youth social action.

³ National Youth Agency (2020) “Youth Work Curriculum” <https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/20210414232918/5.3.1-0923-NYA-Youth-Work-Curriculum-DIGITAL1.pdf>

⁴ National Youth Agency (2020) “Youth Work Curriculum” <https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/20210414232918/5.3.1-0923-NYA-Youth-Work-Curriculum-DIGITAL1.pdf>



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action. **The #iwill Fund states that: “youth social action refers to activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others or the environment. There are lots of ways in which young people can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers.”**⁵ Across this research project, the social action that is being studied is done through a youth organisation and supported by youth workers. However, for some young people engaged in social action, this set up won't always be the case. It is important to note the role that youth workers have in facilitating social action and also the role that programmes, such as EmpowHER, have in supporting youth workers to engage young people in social action led youth work.

Therefore, youth social action means practical action undertaken by young people in the service of others to create positive change. These actions include campaigning, fundraising, volunteering, mentoring or simple acts of kindness to others.⁶ Youth social action is not limited to one cause, social issue or personal challenge. When we use the term youth social action, we use it without attributing a value, either monetary or otherwise, to the outcomes of the action.

The overall research project seeks to understand how youth social action can become a habit for young people. Habit forming refers to something becoming a routine behaviour through repetition that has become a subconscious action for a person.⁷ The #iwill Fund aimed to see a culture shift around social action by 2020, where young people are taking part in regular social action activities and are driving to make social action a 'habit for life'.⁸ Therefore, the overall definition of a youth social action habit, also includes the idea that it can be encouraged and developed.

Finally, it is important to set out the rationale for the focus on young women and girls across this research project. While youth social action is clearly a part of the lives of many young people, both male and female, the starting point of this project rests with the EmpowHER programme. EmpowHER was exclusively for young women in response to a recognised need to build the confidence and capabilities of young women.⁹ Furthermore, the literature review attached to this project indicated a dearth of literature that focused specifically on young women. Therefore, this project focused on seeking to plug that gap in our understanding of youth social action and its impact on young women and girls.



⁵ #iwill (2021) “About us” <https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/youth-social-action>

⁶ Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013). The State of The Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK. [online] London: DEMOS. Available at: https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Youth_Social_Action_in_the_UK_-_ver_3.pdf?1373620410

⁷ See Gardner, B., Rebar, A. L. (2019). Habit Formation and Behaviour Change. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology. <https://oxfordre.com/psychology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.001.0001/acrefore-9780190236557-e-129>; Lamb, M., Taylor-Collins, E., & Silverglate, C. (2019). Character education for social action: A conceptual analysis of the #iwill campaign. Journal of Social Science Education.

⁸ #iwill (2017a). Making social action part of life for all young people by 2020. http://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloadmanager-files/iwill_reviewdoc_digital_2017.pdf

⁹ This report uses definition of young women and girls that is inclusive of trans and non-binary people.

Research objectives

There are two distinct threads being investigated through this report. Firstly, to understand how the delivery of youth social action affects the delivery organisation, specifically whether there is an added benefit when compared against their operations before they started delivering youth social action and how they can embed sustainable social action through their youth work. Secondly, to investigate the outcomes and experiences of young women and girls and to understand the longer-term outcomes and experiences of participants following their engagement in youth social action.

Therefore, the agreed research questions are:

1. What is the strategic benefit of providing youth social action for the delivery partner/youth organisation?
2. What is the journey of participants following their engagement with youth social action?

The overall purpose of the research project is to make recommendations for policy and practical interventions based on learning about the power of youth social action grounded in the evidence collated. Additionally, the research project will touch on the 'double benefit' element of social action, as the exploration areas for this study are very much about the longer-term outcomes of social action programmes within communities. By double benefit we refer to the positive consequences for the community that the social action happens in, as well the positive consequences for those taking part in social action.

The research sub questions related to these objectives and aims are presented in Appendix 1.

Methodology

Using a mixed methods approach, this project employed tools to gather qualitative and quantitative data for analysis and reporting on, while showcasing individual stories and experiences to give voice to the people directly involved. The methods used were:

- **Literature Review** – Based on evaluations of the EmpowHER programme, Government and charity publications, academic journals and media reports, as well as grey literature.
- **Youth Worker Survey** – We ran a survey, using online platform Survey Monkey, aimed at gathering quantitative data regarding youth worker views on the benefits of youth social action. We received 70 responses, which came from a range of youth organisation employees, including CEOs, trustees/ members of the board, directors, youth workers, co-ordinators and volunteers.
- **Youth Worker Interviews** – We conducted 33 interviews with youth workers, with the intention of speaking with youth workers that had worked on EmpowHER, as well as those who had worked on other social action projects.
- **Young Person Interviews** – We conducted 30 interviews with young people. We spoke with young women and girls that had done EmpowHER and those that had done other social action projects.
- **Community Stakeholder Interviews** – We reached out into the communities that youth workers told us benefitted from youth social action and ran interviews with them (five interviews conducted). These were selected from contacts made through interviews with youth organisations. We



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purposely spoke with different types of stakeholders, to gain a broad insight.

- **Case Studies** – We used the content of the interviews from youth workers, young people and community stakeholders to validate, understand and give voice to the research. We developed a number of case studies that tell the individual side of the youth social action journey and organisational benefits.

This report took the data from each of the phases of the research and conducted a thematic analysis against the research questions and sub-questions. We looked for key themes and where multiple data sources corroborated these. A convenience sampling technique was used to select youth organisations and young people to be interviewed for the research and for the case studies. The criteria used was to ensure representation of EmpowHER and non EmpowHER youth organisations and young people, as well as a range of experiences and journeys and youth organisations working with vulnerable, hard to reach or ethnic minority groups. Given that much of the fieldwork was done with young people, across the project all participants are anonymised or given pseudonyms, for safeguarding purposes.

This study achieved an adequate representation of the youth sector. 16% of the youth organisations surveyed function at a national level, and the remaining at regional or local level. The survey has representation from across the UK, although due to population centres the North West and London had higher representation. The youth organisations we interviewed primarily work with young people under 25 years old and some have no age limits. Their reach into different demographics of young people demonstrates the representation of views presented in this report. 21% of youth organisations reported that their reach among ethnic minority groups is between 51 to 100%, and 30% stated that their reach was between 25 to 50%. Some 67% of youth organisations stated that 50% of their users are from deprived backgrounds and experience vulnerabilities.

Limitation of the research

The most significant limitation placed on the research was doing all of the fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic, including doing a significant amount of data collection while in national lockdown. This had a number of impacts on the research:

- All fieldwork was completed online. Despite hopes to do the final part of the fieldwork, the community stakeholder interviews, in person, all of the research was done over Teams, Zoom or by phone. The focus on online interviews especially made it hard to find interviewees, as young people reported screen fatigue, and shyness at speaking over a computer screen.
- Low survey sample size. The research suffered from apparent survey fatigue across the youth sector. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, online surveys became a common research tool and as a result response rates fell. Anecdotally, evidence suggested that youth workers were becoming apathetic to the 'deluge' of surveys that they were receiving. This impacted the sample size that the survey attached to the research project achieved.
- Much of the social action that was discussed, was seen through the lens of the pandemic. While it is laudable that young people want to respond to the pandemic, it influenced the data. The pandemic triggered a heightened sense of community spirit, which young people were clearly aware of and being influenced by.
- Given the focus on social action, the fieldwork only spoke with those who had been involved in delivering social action programmes. This meant that the research was based on a highly self-selective sample, which can be seen in the overall positive responses to the fieldwork.



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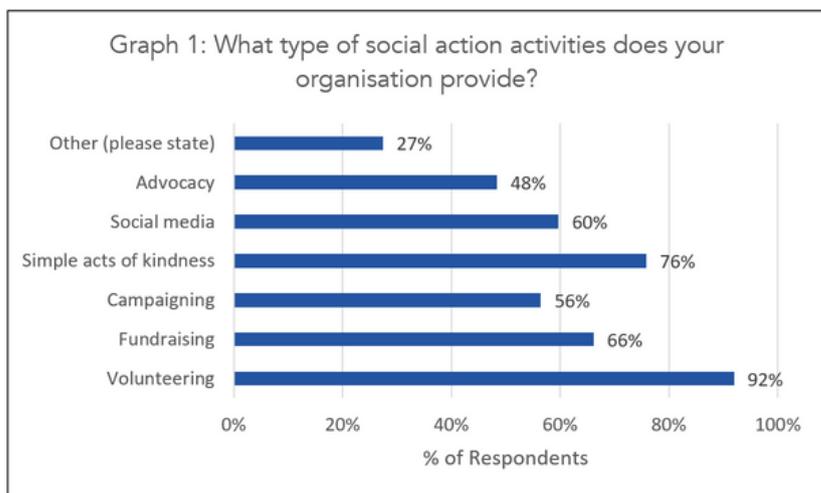
Finally, the community stakeholder aspect of the research was heavily affected by lockdown and the pandemic restrictions that followed it. This strand of the research was left until the end of the fieldwork period in the hopes of doing it in person to lift the quality and reach of the final interviews. However, we found two interconnected barriers:

- People simply did not want to be interviewed in person. This was because they were nervous about unnecessary face to face meetings, they were struggling for time due to the impacts of the pandemic on their business or service and, interestingly, by this point business had been conducted online for over a year and people did not see the need for the face to face meeting.
- There was an unexpected language barrier. We found that community stakeholders were less than willing to talk to us because they did not always connect the actions of the youth organisation or young people as being “youth social action”. This will be discussed in more detail further down.

2. The Reach of Youth Social Action

This report details the strategic benefits felt by youth organisations that deliver social action and the journey that young women and girls go on following their engagement with social action. However, it is important to first understand the reach of social action within youth organisations. The first conclusion from the research conducted for this report, is that social action is an important part of youth work. While other youth workers told us it was an integral and constant part of the youth work offer made by their organisation. One youth worker told us that “we have always done it although it was not always labelled as ‘social action’.” **On average, youth organisations told us that 53% of their youth work time is dedicated to delivering social action.** However, the responses ranged from 100% to 5%, which demonstrates the diversity of youth work activities and ways of conceptualising social action. 46% of youth workers told us that they have been delivering social action activities for over five years. While 95% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree with the fact that the delivery of youth social action influences other aspects of their work or services.¹⁰

Social action’s dominant position within youth work was made clear to us by youth workers who told us consistently that it was vital to their youth work. Youth organisations told us that the type of action, methods of delivery and faces of the young people changed over time but the motivation did not. Motivated by improved social cohesion, the double benefit received by the community, and the outcomes for young people, social action sits at the centre of youth work.



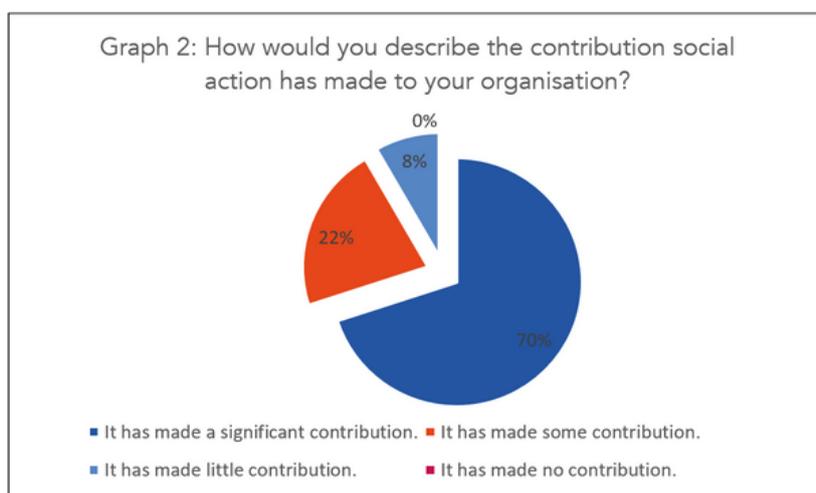
Youth work, including social action, is usually delivered in small groups according to 91% of survey respondents. Youth workers told us that they preferred delivering it this way due to the relationships that the young people formed both with them and each other, something this report will look at in detail later. 79% of survey respondents told us that they delivered it through funded programmes

¹⁰ Overall, 70 youth workers completed the survey. This research refers to the number of survey respondents that answered each question.

(so again in smaller groups, but with a specific programme structure around it), while 52% told us it was through one-to-one sessions. The most common social action activities done by youth organisations under the umbrella of youth social action were volunteering (92%), simple acts of kindness (76%) and fundraising (66%) – see graph 1. Youth workers told us that the social actions they delivered ranged from localised one-off activities, such as supporting a local campaign, engaging in national programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh award, or more sustained examples of social action, such as maintaining a community green space. The style of delivery is linked to the desire of youth workers to encourage habit forming behaviour around social action in young people. There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that habit forming is the aim of many social action programmes and that this habit can be formed or encouraged among young people by social action activities that make a positive difference.¹¹

However, the most pertinent finding is that young women and girls go on a journey with social action that sees them directly gaining from the strategic benefits that youth organisations gain from doing social action in the first place. This contribution comes from new, improved and embedded relationships with their community, leading on an activity that lifts the wellbeing, confidence and skills of their beneficiaries, and ultimately, creating community leadership among themselves and their young people.

Both youth workers and young people benefit from new and improved relations with each other, and their community. **70% of survey respondents told us that social action makes a significant contribution overall to their youth organisation** - see graph 2. They benefit from improved perceptions in their community, which in turn leads to greater embedding and inclusion of young people in those same communities. Social action powers a relationship with young people and their communities – it allows youth organisations to be responsive, relevant and appropriate to a range of needs, both community and young person based.



The shared gains that youth organisations and young people benefit from can be understood through three main strands – new and enhanced relationships, community leadership and growth of skills. This report will explore each of the three strands and discuss the factors that enable them. This report will also look at the barriers to youth social action, which will form the basis of the recommendations made to enhance further the strategic benefits identified.

¹¹ For example, Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service. [online] Birmingham: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham. Available at: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf

3. New and enhanced relationships

The report found that the first strategic benefit felt by youth organisations and young people alike is the importance of the relationships social action leads to and the consequences of them. Whether it's through making friends, meeting community stakeholders or enhancing existing relationships, social action acts as an important vehicle to embed youth organisations in their community, improve perceptions of young people and break down barriers. The importance of relationships cannot be understated as 75% of survey respondents said that a key strategic benefit was new or enhanced relationships with other organisations and increased and strengthened networking. This section will outline how these relationships benefit youth organisations and contribute to the journey that young people take through social action.

Enhanced Community Relationships for Youth Organisations

The evidence collected for this report shows that partnerships with local organisations improved as a result of social action projects,¹² resulting in enhanced connections with local networks and funders, and the ability to attract additional funding or being invited to take part in other opportunities. Furthermore, the literature review found that as a result of social action social cohesion improves as the local community and stakeholders understand more about the work of youth centres.¹³ Overall, following the social action project, 62% of EmpowHER participants reported an increase in their positive perceptions of their own community leading to social cohesion.¹⁴ This compares to previous research conducted by #iwill which suggests that one of the strategic benefits of engaging in social action projects is that local stakeholders and community members see delivery organisations in a more positive light, and this helps them to build trusted partnerships.¹⁵

Relationship between youth workers and young people

Firstly, the most important relationship is that between the youth workers and the young people. An important aspect of embedding sustainable social action and habit forming is the relationship young women and girls have with their youth worker and how this connection is fostered and maintained after completing the social action. One youth worker told us about this relationship and said "I found that you have to support the girls and offer something more substantial, if you don't give them enough support they don't find what they are really interested in, from there they would start to dig into the problems." One community stakeholder we spoke to highlighted the importance of the relationship.

They told us "The way the youth workers work with them. I think that is so vital...how they work with the young people." This relationship can lead to further investment from the young people. When we consider the second research question on the journey of young women after social action, this is particularly pertinent. For example, the youth workers delivering the EmpowHER programme spoke with enthusiasm about the alumni continuing to participate in peer mentoring or events encouraging younger women to be leaders and take action. **A critical benefit for youth**

¹² Hill et al (2009) Young People Volunteering and Youth Projects: a rapid review of recent evidence.

<https://scvo.scot/policy/research/evidence-library/2009-young-people-volunteering-and-youth-projects-a-rapid-review-of-recent-evidence>

¹³ For example, see #iwill (2019) "Impact Report" <https://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/iwill-impact-report.pdf>

¹⁴ EmpowHER Final Report, (2021) UK Youth.

¹⁵ #iwill, (2019). The Power of Youth Social Action #iwill Campaign Impact Report. [online] London:

workers is the continued relationships social action encourages with their young people, while for the young person's journey it is that pathway being created to mentoring others.

Relationship between youth organisations and schools

Secondly, a strategic relationship for youth organisations that social action enhances is often with the local school, which is a key local stakeholder. 75% of survey respondents reported an increase and strengthening of networking with partners and local agencies, while 75% have established new relationships with other organisations because of social action. The Youth Trust (2020) in 'How Social Action Benefits Pupils, Schools and Communities' found social action positively influenced school exclusion problems, while Ofsted (2016) reported how social action might aid the development of other challenging areas such as attendance, behaviour and academic standards¹⁶ Through the evaluations of the EmpowHER programme, there was anecdotal evidence that social action had encouraged better relationships between schools and youth organisations, and in some cases the schools were working with the young people on their social action. In relation to their journey after social action, the young women told us about feeling more confident at school and stories emerged of performing better and of girls pushing themselves forward to make the most of the opportunities school presented to them. Indeed, when we're considering the journey young people take after social action, it is clear that it lifts their ability to achieve – whatever that means for them on an individual basis.

The 'double benefit' of social action is also felt by schools. One community stakeholder, a teacher, told us about the impact of social action on her teaching practice at school. She spoke honestly about how the lessons she gained were hard to hear, but vitally important to the young women and girls in her classroom. She said the social action:

"has raised things really hard to hear, [it was] really turning point session about safety. All the girls sat down said I don't feel safe and that was really hard to hear for me. We really now have a feeling about girls impact they can make, I have been surprised about how successfully they put their idea forward, they changed a uniform school policy that had been in place for a long time. The language we use will be permanently changed and made better... the ripple effect will be enormous and spread to the community in how we talk to each other. They really guided what matters and see it through with passion and commitment."

Relationships with other youth organisations

This report found that the relationships that are built through social action are often with other youth and community centres – see graph 3. The literature review found that institutions and programmes should consider how they can play a role in supporting young people to continue participating in services through key transition points, facilitating a journey of service. It found a need for improved signposting between organisations and more significant partnerships between primary and secondary,

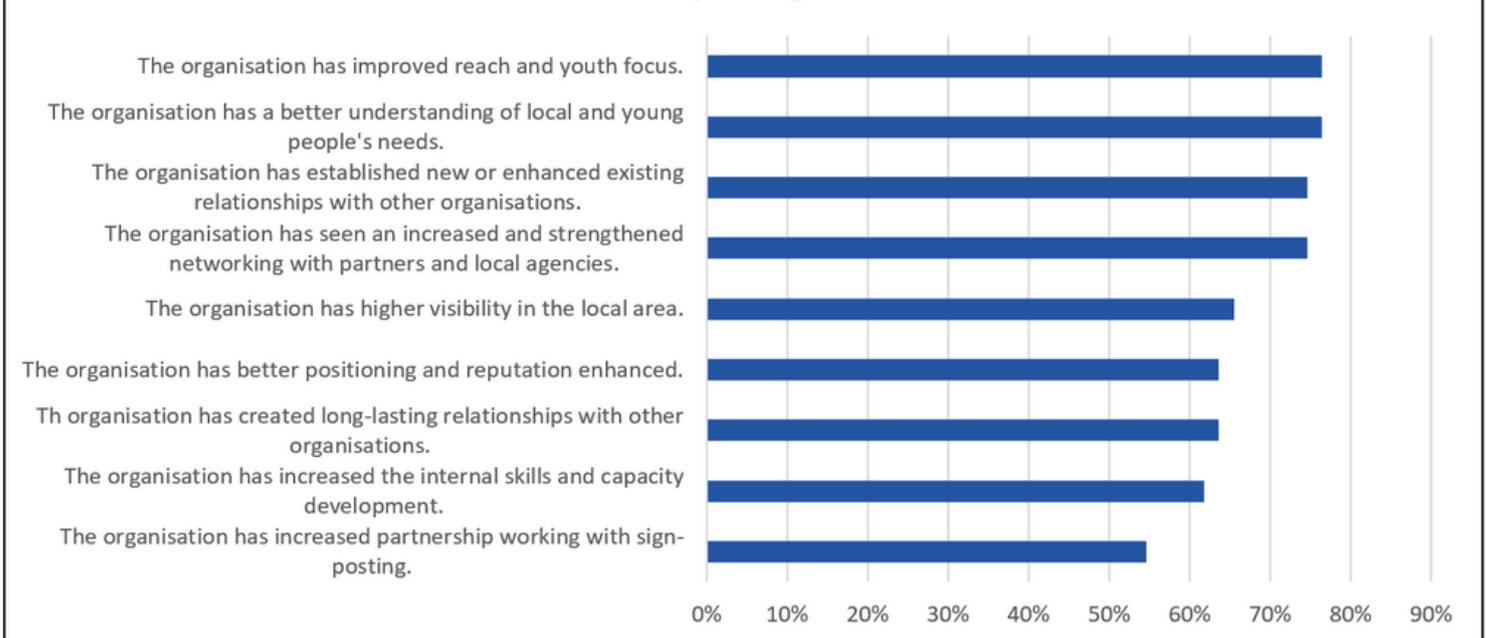
¹⁶ Ofsted (2016) "Social Action: Good Examples from Schools and Colleges" <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-action-good-examples-from-schools-and-colleges>

secondary and college, secondary/college and university/employment, and university and employment.¹⁷ One youth worker told us:

“Through social action we’ve gotten to get to know other youth clubs. We also build better networks across London. Because we are a community centre, we do stuff with local residents, and with refugee communities. It’s so great for us when we do a social action project, we think who in our network we can work with and how are we going to engage with them.”

This heartening and encouraging note from a youth worker demonstrates that social action encourages thought about how the young people can benefit their community. It also showed how important these relationships were to supporting young people to continue their journey. One youth worker told us “If a young person is not connected to any youth group and wanting to start a social action project. There isn’t much you can do, there aren’t a lot of resources. That’s the strength of youth group, you know where to find things, how to get a project started.” Furthermore, a key theme from our conversations with community stakeholders, irrespective of where they worked, was that they welcomed the opportunity to get to know the youth workers in their area who were supporting the young people with their social action. This was often mentioned alongside comments about further opportunity to work with young people.

Graph 3: How have the youth social action programmes that you have delivered benefitted your organisation?



¹⁷ Arthur, J., Harrison, T. and Taylor, E., (2015). “Building Character Through Youth Social Action. [online] Birmingham: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue” Jubilee Centre <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1574/projects/youth-social-action/character-through-youth-social-action>

Relationships with the community

Finally, this report found that the strategic benefit that comes from the **new community relationships was defined by one youth worker as leading to “added respect for our organisation.”** Linked to improved perceptions, developing relationships within the community allows youth workers to use social action as a mechanism to build the credibility of their organisation and the young people they work with. This leads to more opportunity for partnership and collective working. The strategic benefit of social action lies in its ability to open doors, smooth the pathway to shared objectives and bring communities together. For example, one youth worker said that as a result of social action:

“We’ve built relationships with other organisations we never thought existed. It’s really given us good opportunities. It’s not just about the funding but having the support from other projects.”

Perhaps most importantly, social action gives community stakeholders, young people and their youth organisations a shared purpose, which is a key enabler for sustainable social action. For example, one young woman told us “social action has helped me see the problems the community faces, ways that I can help them and how to work together.” To encourage long-term social action, the young person must feel valued and their efforts recognised and rewarded. Young people that attend their local youth centre and want to do social action need an outlet for that. With the support of their youth worker, this leads to relationships with a range of community stakeholders. Across the evaluations of EmpowHER, countless stories about relationships with old people’s homes, animal shelters, homeless charities and sports clubs have emerged. All of them start with social action and a group of young people wanting to engage. The consequence of this is that a relationship between the youth centre and that community body is broached and then often embraced and sometimes embedded (see case study 1). The development of this relationship with the community is also a key part of the young women and girls’ journey following their engagement in youth social action. A relationship with the community provides the young people with a sense of purpose and link to the community, fostering an environment where they feel empowered to continue with social action.

Case Study 1 – Building relationships

Amy is 21 and has been involved with Greenbank youth club for a few years, where she was trained as a young leader on a social action project. One of the projects Amy is most proud of is a regeneration project of a disused green space in the local community. Tanya leads the youth group and noted that by engaging young people in social action, youth organisations will gain a better understanding of the issues that young people are passionate about.

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Jason, a volunteer at the same community centre, describes his experience with young people engaged in youth social action as a “joy”. Jason has seen the benefits to community cohesion as the youth club’s social action has helped local people to overcome negative perceptions of young people. He hopes that this experience will prepare the young people for a bright future. He explains, “It’s great to see the drive and passion here at the youth group, to see that they want to become a youth worker or something else.” For Greenbank itself, the benefits of youth social action have included building

relationships and gaining support from other organisations. The organisation has also introduced youth involvement with recruitment and enhanced young people’s access to the Board to make sure young people’s voices are heard across the organisation. By developing young leaders through social action, Greenbank has increased its capacity and is able to work more sustainably as young leaders are able to facilitate sessions, recruit and train young people who then become involved themselves in youth social action.

Amy has learnt practical skills in project management including fundraising and submitting funding bids through her social action work. She feels more confident speaking in front of people and explains, “I’ve grown a lot more comfortable with myself and who I am.” Amy is now a paid youth worker leading the Ambassador programme at Greenbank.

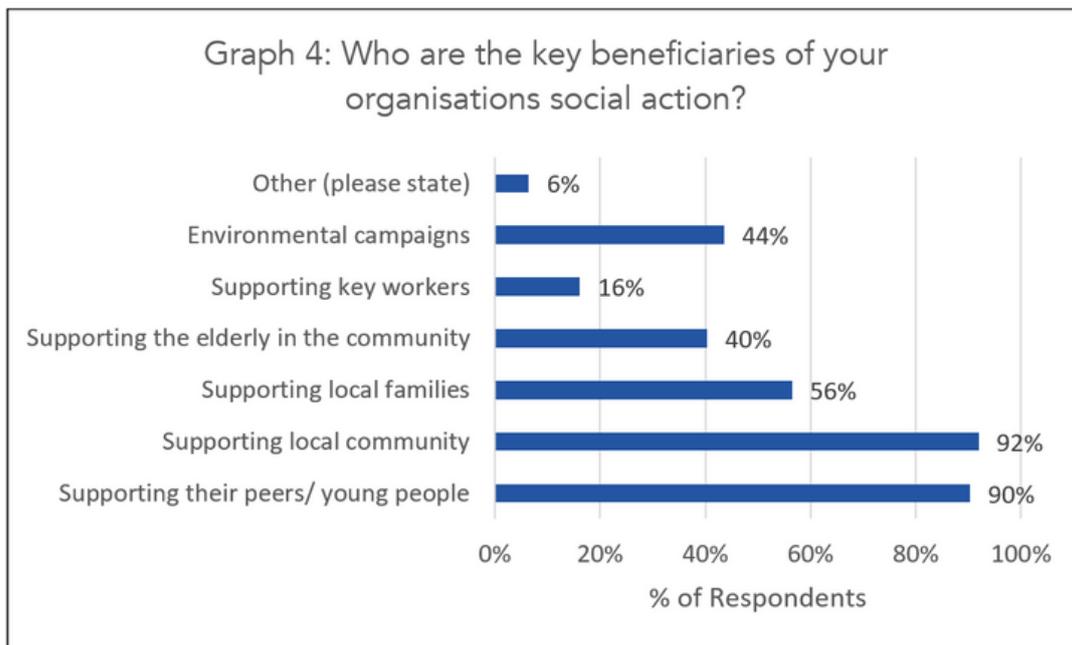
Improved Perceptions of Young People

This research has found that a direct impact of new relationships is an improved perception, not just of the youth organisation, but also of young people. **93% of survey respondents agreed that the way in which communities benefitted the most from youth social action programmes was through enhanced relationships between young people and their local community.** In fact, for 92% of youth worker survey respondents agreed that the key beneficiaries of youth social action are the local communities, immediately followed by young people (90%) – see the chart below. Meanwhile, the final EmpowHER evaluation found that 66% of youth workers stated that the programme enhanced and improved relationships between the young person and the local community, and 75% of young women agreed that their social action helped people in their community.

Young people today have a strong desire to help others, but many do not feel like they can make a difference: 84% of young people want to help others, but only 52% believe that they can make a

positive difference in their communities.¹⁸ Improved perceptions of young people across local communities lead to more opportunities for young people to make a difference. A key benefit from social action is that it instigates better relationships, more inclusion and improved short- and longer-term positive outcomes for young people in their communities during and following their engagement in social action– see graph 4.

¹⁸ Partridge, L. et al (2018) “Teenagency: how young people can create a better world” The RSA
<https://www.thersa.org/reports/teenagency-how-young-people-can-create-a-better-world>



The Social Action National Survey (2020) reported an increase in the proportion of young people who stated it was essential for them to try and make a difference in the world (86%), and cared about contributing to make the world a better place (88%).¹⁹ While the literature review found that young people already have a sense of urgency for change in their local community, they experience increased confidence in their ability to change things and enhanced community responsibility, as a result of social action.²⁰ There is some emerging evidence that social cohesion is improved via social mixing, community integration and aligning social action projects to local need. For example, the overall EmpowHER evaluation saw the number of young women and girls reporting that by the end of the programme that they felt that they could trust the people who live near them growing from 40% to 85%. Taking social action and mixing with people that they would not normally have contact with improved perceptions of young people which help to embed youth services within the community.

Community stakeholders told us that social action changed their views and perceptions of young people, while also educating the young people about others within their community.

One community member who works with older people told us about how the young people brought unexpected “joy” to the older community members they worked with. The young people had completed a social action tidying up a community garden and planting new flower beds. They told us that working with the young people “promotes everyone to [shift] perceptions of young people, they’re not just drinking and on the internet like people think.”

¹⁹ Ipsos MORI (2020) National Youth Social Action Survey https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931216/National_Youth_Social_Action_Survey_2019_-_Summary_Report-c.pdf

²⁰ For example, Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013). The State of The Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK. [online] London: DEMOS. Available at: https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Youth_Social_Action_in_the_UK_-_ver_3.pdf?1373620410

The improved perceptions of young people arose from the opportunity to share stories and find common ground. Indeed, the community worker told us that they remembered one young person who had worked on the garden having a moment of realisation that the older people they were chatting with had led a whole life before getting to where they were now, and that this life had faced similar challenges and struggles.

Finally, negative perceptions can act as the motivation for social action. For example, the 'Seeds of Happiness' social action, where young people planted sunflowers, came about as a result of a discussion between young people and their youth workers about the community and community work. The youth worker explained to us that the young people had mentioned that negative perceptions of young people is an issue, they felt that "incorrect behaviour" from some of their peers was louder than good deeds, and the memory of them lasted longer. So, they wanted to do something for the community which benefitted everyone, but simultaneously left a lasting positive image and perception of young people. In this instance, social action acted as a trigger for social cohesion, and helped to bring the community together to tackle an issue felt by the young people. Social action presents an opportunity to experiment and innovate to improve relationships, perceptions, and role in their communities for young people. It also increases young people's awareness, a wider understanding of community concerns and helps them to recognise the needs of their community. Social cohesion coupled with the young women developing the skills to identify local needs encourages further social action.

The Importance of Friendship

The social skills, the relationships built and the sustainable nature of these are based on the power of friendships that are developed during social action. Friendly relationships between organisations within communities are driven by the personal relationships of the people that work for them. Similarly, young women and girls find their social action journey is powered on by the solidarity, validation, and camaraderie of doing something with their friends. This is particularly potent when we consider the journeys of young women and girls after social action. It is often powered by the friends made along the way.

Social action provides young women and girls with an activity that they can do together as equals at their youth organisation, which is an important grounding factor in enabling what happens after social action. This report found that friendship is the first step on the journey to the habit of social action that they take and a key enabling factor for it. The friendships made are key to tackling issues young people face, such as youth loneliness. By starting a social action programme, all young people, not just women and girls, are in the same place. One youth worker who works with young carers described the social action projects as inviting "a different side" to the young people that they're working with. They told us about the young women coming together in the group to talk about their emotional health and establish friendships. Their common starting point being that they were all young carers, they all shared that experience and came from the same place. One young woman told us about how

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in school she “didn’t know who to go to” to talk, but through her social action project she had met other girls that were concerned about the same things as her. The journey that this young woman started on was one of knowing that she could talk about her concerns and that there was someone who would listen.

This report found that friendship can underpin the double benefit felt by communities. This is because social action provides young women with a common ground to meet and interact with people that they might not have otherwise, and not just other young people. **One young woman told us that by doing their social action of litter picking she met older people in their community and found that they had more common ground with them than expected. They became friends.** Social action takes youth work out of the youth centre and into the community, which encourages friendship in different places. Speaking about the older ladies that they had met, one young woman said of their social action “you’re active and talk to people you would not normally talk to...If I had gone to the [youth] club, I would not have met them.” The final EmpowHER report found that friendships and relationships were crucial to reducing limiting self-perceptions for 60% of participants. This shift in mindset resulting from these relationships underpinned the confidence needed to continue their social action journey beyond their initial experience.





Friendship is important to continued social action after an initial programme and the onward journey of young women. For example, one young woman told us about her experiences of working with the other young women at her youth club on a social action project with the older people in her community. Her continued journey of social action was really grounded in the relationships she had made. She said:

“we organised a day to go in with the [older] residents. We did it with the Jo Cox Foundation. The Great British get together, we brought cakes and teas, organised a ukulele team to go in. We spent a day with the residents, because they are one of the loneliest groups in society. Since then, we’ve kept in touch with them. As a youth group we now contact 13 different groups in the care home local area.”

The collaboration between the young women and girls on the initial project, and the friendships that they made, the connection they have made through resolving an important issue to them have underpinned a longer-term commitment to their social action. The contribution that friendship makes to the social action journey is grounded in the teamwork and togetherness of the young people doing it. This is something that has the potential to last far beyond the initial social action programme, and indicates the kind of habit forming journey that young people experience.

Finally, the friendships that the young women made had a positive impact on the outcomes for young women who face barriers or vulnerabilities. Overcoming those barriers or vulnerabilities is a key aspect to the journey young women go on after social action. For many young women and girls, social action is the first step on the road to the empowerment they need to overcome the trials and tribulations life has thrown at them.

One youth worker told us that they purposely targeted social action at vulnerable young women in their community. They said:

“This is a fantastic opportunity to utilise the broad expertise of our network to target the critical personal, social and emotional issues this cohort experience.”

One strong example that a youth worker told us about was their work on tackling poor race relations in their local community. The social action the young people did broke down personal barriers between the young women by giving them a common ground to meet other young women from different ethnic backgrounds. The girls reported an improvement in relations, which was felt across the youth centre more broadly as the girls simply made friends with each other. The youth worker told us that:

“the biggest thing I’ve noticed is that it’s brought the white and the Asian girls together. They don’t usually mix; they live in different areas, go to different schools and a lot of the Muslim girls don’t do anything outside of school. They thought they wouldn’t get on but once they tried, they were fine.”

4. Creating Community Leaders

Community leadership provides an interesting insight into the longevity of social action. Key to habit forming is to start social action at a young age. The literature review highlighted the importance of encouraging the habit of service or social action at an early stage.²¹ Further to this, Jubilee Centre also concluded that those who first get involved in social action under the age of 10 were found to be more than two times more likely to have formed a social action habit than if they started their social action aged 16-18.²² For example, a youth worker told us of seeing the difference when starting social action with younger girls. They told us about working with 10-11 year olds for the first time. They said “it was really eye-opening. This gave the older ones the chance to be role models.” Interestingly, the EmpowHER final report found that 16-18 year olds enjoyed social action the most. Parents and friends’ involvement in the social action projects undertaken by young people, as well as their ongoing support of the young person doing it, was essential to habit forming. Andolina et al, (2003) argue that engaged parents tend to raise involved children.²³

Improved Wellbeing

This report found that social action has a profound effect on the wellbeing of the young women that undertake it. This builds on the findings of the evaluations of the EmpowHER programme that consistently found higher wellbeing outcomes for young women, even while delivering in a pandemic. Overall, young people told us that social action was enjoyable, that they gained a sense of achievement, worth and self-care through it and that it supported them to overcome personal barriers in a safe place. Harking back to the motivator for EmpowHER, this report found that linked to improved wellbeing was single gender spaces. Young women and girls found that having a space just for them

²¹ Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). “A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service” https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf

²² Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). “A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service” https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf

²³ Andolina, M. W., Jenkins, K., Zukin, C. and Keeter, S. (2003). Habits from Home, Lessons from School: Influences on Youth Civic Engagement. *Political Science & Politics*, 36 (2), pp. 275-280

was important to their wellbeing and when this was tied to social action it was liberating for many.

Youth social action improves the wellbeing of young women and girls by giving them something to work on that leads to a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth; something that is vital to the journey that they go on following social action. The wellbeing lift young women experience, often spurs them on to continue social action knowing that important feelings of self-worth can be found in it. These findings are validated and supported by critical studies evaluating youth social action programmes such as NCS.²⁴ One youth worker told us that the chief strength of working with girls to take action in their community is that “they feel part of something bigger. **We heard the story of a young woman who had a history of mental health challenges. The young woman started to engage with social action connected to women’s rights and this led to political engagement where she championed the rights of young people with mental health struggles. She described this programme as something that “saved my life”, as social action gave her “a purpose and responsibility” which was taken away when she was struggling and not coping.** This example is perhaps a more exceptional story of an undercurrent in many of the conversations that we had with young people. As a result of the social action, she describes how she now has a sense of direction and purpose and wants to pursue a career where she is helping people with mental health concerns and disabilities. This has motivated her to enrol onto a university course in this area and to continue her activist journey.

Social action, for many young people, is the impetus to a journey of improved wellbeing on a number of fronts. Young women told us that social action gave them self-care skills, such as “how to pick up their morale”, which they recognise as being useful to their future. However, the journey from social action into other aspects of their life isn’t just about gaining employability skills or project know-how, it is also about managing yourself. **As one young woman told us “I realised I am stronger and more resilient than I thought I was.” Another told us that the main skills for her future that she gained from social action is “how to take a step back, rationalise and find a solution. I don’t go into straight panic mode, now I can step back, reassess my situation, and deal with situation at hand.”** Young women told us how they gained satisfaction from seeing their projects be well-received, became happier as a result of working with their friends and got to know themselves better from being able to do something they never would normally do. Social action arguably provides young women with the soft skills they need to achieve beyond the social action programme they’re taking part in.

The study has found that social action supports young people to overcome their barriers and vulnerabilities. For example, a community member drew on their experiences of the people they work with. They told us “I work with rehabilitation people who have had issues with drugs and alcohol. If they had something like this when they were young it would have maybe prevented this. They learn about healthy living, they want to go out and paint over graffiti.” This is because social action that starts in a youth centre is starting from a safe place for young people. As this report demonstrates, the relationships between youth workers and young people are important to social action. We spoke with a counsellor who ran her service focused on adult wellbeing out of the same community centre as EmpowHER was delivered. While her work focused on adult wellbeing, she saw the impacts of the work

²⁴ See Gov.uk (2019) “NCS 2019 Evaluation Report”

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1015222/NCS_2019_Evaluation_Report.pdf

done by EmpowHER and appreciated its impact in relation to her own work with adults. She told us that from her experiences having a safe place to explore emotions and wellbeing was hugely important to the development of young women and girls. She said, "It's much more difficult when they are older, if they can explore it in a safe environment now, it gives them the confidence and step in the right direction." **Overcoming personal barriers and vulnerabilities is a uniquely personal thing. Social action provides that safe environment, which is an important step for young people to go on that journey.**

This report found that a significant enabler to social action improving the wellbeing of young women and girls specifically is when social action programmes are delivered in single gender spaces (see case study 2). The single gender space provided by EmpowHer worked to enrich the wellbeing, confidence and leadership ambitions of many of the young women that we spoke to. One young woman spoke powerfully about having engaged in mixed gender social action programmes and seeing the boys dominate conversation and direct the theme of the social action, usually to sports, while another told us that their confidence in this space grew when they knew that they would "not [be] told to just shut up, which might happen in a group with boys. This work is important with a single gender group." The single gender space made it easier for the young women to lead on predominantly female issues, such as periods and endometriosis, that as one young woman told us, would have been "taboo" to speak about if boys had been in the room too. While another young woman told us that the initial single gender space empowered her to be "brave" and speak about periods in front of boys. She described it as "the hardest point of all of it, there were some [boys] who were not being kind about it." But knowing that her peers needed to hear her message gave the confidence to lead. An observation from interviews with youth workers that were working on mixed gender social action programmes is that they often mentioned the young women being shy or not coming forward with their opinions. Something that seems in complete contrast with EmpowHer.

Finally, an under-considered aspect of the social action journey that came through in our conversations with young people is simple enjoyment – it makes young people happy. Ruggeri et al argue that wellbeing has been defined as the combination of feeling good and functioning well; the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment as well as the development of one's potential, having some control over one's life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships.²⁵

The happiness young people feel at doing social action is the final part of the puzzle of the impact that it has on overall wellbeing and a motivating factor in the journey post social action.

One young woman told us of her social action programme "I think it was a great, amazing...I quite liked it. It was really fun and enjoyable. At the start I thought I wasn't going to enjoy this but as we kept doing more things it made me realise that I enjoyed it." Simple happiness at doing social action was reported by other young women as a reason for continuing it and is fundamental to social action becoming a life-time habit. One of the young women spoke about her experiences with YoungMinds. She had contributed to a campaign that was focused on taking action for better mental health and

²⁵ Ruggeri, K. et al (2020) "Well-being is more than happiness and life satisfaction: a multidimensional analysis of 21 countries" Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 18:192
<https://hqlo.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12955-020-01423-y>

ended up being a Youth Advisor. She explained how her initial happy experiences of social action inspired continued involvement. She told us “I thought it looked fun to do, but the [social action] programme has given me the push to do it.” Her initial fun and happy experience led to a more in-depth involvement with and continued social action journey.

Social action provides a safe and happy place for young people to share their emotions, grow their resilience and test out their ideas. These factors contribute to social action lifting the wellbeing of the young people that do it. However, it is the sense of worth and purpose that is the most uplifting. When combined with the impacts from better community relationships, that validate the care and attention young people are giving the issue they’re taking on, it shows a rounded picture of the journey young people go through. Social action gives them something positive, practical and welcomed to do in their community, which is personally enriching.

Case Study 2 – Women’s empowerment

Hanifa and Jamila were inspired to join the EmpowHER programme because of its emphasis on women’s empowerment and bringing girls together. Fatima runs the girls’ youth group at their local community centre and explains that the gender-specific structure of EmpowHER makes the programme more accessible for many of the girls in her community where parents prefer genders are kept separate. The young people decided to support local children with their social action project by providing ‘Stay Safe’ packs that included face coverings, hand sanitizer, pens, coloured pencils and activities. By delivering a project in the community, the youth group has formed links with local schools and businesses. They have found the training programme and support for EmpowHER to very useful and have recycled and reused a number of the resources. Fatima has noticed that young people find the social action project the most exciting element of being part of the youth group and is a great way to keep young people engaged and actively involved in the organisation.

The girls’ social action has been recognised and praised by community members and has led to strong working relationships with other community initiatives. Sabina is a counsellor and psychotherapist who supports women in the local community. She came across the girls’ social action in their shared community space and now works with the youth group’s leaders to share learning, insights and referrals in order to provide local women and girls with the support they need. Sabina was particularly touched by the impact of the girls’ work on adult women in the area, “When you see young girls that are empowered, doing well for themselves and leading, you realise I need to do this. It’s motivating.” There are high levels of deprivation in the local community, which can lead to social isolation. Sabina saw how the girls’ work uplifted the people they spoke to. She explains, “The community realise no one has forgotten us. It gave clients and community members hope.”

One of the greatest changes Fatima sees in young people engaged in social action is an increased in confidence. Hanifa thinks she has become a lot more confident with talking in front of people. Both Hanifa and Jamila are excited to do more social action. Jamila says, “I will stand up for girls’ rights like Emma Watson. Girls need to have a chance to do what they want to do.”

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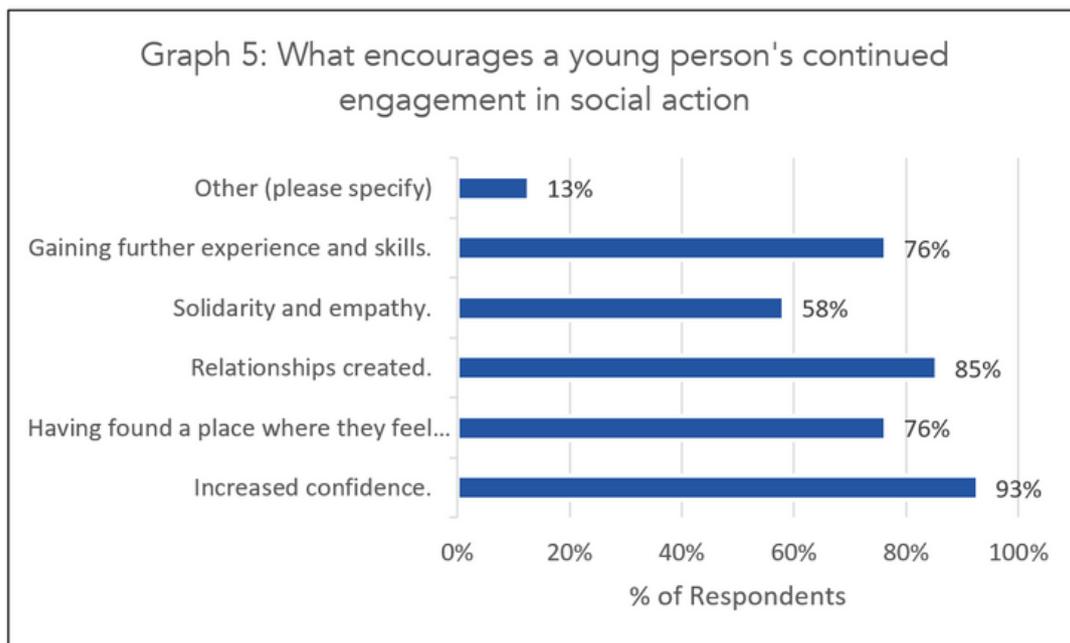


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Confidence

The evidence collected for this report points to a growth in confidence as a significant consequence of taking part in social action for young people. **93% of survey respondents agreed that increased confidence was a key motivator in continuing with social action projects** (see graph 5). Overall, 68% of EmpowHER participants saw an increase in their ability to identify and lead change, which was calculated based on reported outcomes around confidence, resilience, responsibility and taking the lead.²⁶ The literature review found that social action improved the young person's character qualities such as empathy, grit, resilience, confidence, self-worth, self-esteem and cooperation and problem-solving.²⁷ The confidence that young people, and especially young women and girls, gain from social action comes from the variety of opportunities it offers.



Social action gave young women and girls the confidence to speak up. For example, one young woman told us that her social action project “helped my confidence, because I sometimes hold back to speak to other people, but when you go out and see their smile on their faces, I actually did something, gives you confidence boost.” The simple confidence to raise their voice underpins many of the achievements young women and girls go on to experience. One young woman told us:

“I do majorly credit EmpowHER to the person I’ve become today. If you would have told me back in year eight, this is what you’re doing in the future....I’m President of Student Union, speaking to these people. I would have just laughed, I wouldn’t have imagined myself using my voice.”

²⁵ EmpowHER Final Report (2021) UK Youth.

²⁶ Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013). The State of The Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK. [online] London: DEMOS. Available at: https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Youth_Social_Action_in_the_UK_-_ver_3.pdf?1373620410, Arthur, J., Harrison, T. and Taylor, E., (2015). Building Character Through Youth Social Action. [online] Birmingham: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Available at: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Building_Character_Through_Youth_Social_Action.pdf, Building Character Skills – What Works? (2016) Behavioural Insights Team <https://www.publicsectorblogs.org.uk/2016/10/building-character-skills-what-works-behavioural-insights-team/?share=google-plus-1>

The confidence to raise your voice is a common and consistently reported benefit for young women from social action. However, it underpins everything that they go on to achieve on their journey after social action. This report details young women and girls achieving remarkable things for their communities, as well as important things for themselves. But every story starts with having confidence (see case study 4).

Linked to being confident enough to raise your voice, the evidence collected for this report also pointed to overcoming limiting beliefs and behaviours because of perceptions around women. This is supported by the findings of the RSA “Teenagency” report, which found that some young people believe that their age and inexperience are limiting, but report building confidence in their ability to make a difference through participation.²⁸ When considering the journey young women go through after social action, simple growth of confidence in the women they’re growing into cannot be underestimated.

While some of the young women came away from their social action carrying the message to “be yourself regardless what others think”, some young women gained a sense of power in their womanhood. **One young woman, when asked about the impact social action had on her told us that she, “gained more independence in different activities, gained more confidence, and more understanding about my gender and my identity, and helped me understand that my gender can be more independent, superior and powerful.”** Having the confidence to overcome limiting self-perceptions also manifested itself in challenged negative gender stereotypes. One youth woman told us how she’d been told she was “bossy and too loud” but that her journey through social action involvement with the Girl Guides had led her to see that these were skills that could be used in a positive way to lead others.

Connected to this was the growth in self-esteem. One young woman told us that before she took part in social action, she didn’t like herself very much. Participating in the programme and being with the other women made her realise the importance of loving herself. She spoke about having the confidence to ignore the “cyber villains on TikTok and Snapchat” because she knew that their opinions didn’t matter. While another young woman told us that her confidence had grown and she cared less what others thought about her, which was empowering her to speak her mind and be “proud” of herself for doing so. While another young woman told us her main lesson from taking part in social action is that she does not have to wait her turn to speak and her “opinion is valuable.”

Youth workers told us that confidence underpinned the young women feeling a sense of connection with their community and a heightened sense of belonging. Youth workers told us that the young women’s confidence grew as they realised their social action was “valuable” to the local community, that they feel more “connected to the area” and that they were “champions” within the community for the issues that they were doing social action on. The ‘double benefit’, that the community as well as the person leading the action gains from it, was certainly strongly felt. Young women saw that their actions were being well received in their community, which validated their sense of belonging within their community and encouraged further engagement beyond the initial social action.

²⁸ Partridge, L., Astle, J., Grinsted, S., Landreth Strong, F. (2018). Teenagency How Young People Can Create A Better World. [online] London: The RSA. Available at : <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/teenagency.pdf> [Accessed 27 Nov. 2020].

The strategic benefit to youth organisations is not just about young people having the confidence to go out into their communities and everything that comes with that. It is the 'double benefit' of communities feeling those same benefits within their own work. An unexpected final finding was that social action gives community members more confidence around young people. When we spoke with members of the community where social action projects had been happening, many recalled feeling nervous of interacting with or having negative perceptions of young people. For instance, street drinking, drugs, and crime were mentioned as associated with young people. However, once relationships were formed these perceptions slipped away and confidence to actually speak with and engage with young people grew. One community worker, who usually works with older people told us, "It's given me confidence to speak to young people...I now feel more confident to engage with young people."

Case Study 4 – Youth leadership in action

Before joining EmpowHER, Laura had done a little volunteering here and there, but hadn't participated in a social action project from beginning to end. During the programme, Laura coordinated a project with other young women to bring a day of fun to local care home residents during the Covid 19 pandemic, establishing a long-term relationship between local care homes and the youth group that continues today. Laura explains that before joining the programme, she often felt shy and didn't want to speak up in class, lacking confidence: "I used to be terrified of talking to people. For example, introducing myself. After EmpowHer, I was talking to people [...] It gave me a lot of satisfaction, realizing this is something I can do."

Thomas organises Laura's youth club, Preston Impact Group. Observing youth leadership through social action has led Thomas to develop a stronger youth voice in the leadership of Preston Impact Group. The organisation now involves young people in its funding bids and has developed a youth forum to feed into the organisation's direction.

Young people's social action means the youth group is now working with other community groups and local charities. Natasha, a staff member of the local branch of the Salvation Army, has enjoyed working with young people like Laura involved in youth social action at the foodbank. The young volunteers play a critical role, allowing the foodbank to have a wider reach and provide food parcels to more people in need. She has observed that charity collections involving young people raise more money than those that don't include young people. Natasha explains that having young people's ideas and suggestions gives the charity a different insight and valuable perspective, "We enjoy working with the young people and we hope it continues."

Crucially, the programme provided Laura the space and the tools to engage in social action and develop her leadership skills. She explains, "It helped me become a lot more passionate about social justice. Since then, I am still involved with the youth group and now I am a young ambassador." Laura

credits the programme for making her who she is today, a young leader supporting other young people with the EmpowHER programme and President of the Student Union at her college. She noted, “The programme has definitely helped me know the power of my voice.” Laura plans to continue her social action work through the student union and her involvement with the youth group, particularly around women’s empowerment and street harassment, mental health and body positivity.

Leadership

When considering the journey that young women and girls go on after social action, this report found that the development of leadership skills was hugely important. This is influenced by a number of factors. Some are connected to the style of delivery that social action invites, which includes giving the young people autonomy over what social action they do. Programmes, such as EmpowHER, where there is a focus placed on social learning, not just social action, educate and encourage participants to learn about the issues they’re taking action on so they’re not just active but informed. Social learning is crucial to leadership as it encourages young people to have a deeper connection with and understanding of the facts of the issue. This empowered leadership because they were taking action on something personally important to them. However, this report also found that leadership was something that grew for young women and that as their confidence grew, so did their ability to take on more leadership roles and continue their own personal and social action journey.

This report found that a combination of improved wellbeing and confidence underpins the leadership skills that young women grow through doing social action. The journey to leadership that young people go through with social action is a gradual one that they see as being a product of their activities gathering layers of complexity. For example, one young woman shared that she started doing “bits and pieces” of social action through her local theatre group, which led her into doing social action projects. She told us about her social action journey really starting when she got involved with the Clarion Housing Group and their Community Ambassadors Programme that focused on social action. As one of the older ones in the group with a little experience, she was empowered by the youth worker to lead the younger ones. She told us:

“As we went through the second year of Clarion, I was employed by the trust that the youth group come under to run the Ambassador programme. It was really cool, I went from young leader, took all the training and courses to become an actual leader in the programme.”

Autonomy is a key enabler of social action. The Cohort 4 EmpowHER evaluation found that 79% of all participants agreed that they had control over what their social action involves and qualitative evidence suggested that working on change that mattered to young women, and having the opportunity to test things out in a safe, non-judgemental environment, boosted confidence to lead further projects in the future. Linked to the style of delivery that youth workers utilise, youth workers found that encouraging autonomy from the young women led to confidence, engagement and leadership. One example of this was:

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“The experience and conversations that have been happening through EmpowHER have inspired our female-only sport programmes” and “Now they’re going to have a consistent group on Friday nights. I know we can do it because we’ve done it for four months. It’s given us something to work with - a structure of activities to do with the girls. In this area there isn’t anything that they can do.”²⁹ Youth organisations that involve their young people in developing funding applications or that run sessions with young people to explore their thoughts also reported longer term engagement with social action. **A youth worker told us that their work co-designing and developing social action with young people “gives them a sense of ownership and sense of knowing what they are doing is important.”**



Social learning supported young people to understand the issues that they care about, which was critical to it becoming sustainable and embedded in youth work practice. It is also crucial to the young person’s journey following their initial social action. As reported by the young women interviewed, the social learning and the resulting social action inspired them to continue to support the cause via social action or to take action on an issues they are interested in. Social learning is the link between social action and the autonomy that youth-led social action needs. It outlines the issues and gives the young people the opportunity to become informed activists. Furthermore, for many young people, learning more about the issue that got them involved in social action in the first place is the motivator for further involvement.

One youth worker explained the importance of social learning because it grounded the need for social action in the real world and the activity that was borne out of this “gave the young person a chance to take ownership, take the lead, and do things by themselves, made them step up.” Personal autonomy links directly to leadership, which powers a continued journey of social action. Throughout the course of the fieldwork, we heard many young women’s stories that started with learning about something that shocked them and immediately responding to this new understanding with a desire to take action. Whether it was period poverty, mental health in the NHS, or refugees, the journey is the same – young women realise that they care about an issue, but more importantly, that they personally can do something about it and that they can show leadership. **As one young woman told us, “I’ve seen I can make a difference even if I am just one girl and that is inspiring to me.”**

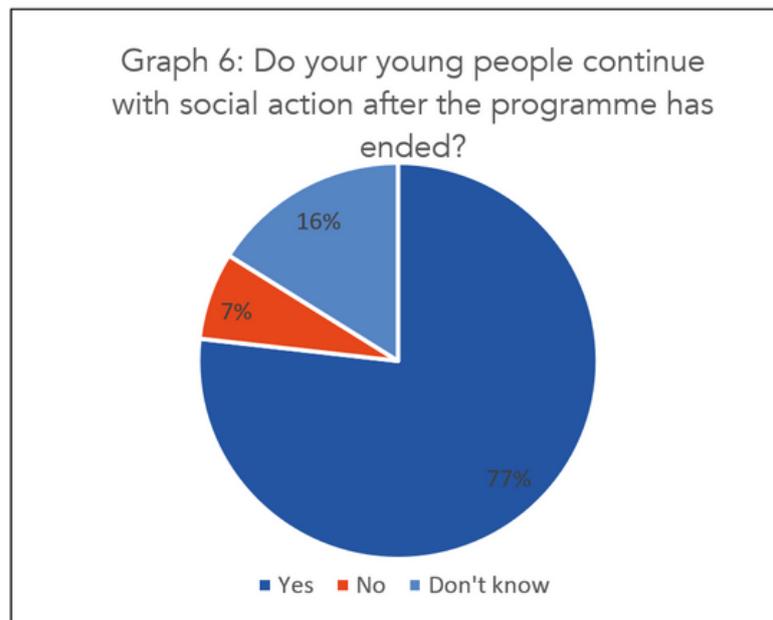
²⁹ UK Youth, (2019). EmpowHER Cohort One Impact Report. London: UK Youth.



In contrast, when community stakeholders talked to us about leadership in young people, they see it as something all young people have somewhere in them and they just need to be given a chance to express it. We spoke to a community member who worked for a local volunteering network that had supported the roll out of Covid-19 support, include a vaccination centre. Through their links with local youth services, they reached out for support and found themselves with a team of young people that quickly stepped up into leadership roles. They told us how the young people quickly learnt the ropes, were working together on the tasks they had been given and confidently dealing with the public. The community stakeholder told us that the young people “have been a delight. They have been dedicated, always there, always on time. They just get on with it.... Just the fact that they’ve gone from nothing to being leaders... they use their initiative, they know they can do stuff and they know they can lead.” Social action gives young people the opportunity to realise a side to themselves that perhaps they knew nothing about or had no previous opportunity to express.

²⁹ UK Youth, (2019). EmpowHER Cohort One Impact Report. London: UK Youth.

The final EmpowHER report found that providing participants with genuine opportunities to lead activities was crucial to building their confidence in this area. Importantly, when youth workers gave the young women the freedom to decide what their social action would focus on, 79% of young people agreed that they had control over what their social action involved. The consequences of this can be seen in next steps that young women and girls are ambitious about taking. While 77% of survey respondents told us that young people continue with social action after the program has ended, the young women told us about their plans for the future (see graph 6). They ranged from being inspired by their Covid-19 social action and wanting to “work in the NHS and maybe be a paediatric nurse,” to being a business leader. The evidence indicates that confidence and improved wellbeing are the critical ingredients for leadership.



The Outcomes of Social Action

This report found that the strategic benefit of social action for youth organisations is that it is the perfect marriage of the ethos of youth work and community engagement (see case study 3).

Leading to increased confidence and encouraging leadership qualities in young people, social action is an excellent vehicle for youth workers to achieve their aims. A youth worker told us, “Our core philosophy is empowerment of young people. That can't be done without engaging in social action.” The evaluations of EmpowHER demonstrate that high quality social action is more likely to be achieved when it is led by young people and matched to the needs of the local community. A youth worker told us how social action fitted in with their youth organisation’s ethos, “It matches the values and ethos of the wider organisation, young people should be supported to have opportunities to influence change that affects themselves and those around them.”

It goes without saying that social action can directly lift the overall wellbeing of the young people taking it. 89.6% of the young women taking part in EmpowHER left the programme with some kind of personal improvement – whether to their wellbeing, ability to lead change, social cohesion, or having their limiting perceptions challenged. What this means for youth organisations is that social action is a

strategically beneficial activity for them to undertake as it encapsulates what youth work is. At the start of this report, a youth worker was defined as someone engaging in work that “seeks to promote young people’s personal and social development and enable them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society as a whole. It builds resilience and character and gives young people the confidence and life skills they need to live, learn, work, and achieve.”³⁰ Social action allows youth workers to meet that definition entirely.

Case Study 3 - Ethos leading to community cohesion

Akhram is in the first year of a Psychology degree. He has been part of youth organisation for over 3 years, during which he has taken part in a lot of social action work. His first experience of social action was in Year seven, when he raised money for charity and volunteered with his local mosque. Currently, he is involved in several social action projects with their youth organisation including a gardening project with older and vulnerable members of the community and volunteering at the local vaccination centre.

Richard, a youth worker at Aik Saath, sees youth social action as a vital tool for community cohesion and a way of youth groups connecting and collaborating with other community-based organisations. Social action brings intrinsically good things like cohesion which is cross sector, intergenerational, across faith, race. Their mission today “is to work with people from all communities, faiths and backgrounds to promote and encourage conflict resolution and community cohesion through training, campaigns and projects.”

Aik Saath has developed long-standing relationships among the community through its youth social action (YSA) work, but the organisation’s local recognition and reputation grew as a result of its YSA work during the pandemic. John coordinates the volunteers at the vaccination centre where many Aik Saath volunteers have been giving their time. He explains, “People know Aik Saath already, but during the pandemic everyone was praising Aik Saath around their work with myth busting and feeding back to the community.” Young people volunteering at the vaccination centre became a crucial link to understanding the needs of the wider community and providing information and support to marginalised people with reduced access to health information. John adds, “A lot of the people at the centre were impressed with the young people. Especially older people, they loved seeing young people there and volunteering.”

Akhram takes part in social action because of the difference it makes in the community. He also sees how social action encourages young people to contribute to what is going on around them and demonstrates how young people can turn ideas into action. Akhram has personally seen his confidence increase so that he is able to speak up and present in an assembly. Now Akhram would like to give back further, as a young leader supporting younger members of Aik Saath with their social action projects so that he can teach them what he has learnt.

³⁰ National Youth Agency (2021) “Youth Work” <https://www.nya.org.uk/youth-work/>

5. Development of skills and learning

Youth social action programmes, like EmpowHER, offer an opportunity to both young people and youth workers to learn and develop. Whether it is practical, logistical or emotional learning, social action offers it all, but crucially, offers it as one package. Summarised brilliantly by one youth worker, social action “provides opportunities for young people to learn and grow through giving back, supporting others and improving their local environments.” These opportunities were vital to the journey young women went through after their social action programme and provide the foundation for what happened next.

Work Ready Skills

This report found that fundamental to the social action journey are the essential social and emotional skills that young people pick up along the way, which are particularly pertinent to answering the second research question about young person journey. These work-ready skills equip, enable and prepare young people for better education and employment outcomes. The role that they play on young women’s social action journey is that social action provides a safe place for them to experiment and learn so they’re ready for the “real world.” However, during the interviews with young people, the idea that their social action could lead them to work or that it could equip them with the life skills they need seemed secondary to the desire to do good in their community and youth centre.

The literature review found that youth social action is likely to have a positive effect on education outcomes, as well as employability skills.³¹ One youth worker told us “It gives young people the opportunity to develop skills and go on and be community ambassadors, positive roles in the community. It’s also about self-development.” Completing social action enhances ‘non-formal’ learning for young people developing skills that are not always developed by formal education. One of the main outcomes associated with social action and the impact it has on a young person’s journey is that that it can help to narrow the attainment gap by improving young people’s attitudes towards school, motivating them to study and attain better grades. This is particularly relevant for underachieving schools where there is evidence of youth social action boosting attainment and employability skills.³²

For some young people social action offered them an alternative to academic learning at school, which helped them identify their path post-programme. **One young person told us that they weren’t “academically strong” but through their social action realised they had a whole different skillset that they could offer.** Social action also encourages young people to consider careers in sectors such as health and social care, teaching and community or service-related industries, as well as expanding their network, securing employment, and leading them to consider training and development needs.³³ While another young person explicitly told us how social action was informing their attitude towards progressing a career. They said, “I learned what social action means... if I go for a job in the future, I can just show my [EmpowHER] certificate and show what I did. I think that will help me get a job.”

³¹ For example, see Birdwell, J., Scott, R. and Reynolds, L., (2015). The Double Benefit of Youth Social Action Could Help to Tackle Some of Our Most Pressing Social Problems...Service Nation 2020. [online] London: Demos. Available at:

<https://www.demos.co.uk/files/ServiceNation2020.pdf> and Kirkman, E., Sanders, M., Emanuel, N. and Larkin, C. (2016). Evaluating Youth Social Action. Does Participating in Social Action Boost the Skills Young People Need to Succeed in Adult Life? [online] London: The Behavioural Insights Team. Available at: <https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YSA-Report-Final-Version1.pdf>

³² Birdwell, Birnie & Mehan, 2013; Demos (2015); DfE (2012); Ofsted, 2016; Boeck et al. 2009

³³ Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013). The State of the Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK.

Studies demonstrate that young people who take part in social action projects tend to do better once they are in employment. Birdwell et al (2015) argue that full-time service year models increase employment opportunities for young people, and lead to: higher wages, increased job satisfaction, feeling capable and more confident about securing a job in the future and NEET young people moving into employment and training.³⁴ The USA AmeriCorps VISTA programme, which has been running for 20 years, is one such full-time model.³⁵ For some providers of social action, the link between excelling in employment and social action is central to their youth work. Peabody told us that their social action “is very much on the skills sharing. We want young people to get good jobs not just jobs. Youth social action gives them confidence and aspirations.” The thoughts of community members we spoke with strongly echoed this. When they told us about the post-social action journey, they spoke of it being a “stepping stone” to the future jobs and careers of the young people, so they don’t “feel scared” about their future and have the “safety net” of being able to see different worlds of work before they have to enter it properly.

The evidence showed that the most common specific work-ready skills gained from social action are communication skills. Overwhelmingly, young women and girls told us about how social action had equipped them with the communication skills that they needed, not just for their project, but also for other areas of their life. While the actuality of the skill gained ranged from “how to write a full email” to arranging meetings with MPs, that young women had not only the confidence but the know-how to raise their voice was hugely influential on their social action journey.



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³⁵ Birdwell, J., Scott, R. and Reynolds, L., (2015). The Double Benefit of Youth Social Action Could Help to Tackle Some of Our Most Pressing Social Problems...Service Nation 2020. [online] London: Demos. Available at: <https://www.demos.co.uk/files/ServiceNation2020.pdf>

other areas of their life. While the actuality of the skill gained ranged from “how to write a full email” to arranging meetings with MPs, that young women had not only the confidence but the know-how to raise their voice was hugely influential on their social action journey.

As one young woman told us “I met the First Minister through my campaigning work with Girl Guiding, I learnt a lot about women of influence, ways to approach campaign issues and to liaise with government official and policy makers.” This young woman went on to list “media advocacy, PR, public speaking, conveying my points, managing myself, media skills, social media skills empowered, how to deal with failure, resilience, confidence and the value of what I can do for others and myself which is not based on looks” as skills gained from social action.

She told us about how social action through the Girl Guides made her realise her strengths and encouraged her to use them. While one community stakeholder we spoke to, a parent, described it as “stunning” to see their usually shy daughter not only contact the headteacher of their school about their social action, but to know how to do it and the correct tone and wording too. The communication skills that the young women gained were clearly linked to the confidence that social action brings.

Preparing young people for the practical side of the world of work is just one aspect of how social action contributes to the work readiness of young people. Community stakeholders told us about how engaging with young people not only introduced them to what work meant to them and the people they worked with, but also provided eye opening opportunities.



A community member who spoke to us works in a food bank and spends much of her time supporting local families who are extremely poor and struggling. She told us that she thought the main lesson that young people received from social action was that it forced them to see the “reality of some people’s lives.” The hard emotional lessons of what life is like for others shocked some of the young people, but also further motivated them to support the food bank through their social action project. Important life lessons are taken forward as the young people mature.

Young people also learn about failure through social action. One youth worker told us that they spent time while organising social action with young people preparing them for “disaster.” The community member from the food bank told us about how the young people they had volunteering with them during Covid had wanted to produce recipe cards to go with the food parcels. They found that this didn’t work because the parcels were all so different. However, the food bank worker told us about how the young people were able to recognise that they were doing something good for their community and that this trumped the fact their idea had not worked. They actively sought to learn why their idea had fallen flat so they could suggest alternative ideas.



Project Management

This research found that social action projects allowed young people to see something from beginning to end that they were themselves driving. This encouraged young people to grow a sense of responsibility, teamwork and maturity that helped to prepare them for life after social action. One of the enduring legacies of social action, even when young people do not continue with it beyond their initial project, is the appreciation of what is needed to start and finish something.

Young people told us that they gained skills in project management that they could carry forward. One young person told us, "I've been able to use my Clarion experience, how to run a project, I now understand the foundations of what it takes to build a project, all the little bits you've got to do like recruitment, get the young people engagement, you have to have the goals, how to achieve them, be realistic. I've learnt a lot about what I can do, what I'm not so good at, how I can help others. It's not just us teaching them, but young people teaching us." The young person went on to tell us how their experience of social action with Clarion Housing Project gave them the opportunity to put into practice youth work theory and take responsibility for themselves, which in turn allowed them to gain the experience they needed to go on to become a youth worker. Young people spoke to us about understanding time-keeping, meeting deadlines, understanding budgets and planning as key practical skills gained that prepared them for life beyond social action.

A key part of the social action journey is learning to work with others. Young people told us how they learnt how to work together with others to complete projects and how everyone has their part to play. For example, one young woman told us that the most important thing that she learnt was "the value of every member on the team. It's so easy to overlook the minor tasks on the project, if they haven't been done, then you wouldn't have the project." While another young woman told us about learning how to share responsibility with others to get a project done. She told us that she gained "team skills too, some people were in charge of this and some in charge of that. We got stuff done, that was really

good.” some people were in charge of this and some in charge of that. We got stuff done, that was really good.” **An important skill to take from the social action journey into the next stages of their life was knowing when to lead, when to follow and when to collaborate.**

Overall, the skills that young people gain from social action help prepare them for work or further education. However, what is implicit in the evidence is that the journey they go on after social action to university or work is one of having a safe place to practice these skills, a supportive environment to learn them and an understanding starting point that appreciates that the young people have likely never done anything like this before. For example, one young woman we talked to struggled with confidence and found it tricky to know what to say or do in social situations. Following a social action project in her community, her youth worker told us that she is now working in a care home and is due to start an Open University course. The skills gained from social action overwhelmingly were about supporting her to find a sense of direction and to be able to find out that she wanted to work with people with mental health struggles and disabilities. Her youth worker told us that her inclusion on the social action programme made that possible by providing a safe place with other girls to speak freely, without judgement and explore her options.

Professional Development and Youth Workers

A key strategic benefit from social action programmes, particularly like EmpowHER, is that they provide much needed training opportunities to youth workers. The APPG on Youth Affairs found much evidence to suggest that the current number of youth workers is insufficient, while the proportion of those with experience and qualifications has reduced drastically leading to a greater reliance upon volunteers.³⁶ The report also found that the lack of job security led to a de-skilling of the work force and the loss of experienced staff, leading to a higher stress levels for those who remain due to pressure on their time by increased young person need, and a growth in the administrative aspect of their roles.³⁷ There is without doubt a genuine need for learning and development in youth workers, which is something that social action programmes that include training opportunities provide.

Youth workers told us that they gained professional development as a result of doing social action. 62% of survey respondents reported that their organisation had increased its internal skills and capacity development due to delivering social action programmes, like EmpowHER, that come with training support. Through evaluations of EmpowHER, the evidence suggests that training was really important for new youth organisations that were delivering the programme, but also that those who had delivered it before benefitted from the opportunity to refresh their understanding. Youth organisations reported also that training provided by the external training providers complemented their delivery and provided new skills, such as bereavement training.

Youth workers told us that social action programmes that come with training and resources inform their social action beyond the immediate programme they were developed for. The EmpowHER programme

³⁶ APPG on Youth Affairs, (2019) “Youth Work Inquiry” <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/APPG-Youth-Work-Inquiry-Final-Report-April-2019-ONLINE.pdf>

³⁷ APPG on Youth Affairs, (2019) “Youth Work Inquiry” <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/APPG-Youth-Work-Inquiry-Final-Report-April-2019-ONLINE.pdf> (page 27)

comes with a full suite of training, resources and toolkits for youth workers. They were very open and honest that these had informed and inspired their youth work beyond EmpowHER. One youth worker told us:

“before [EmpowHER] we were delivering a couple of sessions a week but there was no platform, we did not have a guidance, but now with EmpowHER we got so many more resources to work with, we can deliver sessions and run programmes based on these resources because of EmpowHER and British Red Cross. We got amazing platforms now.”

Youth workers have told us about how the gender lens that EmpowHER put on their social action inspired them to turn it around and think about how they could run a similar programme for boys. They also told us about how they had turned the EmpowHER materials into training materials for new youth workers and are upskilling existing staff not delivering the programme, demonstrating that there is a gap for training youth workers on doing social action.

Perhaps an unexpected enabler, and professional development opportunity for youth workers, is the digital delivery of social action. Not only did digital delivery allow youth work to continue during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it also offered a new route for youth workers to embed social action. Youth workers told us about how the role of online action enhanced their own delivery and the young people on their programme took this on board. For example, one youth worker told us about how a social action project focused on encouraging people to know basic first aid was further embedded as the young people got their “family members to download the first aid app from the BRC [British Red Cross] and that will always stay.” Cohort Four of EmpowHER was the first to be done through dual delivery, where it was a mix of face to face and online. The evaluation of Cohort Four found that 49% of young women and girls reported they would take part in volunteering, fundraising, or campaigning in the next 12 months - an increase from all previous cohorts (with 46% reporting this in Cohort Three, 37% in Cohort Two, and 34% in Cohort One).

A strategic benefit for youth organisations from social action is that it allows youth workers to grow their own skills despite the wider training landscape that is not meeting their needs.

This benefit goes further than the youth worker doing the specific delivery, as this report shows that youth workers share their learnings from the training that is on offer. While not explicitly stated, a final benefit could be that these opportunities to share learning with colleagues is a benefit in itself. It lifts the relationships and teamworking of the youth workers at a specific organisation. A final, and anecdotal finding is that youth workers enjoy delivering social action. Consistently youth workers told us positive and cheerful stories from their work and expressed the joy that social action brought them.

6. The Barriers to Social Action

Social action plays a huge part in youth work. Of the youth workers that responded to our survey, 95% said that their social action programmes influenced the other aspects of their youth work and the services that they offered to young people as part of a holistic support package for young people’s needs. Furthermore, 76% of respondents agreed that due to social action, organisations have a better

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understanding of local and young person's needs, while an equal number felt that social action improved the reach and youth focus of their youth work.

This report has shown that the benefits of social action for youth organisations are that it enhances the basic principles of youth work (including young person wellbeing), that it allows young people and youth workers alike to build their skills, and that it grows the reputation, presence and inclusion of young people and the youth organisation within their community. To truly understand the strategic benefits of social action and their replicability to the journey that young people go on, it is important to understand what prevents social action within a youth organisation and stops young people from engaging with it.

Logistical Problems

Barriers to social action that youth workers highlighted to us ranged from the high-level barriers, for example around funding, but also smaller scale but hugely impactful barriers to doing social action that were based within community constraints. They ranged from the young people being under-18 and being unable to access 'adult spaces' (despite the evidence suggesting starting social action young was an enabler), to the impacts of being based in rural communities where young people were reliant on public transport or parents to get places, unforgiving or unmoveable school lesson timetables and that opportunities were not paid. 63% of youth workers told us that "logistical problems" are what prevents young people the most from taking part in sustainable social action and starting or continuing their journey

Some of these barriers speak to larger problems, which will be discussed further below, however, the crux of the issue is youth organisations struggling to do the social action in conjunction with their local community. An #iwill Fund Learning Hub paper recommended that partnering between youth social action and other community sector organisations with overlapping aims is the way forward.³⁸ For example, a youth social action programme in which young people decide to improve the health of a local nature reserve could look to conservation groups for guidance.³⁹ This suggests that for youth organisations to truly benefit they ought to consider aligning their organisational objectives with those of local community organisations.

Lack of local Infrastructure

³⁸ #iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream, (2019). Community Benefit and Youth Social Action. [online] London: #iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream. Available at: https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/iwill_fund_learning_hub_-_evidence_workstream_-_community_benefit_and_youth_social_action.pdf

³⁹ #iwill Campaign (2019) The Power of Youth Social Action, <https://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/iwill-impact-report.pdf>



The literature review found that a lack of local infrastructure hindered social action becoming a consistent activity for youth organisations. A lack of systems of collaboration, resource to work together or knowledge of appropriate community stakeholders were cited by #iwill funded research as a barrier to social action. The #iwill Fund concluded:

“Particularly at local level, it is important for funders to build deep relationships with existing youth- and/or community-focussed organisations (some of whom may not have a track record within youth social action) and help them explore if and how youth social action can help them meet their aims. These organisations know their local area and will be key to sustaining youth social action opportunities, and youth leadership, after initial funding has ended.”⁴⁰

Youth workers told us that the outcomes for social action projects often determined whether young people continued on with them. They told us that ease of access, the patience of community members and the praise the young people received were not to be underestimated as motivators for young people continuing with social action past an initial project. The stronger the community links, the easier the social action. As a result, the strategic benefits for youth organisations are limited by their local infrastructure as it is challenging for them to set ongoing or longer-term strategic objectives concerning social action for their organisation. The impact on the journey for the young person is the possibility of it coming to crashing halt.

Youth Sector Funding Cuts

Not to be underestimated as a barrier to youth led social action are the impacts of the funding landscape on the youth sector. Only 58% of survey respondents mentioned financial benefits, in comparison with, for example, 95% who stated their motivation being the benefit felt by the young people as a reason for doing social action. What most prevents surveyed youth organisations from delivering social action is short-term programme-led funding (67%). The APPG for Youth Affairs describes the funding landscape for the youth sector as being dominated by “funding streams increasingly [pursuing] short term outcomes against narrow targets, suggesting an iterative and self-vindicating cycle.”⁴¹

London Youth are critical of this style of funding. Arguing that it has resulted in a more rapid turnover of projects as the funding is typically shorter-term, which makes it “difficult to sustain projects that young people may already be engaged in.”⁴² Short term funding can be a barrier to sustainable social action because it can threaten to undermine the strong relationships that youth workers and young people build up. One youth worker told us that if they had to change youth workers on the programme due to funding constraints “That would be difficult if it changed because they know and trust us now, they know the youth club is always a safe place.” Furthermore, it would undermine the journey many young people go through because, as this report has shown, so much of the success of social action lies in the relationships between the youth worker and the young person.

⁴⁰ The #iwill Fund Learning Hub, (2019). Key Learnings from the Last 12 Months. [online] London: The #iwill Fund Learning Hub https://www.youthimpact.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/final_learning_hub_12_month_look_back_aug_19_.pdf

⁴¹ APPG on Youth Affairs, (2019) “Youth Work Inquiry” <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/APPG-Youth-Work-Inquiry-Final-Report-April-2019-ONLINE.pdf> (page 15)

⁴² London Youth (2017), Young People’s Capital of the World? Understanding and responding to young Londoners’ changing needs. Available from: <https://londonyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Young-peoples-capital-of-the-world-March-2017.pdf>

Furthermore, the APPG report highlights that the reduction in stable youth services reduces the traditional pathways for young people to engage with those services, “whereby they might stay on, volunteer and eventually train to become a youth worker.”⁴³ Youth workers told us that the short programmes hindered them developing sustainable social action habits and behaviours, as it “takes a while to embed their confidence” and that it takes time to build the community relationships it needed. While others spoke of the overall impact of a lack of funding explaining that without it there was a lack of “longevity” in the programmes, which undermined the initial positive impacts felt.

Available Opportunities for young people

Social action habit forming for young people is dependent upon their being a wealth of opportunities available to young people. A barrier to sustainable social action is a simple lack of opportunity. The National Youth Social Action Survey (2019) found there has been an increase in the proportion of young people who stated there are ‘few/no opportunities in my area’ (19% in 2019, compared with 12% in 2018 and 4% in 2017). Suggesting that despite there being more of an interest in participating, young people report that they are not finding the opportunities to do so.⁴⁴ A further entrenchment of this barrier is a lack of understanding of what social action opportunities are available and what they are, particularly for younger participants. So even if there is a desire to engage in further social action, it can be limited by information or misunderstandings around definitions.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the National Youth Social Action survey was conducted before the pandemic and youth services were largely closed down due to lockdown restrictions. It is not unthinkable that these challenges have become more entrenched as young people have become detached from youth services.

Young Person Resources

Another factor which prevents further engagement and thus influences the young person’s journey following their engagement in the social action programme, is a lack of resources which makes it difficult for the young person to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Poverty and disadvantage make it hard for all young people, not just young women, to continue with their social action journey. Arthur et al (2017) in their study ‘A Habit of Service’ conclude “improving access to resources, and removing the barriers that a lack of resources creates, should be key areas of focus for those looking to support young people to develop a habit of service.”⁴⁶

One youth worker told us about their frustrations when young people were keen on an environmental project, which was hindered by a lack of resources. They said:

⁴³ APPG on Youth Affairs, (2019) “Youth Work Inquiry” <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/APPG-Youth-Work-Inquiry-Final-Report-April-2019-ONLINE.pdf> (page 30)

⁴⁴ Ipsos MORI, (2015). “Youth Social Action in The UK – 2015” <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/youth-social-action-uk-2015>

⁴⁵ Ipsos MORI, (2015) “Youth Social Action in The UK – 2015” <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/youth-social-action-uk-2015>

⁴⁶ Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). “A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service” Jubilee Centre, https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf.

“A lot of young people are really into it but don’t really know how to go about it on their own....Unless you have all the gear you need. For example, with the gardening project, we didn’t have any forks or spades and that is where the funding came in.”

There is emerging evidence from EmpowHER programme evaluations that space to continue social action work after the programme ended is vital for it to be built on and extended. Therefore, improving access to resources, and removing the barriers that a lack of resources creates, should be key areas of focus for those looking to support young to develop habit of social action and continue on their social action journey.

Language

An interesting finding was that often youth workers and young people did not call their work social action. They used terms like “youth volunteering”, while some youth workers referred to it and the young people through a programme name, for example “the EmpowHER girls.” Our conversations with youth workers found that social action is a helpful catch all term when communicating with funders, that allows them to apply for funding for activities as diverse as campaigning or fundraising. The definition of social action offered at the beginning of this paper indicates the variety of specific activities that come under social action. However, for those who do not work in youth organisations, the term “social action” is not commonly used and can be a barrier. An observation from the interviews, was that when asked about how long they had been delivering social action was that many of them found it an almost curious question as it was something that they had always been doing in some form. Some mentioned that their delivery of it had become more formal due to programmes like EmpowHER, but overall, whether it was fundraising for Children In Need or doing litter picking, they had always been doing community focused work and it was funders that called it social action.

How this is a barrier is that, at worst, the term runs the risk of excluding people, or at least confusing matters. For example, an interview conducted with a parent, as an important community stakeholder, got off to a challenging start. They did not see their daughter as taking part in “youth social action”. What they saw was her coming out of her shell, baking cakes to raise money for people in her community, having a wonderful time doing it and learning about herself and the people around her.



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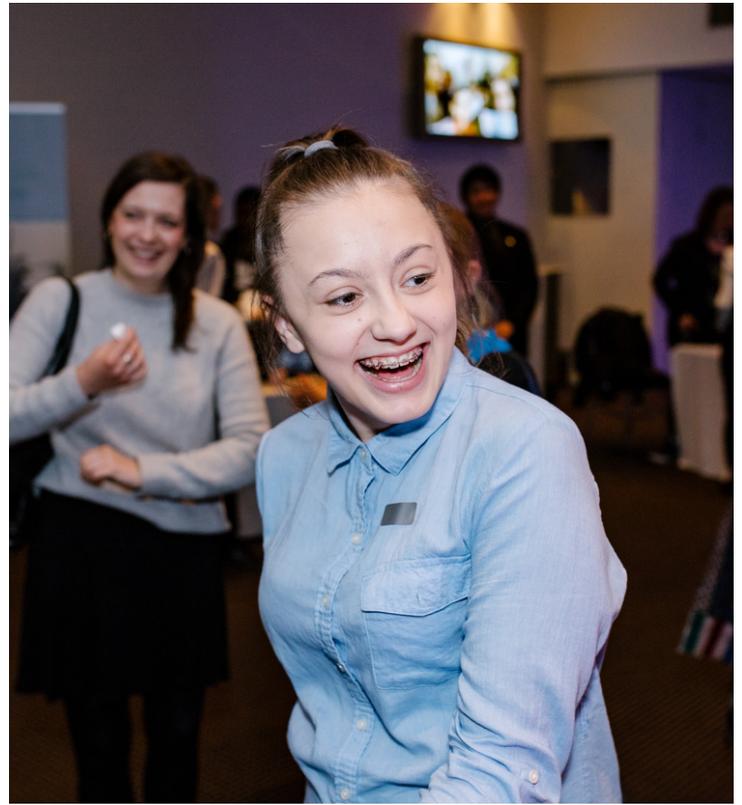
7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Social action, for many young people, is the catalyst for a growth in wellbeing, an acquirement of essential skills and, perhaps most importantly, a first step in a life pivoted towards community. While for youth organisations, social action opens doors to important relationships, gives them a meaningful method of engaging young people in their community and acts as an important tool to change perceptions and opinions. Overall, this report has shown that young women and girls go on a journey with social action that sees them directly gaining from the strategic benefits that youth organisations gain from doing social action in the first place. 70% of survey respondents believe that social action has made a significant contribution to their organization. This contribution comes from new, improved and embedded relationships with their community, leading on an activity that lifts the wellbeing, confidence and skills of their beneficiaries, and ultimately, creating community leadership among themselves and their young people.



Youth social action underpins a lot of activity in youth organisations, even under the guise of something else. Youth organisations told us that they do fundraising, volunteering, and acts of kindness under the umbrella of social action, as well as localised specific activities. These activities are usually done in small groups, and while some youth organisations told us that they've always done it, other organisations suggested that their social action was short-term programme based. Delivery in small groups, however, seemed to truly drive the benefits felt by youth organisations, as well as the young person journey. The small groups became safe spaces for young people to fully benefit from the wellbeing and skill-based uplift that social action offered. It also gave youth workers the time and space to invest in young people so they could take their action out into the community and feel the broader benefits.

The benefits from social action start with the opportunity to create new, enhanced and embedded community relationships. Youth workers told us about how young people led on a variety of social action activities, which improved the reputation of the youth centre, led them to meet other youth workers, improved relationships with other allied organisations and reinforced their relationship with the young people they serve. This benefit was echoed in the journey of the young people as they saw the perception of themselves lifting as they were seen doing good in their communities. Like the youth workers networking with community stakeholders, an important relationship young people gained was with each other. They learnt to work together, to overcome their own perceptions of each other, and to find simple joy in working together on a shared concern. This is vital to their journey outside of youth social action because it taught valuable lessons in socialising, making friends and getting along with others different to yourself.



The next benefit that youth organisations gained from social action was the creation of community leaders. Leadership, not only from the youth workers in relation to the young people they worked alongside, but also from the young people in relation to their community. Youth workers told us that a benefit of social action was that it is a pragmatic and practical activity to do with young people that they know lifts confidence, wellbeing and social and emotional skills. The key strategic benefit being that social action pulls together the main tenets of the informal educational aspect of youth work. However, the young women and girls told us that social action also lifted their wellbeing and mental health. Being able to learn about an issue they care about, develop an action in response, be supported to do that action and see the consequences of it, lifted their spirits and grew their self-confidence. Youth social action teaches young people that they can lead, be taken seriously in doing so and take away the skills and knowledge to continue leading after a programme has ended.

Finally, youth organisations benefit from social action because it comes loaded with opportunity to learn and develop. Youth social action, by its very nature, has to be responsive to youth need, malleable to circumstance and led from the bottom up. The report found that youth workers told us they gained more practical skills in delivering youth work, that they were able to learn about other

aspects of their community and learn how to evolve their youth work offer to meet the needs of young people. While young women told us that they gained practical skills, such as how to communicate professionally or project manage an idea they had, and that this combined with the confidence from doing it with friends and a youth worker equipped them for their future. We were told about ambitions to become nurses, lawyers, youth workers, class presidents and mental health doctors. All of these ambitions were the summation of the confidence gained from friendships, the validation from community response to social action and the grounded practical skills gained from leading on a project.

The sustainability of social action for young people starts with social action being something that they do from a young age, has the involvement of friends and family, and is well-received by the community that they're doing it in by often by being connected to that community or something they have a passion for. However, this report also found that social learning is important to continued social action. Young women told us that a deeper understanding of the issue that they were taking action on led to a more rooted commitment to doing social action. The style of delivery encouraged the sustainability of these benefits. Delivering in small groups led to strong friendships between the participants and youth workers, while community focused delivery created the pathway for the double benefit.



It is important to note how the strategic benefits to youth organisations manifest in the journey that young women go on and their next steps. This report found that young women benefitted enormously from taking part in social action because it led to improved wellbeing and greater confidence, which encourages leadership. Furthermore, the validation and encouragement of community members, youth workers and their friends lead young women to overcome the self-limiting behaviours associated with their gender, which is important to excelling beyond a social action project. While the education and workplace benefits were often secondary to the young women, the report found that social action gave them a safe space to experiment and learn about the skills they need to do well in the workplace. Social action, for all young people not just women and girls, is about providing youth work that draws out the best in young people for their community and equips them for the adult world.

A key conclusion to the second question focused on the journey of young women and girls following their engagement social action is that there is not one answer. While the initial intention of this research was to provide a taxonomy or a categorisation of the kinds of journeys that young women and girls went on and how social action affected their choices or routes into these pathways after a programme, the evidence suggested that this would not be right. While there are similarities in some of the journeys that the young women go on, they stop there as just similarities. This report found that understanding the individual and their experience was more important than trying to reduce their experiences to a category or putting them under an umbrella term where nuance and personhood would be lost. For example, when the report found that young women were looking to apply for university, that was the limit of what generalisation could be made. We found one young woman who felt empowered by her growth in confidence to apply to be a nurse, while another felt she could achieve more social justice by becoming a lawyer, another told us about wanting to apply for university because social learning had helped them find a way to enjoy education. Reducing the outcomes of social action to a taxonomy would lose the important detail and nuance of why social action led to those outcomes. Therefore, this report concludes that social action powers, enables and equips young women on their journey to adulthood – whatever that looks like.

The barriers to social action also presented the mirrored experiences of youth workers and young people. Young people told us that they did not need significant funding to do social action but poverty and deprivation was a barrier. Access to youth organisations is dependent upon being able to afford the bus fare or having a parent that can support you with travel and the youth club being in physical reach. Others told us about school timetables being hard to work around. These barriers were echoed by youth organisations who told us about the limitations of short programmes and reductions in funding impeding their social action offer, or ability to support young people to overcome their own personal barriers. Furthermore, a lack of local infrastructure hindered organisations getting the social action projects out into the community for the full benefit to be felt by any party. A lack of opportunity in the community, compounded by poor funding and made worse by confusion over the term “social action” makes it hard for social action to kickstart the cycle of benefit that this report shows exists.

Considering the findings of this report, and the barriers discussed, this report recommends the following to enhance, encourage and enable further social action with young people, but especially young women and girls. This report will break down the recommendations into two sections to reflect the two research questions:

- 1. What is the strategic benefit of providing youth social action for the delivery partner/youth organisation?**
- 2. What is the journey of participants following their engagement with youth social action?**

Recommendations relating to question 1

Social action focused youth work built by consensus

This research has shown that social action works best when it embraces the autonomy and leadership of young people, but that this flourishes best when communities are engaged and included in discussions with funders. Therefore, this research recommends that social action programme design should be driven by consensus.

Through **bringing together young people alongside the needs of community stakeholders**, and funders of social action would become truly embedded and full benefit would be felt by all. Youth organisations can lead the way on this by:

- Having youth boards that contribute to the overall strategic direction of the youth organisation. This research has shown that young people develop the skills relevant to the workplace and that they excel within social action when they’re in control of the project and when the type of social action is significant to them. By having youth boards, youth organisations can work with young people to ensure that their whole youth work offer reflects young people needs and connects with the community
- Reaching out to other community organisations that they work with. This research found social action projects that engage with community organisations as diverse as care homes and food banks.

By bringing them into the design process when thinking about social action projects, the youth organisations further builds the relationship, the community stakeholders is involved in meaningful engagement and the young people get the opportunity to develop and develop meaningful social action projects.

This would allow recognition of the diversity that young people would bring to those spaces, as well as encouraging the responsiveness to community need that creates a positive starting point for social action to flourish and be embedded. Given that a key strategic benefit from social action lies in the relationships that youth organisations build, their role in programme design and development as a conduit of young person voice and community need would further drive this and encourage the greater community cohesion all feel as a result of social action.

Creating community consensus around programmes for **social action would be enhanced by supporting youth organisations to work across the different sectors in their community.**

By bringing in community stakeholders from various sectors the immense benefits of social action led youth work would be taken directly into the community. Community bodies can support youth organisations and youth people by:

- Signing up to the #iwill Power of Youth Charter and making good on its aims within their work. Community organisations can work with young people through their connections with the youth organisations on how they would like to be held accountable and ensure that their aims meet the needs of young people in a meaningful way.
- Inviting young people from local youth clubs to take part in the development of community focused work as equal partners, recipients and beneficiaries of such outreach. This research has shown that young people are excellent advocates when given the opportunity, so by creating the opportunity for young people to engage, community stakeholders would be actively supporting them with continuing their journey.
- Engaging with Government programmes, such as Kickstart, to actively bring young people into paid roles within their work forces.

This report recommends that funders work with youth organisations to purposefully and intentionally develop programmes that engage community stakeholders, and not just those that work with young people. UK Youth has taken these lessons to heart and is working with young people to co-create research projects, design programmes, and have a strong voice within their operations.

Finally, **funding organisations can support this recommendation by creating a funding landscape that prioritises social action programmes that centre young people**

in their execution, alongside community stakeholders in a safe environment created by their youth worker. This research pointed to the challenges faced by the youth sector and while not the focus of these recommendations, there is much that funders can do to support the building of youth social action by consensus They can do this by:

- Creating specific funds for young people, which are accessible with straightforward application forms and funding criteria so they can lead on building their own action within their own communities.

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- Actively seek to fund social action projects that are grounded in community partnership, which could mean those where the initial application is not from a youth organisation. This would embed the relationships that make a lot of social action possible and also harden the potential pathways for young people after their initial social action.
- Finally, we were told by many young people that they wanted to train to become youth workers after school or college. Indeed, the number that are taking part in programmes as alumni members from previous programme cohorts demonstrates their commitment. Funders should seek to support young people in becoming youth workers with dedicated study grants.

While we know that the funding landscape for youth sector presents challenges, we know less about whether current funding models work well specifically for youth social action. The last recommendation for building social action through consensus is for a funding body to lead on a review of how youth social action is funded as a distinct form of youth work. This would review factors such as whether funding non-youth work actors who lead on social action is viable, and how young people should be included in the funding process, and how social action could be funded differently to other types of youth work, for example. This would enable funders to best support those leading on social action.

Recommendations relating to question 2.

Creating pathways for continued social action journeys

This report has demonstrated that young people continue with their journey of public service, if not social action, after an initial programme has ended. What this means for young people is individual and challenging to generalize. Youth organisations are uniquely placed in their community to provide young people with that individual support, and this report has found, they're also well placed to build community-straddling relationships that young people can benefit from as much as the youth organisation does. Therefore, this report recommends that youth organisations:

- Continue their efforts to **signpost and refer young people to opportunities within their communities beyond the initial social action.** This could mean working with local organisations on volunteering opportunities, promoting local colleges within their services, purposely building community links for young people to travel onto once they "age out" of youth work. These opportunities will be sensitive to what is available locally and it is not the purpose of report to be overly prescriptive, but youth organisations should work to become central hubs for sign posting and referrals to other community opportunities, such as employment, skill development or wellbeing opportunities.
- Invest time and, where possible, resource in building better internal process for young people who are "aging out" of youth services. Through creating pathways with other community organisations (for example, food banks, care homes and so on), this report recommends that youth centres use their position to support the journey of young people that have become too old for their programmes into continuing social action in adult spaces

UK Youth is already building upon this recommendation through our work on the Youth Card app. Youth Card was piloted in Birmingham in early 2021 and is now being rolled out nationally. It aims to provide a one stop shop for young people to find work experience, entry level jobs, youth services and

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fun activities in their area. A final recommendation is for youth organisations to use social media platforms and join Youth Card and encourage their young people to sign up too as it will give them access to further social action or development opportunities in their local communities.

Creating safe spaces for women and girls

This research noted that, for many young women and girls, social action was possible because of the impact of how the programme was delivered. They told us that they felt safe discussing their feelings, ideas and enjoyed the camaraderie of their new friends. Their post-social action journeys would likely have looked much different without them.

Creating safe spaces is not just about single gender programmes. This report found that social action could challenge social barriers young women face. For example, this research heard the story about young Asian women becoming friends with the white women in their community despite social barriers, young carers finding people just like them and shy girls finding a space to open up. All of these were instrumental in young women and girls continuing on their journey, whether it was speaking up in school, applying for university or having the confidence to turn their Zoom camera on. This report recommends that youth organisations can support the journey of young women after social action by doing the following:

- Creating female leadership opportunities within the youth organisation. This report notes that one of the successes of EmpowHER was found in the alumni opportunities for young women to mentor and support the cohort behind them. **By creating female leadership opportunities, they create pathways for older young women to support the younger ones,** and a defined role for them to continue on their social action journey.
- Youth organisations must create single gender spaces. This could mean specific times in the youth work offer that are just for male or female young people. Or, perhaps it could be a physical space. EmpowHER shows the worth of this in the outcomes that it achieved. Not all single gender spaces need to be explicitly for a programme or an activity. Boy-only spaces too must be considered through this – it is not just the girls who feel awkward talking about things in front of the other gender.

There is, understandably, a conversation around resources for such initiatives. Therefore, this report also makes recommendations for funders to support single gender spaces to enhance the post-social action journey of the young people. These are:

- Encourage female leadership as a principle within funding opportunities. By supporting programming that encouraged EmpowHER Alumni to have a role in successive cohorts, Spirit of 2012 demonstrated how this could be done. But, it needs to be a starting principle to ensure that programmes developed toward specific funding pots have this element within them.
- Supporting open access youth work that is focused on single-gender spaces, or programming that has a single gender focus. This report shows that young women benefitted enormously from the single gender space.
- Including a requirement in reporting that is focused on the outcomes of young women in particular. This would encourage a specific focus within programme design that would arguably raise the profile and focus on female leadership within youth work.

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Finally, a recommendation for the young people, is to continue using their voice. Reporting back to youth workers and through the evaluation activities that you will be encouraged to take part in that, will help create the body of evidence what kinds of delivery should be prioritised, whether that it single gender spaces or other forms of delivery. But it is equally important that youth workers, sector bodies (such as UK Youth) and funders alike listen to what young people say.

Recognition of young person social action

The report illustrates the powerful insight which is created from young people telling their story. Therefore, the final recommendation is that youth organisations, funders and all the stakeholders that work closely with young people work collaboratively to enhance and ensure young people's voices and their contribution in social action is illustrated through story telling. Youth social action as demonstrated in this study encompasses a whole movement, whereby young people through a range of activities (volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers) create a momentum for social change for local current and future issues. Why this is important, is that they add so much to the volunteering campaign and this work needs to be showcased and recognized.

Social action delivered through youth work is a unique starting point for young people's personal development, a critical juncture for communities to engage young people and a "real world" demonstration of the benefits that youth work brings to communities. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that young people can be genuine community leaders. From supporting foodbanks, to vaccine centres, this report found evidence that young people are more than capable of stepping up. This research has found that the benefits of social action are enormous for young people, communities and youth organisations – a "triple benefit". However, it is not enough to simply encourage all involved to continue with this. Crucial activities that youth organisations can do is:

- Develop a youth-led communication strategy. Share young peoples stories publicly, loudly and without restraint. Youth organisations need to lead the way in providing a platform for sharing the stories of their work. The audiences for this will differ from local businesses, decision makers to other young people. By leaning into the different audiences, youth organisations can embrace different platforms and media for sharing their stories.
- Work with other volunteer-based organisations in their area to share the story. By this, we recommend that youth organisations look to work with community organisations where young people are volunteering to shine a light on their work beyond the youth centre. This report found that young people go on to do social action in "adult spaces", this needs to be celebrated on equal terms to that which they do in the youth centre.

Youth organisations can do much to share their stories. However, organisations like UK Youth and funders, like Spirit of 2012, can take the stories further. UK Youth, as the Evidence and Insights lead for #iwill, is leading with a story led methodology to demonstrate to community stakeholders, business leaders, Government and beyond that the individual impact social action leads to is transformative for young people and communities alike. This evidenced narrative underpins a strategy that looks to encourage investment in youth work as a priority for young people. Organisations like UK Youth and funders like Spirit of 2012 can build this narrative further by:

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- Telling the stories of those who benefit from social action, not just the young people. Engaging with community stakeholders to speak to the joy and positive experience of working with young people will be a powerful tool. As this research has shown, community members have much to say and support to give for championing young people.
- Find strong collaborative paths between evaluation teams, communication teams and other externally facing roles within the organisation. Developing youth-led communications for different audiences that are grounded in the story and journey taken by young people are crucial to building the profile of youth work, the need for funding and the value of investing in young people.

This report has shown without doubt that young people are a positive, capable and ambitious force for good within society. Whether it is championing animal rights, building community gardens or coaching younger members of their youth service, young people have demonstrated that they more than deserve a seat at the table. Furthermore, young people put huge amounts of time and energy into volunteering for the social action causes. The final recommendation of this report is that organisations like UK Youth, Spirit and 2012 and other who work with young people seek to normalize the inclusion of young people in decision making spaces. They can do this by:

- Using their profile and status to open doors for young people. By inviting young people to networking events, meetings with decision and policy makers, sector learning events and so on, sector organisations can give young people a space to share their story and inform the thinking of decision makers.
- Find youth champions within adult volunteering competitions to work with and mentor young people and ensure that they're included, their stories heard and their voice is listened to. By working to find youth champions in adult spaces, organisations like UK Youth and funders like Spirit of 2012 can put specific objectives against what youth inclusion in these policy decisions looks like and provide an important gatekeeper to ensuring young people are in the room.

Further research

A challenge throughout the fieldwork of this project was that because the focus was on young women and girls, their youth workers and communities that had been on the receiving end of social action, it was overwhelmingly positive. Throughout the fieldwork, we were told nothing about the negative impacts of social action. Throughout writing the report, a transparent presentation of the impact was upheld; some young women felt a tiny positive impact compared to their peers. It is definitely not the finding of this report that social action is a golden egg for "fixing" society's problems. Certainly, we heard about barriers and how they negatively impacted the ability of youth organisations to deliver social action and young women's ability to engage with social action. However, no one told us that social action was not good for them. Secondly, the clarity of answer we found for the first question was stronger than it was for question two. While the answer to this is addressed above and the conclusion that a taxonomy of the post-social action journey was not appropriate, given the evidence, seems correct, it does lend itself to further questions.

Like all good research projects, the fieldwork and reporting of this work led to the contemplation of a

number of other research questions. In many ways, the majority of these questions address the counter narrative of what the negative impacts are, if any, of youth social action for the organisations delivering them and on the journey of young people. The most pressing of these questions are:

1) What about the boys?

Given the lack of female voice in the literature, focusing on the experiences of young women and girls was interesting and opened up interesting specific lines of argument. However, a couple of comments made by young women highlighted that the experience could be rather different for young men. Comments about young men only wanting to do sport, stifling conversation about “women’s issues” and dominating spaces, need to be investigated. When we ponder the negative impacts of social action and young men, research questions about how sport could be used to draw out the same wellbeing impacts that social action arise. Young women told us that boys want to just do sport – do they really? Does it have the same confidence and wellness boosting impact that social action does on girls? Does programming for boys that focuses on social action have the same zeal as it does for young women? Furthermore, what clarity can this bring us on the journey young people go on after their social action – is it notably different for boys than what we found for girls? Is it more specific and can be categorised in a way that the young women’s journey couldn’t?

2) What about the role of formal education?

So often young women told us that because of their lifted confidence they could do more and do better at school. While this meant different things for different young women, the consistent role of formal education was front and centre. School was central to their journey after social action. This research focused on social action being done in youth centres, however, an important question lies in how that can be linked up with formal education. Questions arose about whether schools made better starting points for social action programmes because of the immediate link between the impacts of it and academic attainment. Indeed, schools are often much more renowned and known within communities perhaps making them better placed to lead on community social action.

Furthermore, a focus on social action in schools overcomes one of the factors that has underpinned the overwhelmingly positive findings of this report. Young people choose to go to youth services, they choose to take part in programmes that deliver social action. On the contrary, no young people actually choose to go to school. It is mandated in law. If social action was part of the curriculum, for example, and all young people had to do it, would it be so positively received and lead to the same level of positive outcomes?

3) What about young people who don’t go to youth clubs?

Social action happens outside of youth clubs. Some young people take action through their local food bank, a political party, their sports club, their faith group, and so on. The list of places inspiring young people to take action is substantial, varied and the source of many follow up questions. These questions address the counter narrative that focuses on what the negative impacts of social action could be. An assumption of this report is that social action done in youth services is a good thing – but

is it the best thing? Does the starting point for social action affect the journey of the young person after their initial experience? Placing the focus on a different community stakeholder that supports its young people through social action could easily yield different results.

4) What about other forms of youth work?

This report was glaringly positive about social action as a form of youth work. However, other forms of youth work do not use social action as a tool to raise the confidence, skills and wellbeing of young people. While entirely out of scope of this research project, follow up questions focus on other types of youth work and the impacts they have. Do youth work programmes that focus on sport, art, theatre, gardening and so on achieve the same outcomes and impacts for young people that social action does? Indeed, are the impacts of these different vehicles for youth work deeper, longer lasting and more accessible? An important avenue for tackling the overwhelmingly positive findings of the report would be to compare them against other forms of youth work.



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