

November Insights at a glance

We asked:

How do you create an environment that supports and sustains young people's engagement in social action?



Key message

- Sustained engagement in youth social action is created through environments that prioritise youth voice, trust and shared ownership.
- Young people are more likely to stay involved when they can see their ideas shaping real decisions, when youth workers function as enablers rather than directors, and when social action leads to visible and celebrated impact.
- Embedding social action within organisational culture and local communities, rather than treating it as a one-off activity, is key to long-term participation.

Key findings

As set out in the #iwill Fund Learning Report (2022), [youth social action](#) can be defined as youth led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people as a result of taking part in the social action. Youth social action can be flexible in delivery and must involve at least one of three core mechanisms that improve the skills, wellbeing or increasing knowledge of others, and sense of belonging of a young person. These are:

- *Young people have a safe yet challenging space in which to develop practical, vocational and socio-emotional skills.*
- *Young people take self-directed action which gives them a sense of purpose that contributes to their well-being, self-concept and/or self-efficacy.*
- *Young people have the opportunity to engage with different communities, increasing their knowledge of others and their sense of belonging.*

The responses to our latest Just One Question highlight the importance of youth-centered values, strong relationships with youth practitioners, young people's ownership of projects, and visible impact on local communities or cause. These themes are explored in more detail below.

1. Put young people genuinely at the centre

Sustained engagement in youth social action happens when young people are treated as partners, not beneficiaries. Leadership should enable, not control action. As respondents have explained, when youth workers lead too much, young people disengage; when they stand alongside them young people step forward.

When young people can clearly see that their voices lead to real decisions and outcomes, commitment naturally grows. Youth worker advice on ways to achieving this includes:

- It is important to understand young people's starting point and tailor support accordingly. Focusing on causes, issues and concerns that matter to them, determining the change they want to see, and how they believe it could happen.
- Involving young people in the planning, decision-making, delivery and evaluation, in another words active engagement.
- Giving young people real ownership such as control over priorities, roles, budgets, and how success is defined.
- Create space for young people to design responses, test ideas, learn from what doesn't work, and adapt.
- Being honest about constraints (time, power, funding, what might not work) so expectations remain realistic and trust is maintained.
- Provide guidance, structure and safeguarding, but avoid taking over.
- Offer multiple ways to participate so young people with different personalities, abilities and learning styles are catered for.



“Give them ownership to set the issues, control the budget and design the response.”

“We treat young people as partners, not beneficiaries.”

2. Creating safe, welcoming and trauma-informed spaces

Youth practitioners explained that supportive environment are firstly created through building relationships and offering psychological safety. Trust takes time, but once built, it enables deeper conversations about social issues and action. Youth practitioners' advice on achieving this included:

- Offer spaces that are inclusive, accessible, youth-friendly and well resourced, so young people feel comfortable and valued from the outset.
- Use a trauma-informed approach responding with warmth, consistency and reliability, and respecting lived experience, so young people feel safe, understood and able to engage meaningfully in social action.
- Reduce barriers to participation such as practical barriers such as cost, transport, digital access and personal barriers such as confidence and language.
- Implement an adaptable delivery option to include a combination of 1:1 and group options, in-person and virtual, different locations and flexible levels of commitment.
- Invest in skilled, reflective youth workers who are approachable, practical, and able to draw on lived and professional experience.
- Be available, consistent and committed as young people notice when adults “show up”.
- Use humour, banter and enjoyment intentionally. Social action should feel meaningful and fun, not like a chore.



“The environment needs to be safe, confidential, trustworthy and young people friendly.”

“We respond to their needs using a trauma-informed approach which enables us to build trusted relationships when this happens, we are able to talk openly about social action.”

3. Make social action visible, practical and achievable

Sustained engagement is strengthened when young people can clearly see the impact of their social action and understand how it contributes to meaningful outcomes. When progress and change are visible, young people are more likely to feel a sense of agency, purpose and ownership. Youth workers' advice to achieve this includes:

- Design projects with tangible outcomes that young people can see, feel, achieve and celebrate.
- Break work into clear stages with milestones, outputs and shared reviews.
- Offer small pots of funding so ideas can be acted on, not just discussed.
- Embed skills development (leadership, communication, planning, teamwork) directly into real-world activities.



"We ensure we showcase the impact and celebrate successes, share stories of change."

"We take part in a Sustainable Fashion Show where young people wear the costumes that they have designed and created from donated clothing and share the message about fast fashion."

4. Root social action in community and partnerships

Connection to place strengthens commitment and engagement in social action. Community recognition and collaboration help young people see that their contributions via social action matters to their local community. Youth practitioners' advice on ways of achieving this include:

- Work in partnership with community organisations, local groups and intergenerational networks.
- Design projects that respond to local needs while helping young people see their role within a wider system.
- Normalise social action as part of everyday culture, not an "extra".



"Connection to people helps young people connect to place, and from there they take ownership of local and national issues."

"Members undertake tasks and events that support the local community, such as designing signs for the village or an annual carol singing event."

5. Reflect, learn and develop

Reflecting and learning from delivered social action leads to increased motivation and provides young people with the opportunity to develop their next activities or expand activities. Youth practitioners' advice on achieving this include:

- Build in time for young people to reflect on what they learned, what worked and make improvements, and what they want to do next.
- Celebrate achievements publicly and privately via stories, showcases, events, acknowledgements.
- Reward effort along the way, not just final outcomes.



“Encourage young people to reflect on what they learned, what worked, and what they want to do next.”

“Create space for young people to be empowered to create ideas and plan how a project will be actioned.”

UK Youth supporting youth social action

UK Youth has supported youth social action through various [programmes and projects](#) (including: [#iwill Movement](#), [Community Food Champions](#); [Inspire 2022](#); [EmpowHer Legacy](#); [Outdoor Activators](#)) and helps embed high-quality youth social action across its network. Central to this work is the belief that young people should be active agents of change, with access to opportunities that are inclusive, youth-led and developmentally supportive.

Through the #iwill movement, a partnership between UK Youth and Volunteering Matters, we support organisations across the UK to create the conditions in which young people can meaningfully engage in social action. We encourage organisations to sign the [Power of Youth Charter](#), and commit to the following:

- **Prioritising youth voice and leadership:** opening decision-making spaces to young people, supporting youth ambassadors and leaders, creating opportunities for youth-led activity or takeovers, and enabling young people to share their stories and experiences.
- **Meaningful participation:** involving young people in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes, and ensuring opportunities are relevant, accessible and take place in settings that feel safe and familiar to them.
- **Co-creation:** working with young people rather than for them, including collaboratively developing projects, solutions and, in some cases, funding bids or organisational priorities.
- **Evidence and recognition:** showing the benefits of youth social action, learning from practice, and recognising and celebrating young people’s leadership and impact, including outcomes that may not always be highly visible.
- **Partnership:** collaborating with other organisations to support shared goals for youth empowerment and to strengthen the conditions in which youth social action can thrive.

The #iwill Movement also supports young people directly through the [#iwill Ambassadors programme](#), enabling youth leaders to champion social action, influence decision-makers, and inspire peers through lived experience and leadership.

Alongside this, the #iwill Movement’s [place-based work](#) brings together local partners, communities and young people to strengthen youth social action ecosystems, ensuring opportunities are rooted in local need, connected to place, and sustainable over time.

By championing these principles, UK Youth and #iwill help ensure that youth social action is not only accessible, but also sustained, enabling more young people to develop confidence, skills and a lasting connection to positive social change. For practical guidance on embedding youth-led, inclusive social action, youth practitioners can explore our [EmpowHER Toolkit](#).

Next Question

Your voice matters — what's next for youth work? 

February's #JustOneQuestion is here.

After a short pause for the National Youth Strategy launch, we're back! Your voice has already helped shape national conversations and policy — now we're asking what's next?

We want to know what matters most to you and what the sector needs right now.

👉 Share your thoughts by 28 February: https://bit.ly/JOQ_feb26