



# Leaders of the future:

Youth Social Action and its  
Role in Youth Work

UK YOUTH

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## EmpowHer Research Literature Review

### Introduction

EmpowHer was launched in 2018 to mark the centenary of women's suffrage. 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. Through programme evaluations we have seen positive outcomes for the young women and girls that take part, as well as a "double benefit" for those within their communities. However, the impact, effects and consequences of empowering young women and girls goes beyond the immediacy of what a programme evaluation can uncover.

This literature review is the first output from a larger research project undertaken by UK Youth and funded by Spirit of 2012 to investigate the benefits of youth social action. This literature review will explore the strategic benefits for those who deliver youth social action programmes, and the participant journey taken by young women and girls following their social action engagement. By looking at the outcomes and results from the EmpowHer programme alongside other social action initiatives this literature review will seek to evidence and demonstrate the "so what" of social action, while addressing the main

objectives of the research project. Therefore, the agreed research questions for this research and literature review 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 the engagement of youth social action?

While the overall purpose of the research project is to make recommendations for policy and practical interventions based on our learning about the power of youth social action, the literature review will interrogate existing material on the influence youth social action has on youth work providers, young women and girls, and the communities they're operational in.

Additionally, the overall research project and this literature review 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. However, a detailed analysis of the 'double benefit' of social action is out-of-scope for this research. 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 committing the social action.

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## Methodology

We adopted a systematic approach to the literature review<sup>1</sup> thus using a structured and explicit accountable method. This method enables a research team to review, critique and robustly synthesise the literature and to develop new perspectives and understanding in this area. The literature review started with the rich body of practitioner-based evaluation evidence collected from three cohorts of young women and girls participating in the programme, as well as the programme Theory of Change.

The review studied the reference lists from several relevant studies explicitly exploring either youth organisation research or the young person's journey following their social action engagement. The review was conducted using a conceptual framework designed to ensure the research questions led the review and determined the search criteria. Its findings are based on publicly available reports published by the Government, polling companies, academics, charities, and organisations that provide social action type projects for young people and pertain primarily to the UK based literature. We also made use of any relevant grey literature.<sup>2</sup>

The review starts with a rapid assessment of the value of youth social action and where this literature fits conceptually. This is followed by an analysis of the available evidence on the strategic benefits for delivery organisations providing social action programmes, and the barriers to achieving these benefits. Followed by a discussion and review of a young person's journey and outcomes after participation in social action, focusing on motivations, habit formation and longer-term effects for the young person. The final section of the review outlines key recommendations for the direction of the other research outputs for the research project and conclusions.

## Definitions and scope of the research

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) in 2020 as *"a form of education pedagogy; it provides non-formal education and offers informal learning opportunities."*<sup>3</sup> When combined with understanding what a youth organisation is, the NYA definition is a good place to start. Youth organisations are an informal educational setting where outcomes for young people are social rather than academic. Indeed, the 2020 National Youth Agency

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<sup>1</sup> Gough et al., 2012

<sup>2</sup> Grey literature is *"There are many definitions of grey literature, but it is usually taken to mean literature that is not formally published in sources such as books and journal articles"* (Higgins & Green, 2011, Cochrane Handbook)

<sup>3</sup> National Youth Agency (2020) "Youth Work Curriculum" (page 5)

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Curriculum stipulates that:

***“Predominantly working with children and young people between 11 and 19 years of age, youth work supports young people through adolescence, ranging from eight to 25 years of age dependent on context and need. It differs from other services in that it is voluntary for young people to engage with youth work, and the process starts from where young people are at, their interests, goals and experiences; focusing on personal and social development through a strengths-based (asset) approach.”<sup>4</sup>***

While Youth Scotland suggest that youth work can be understood as a process that *“helps young people to learn about themselves, others and society through non-formal education activities, which involve enjoyment, challenge and learning.”<sup>5</sup>* The key theme of informality can be seen in the definition of youth work offered by the Council of Europe. They suggest that youth work is a *“informal learning process”* that covers a variety of social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political activities that is *“quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live.”<sup>6</sup>*

When we look to define what (or who) a youth worker is the NYA suggest that it is someone who works with young people aged from eight years old and upwards to 25. They suggest that *“their 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.”<sup>7</sup>* Youth workers are often highly trained individuals employed by a youth organisation to lead on the informal education programmes that support young people. However, they can also be volunteers or those who work at youth organisations without formal qualifications. Most importantly, however, a youth worker is a *“trusted adult.”<sup>8</sup>* The definition of youth worker that this review will use focuses on those who are trained and employed by a youth organisation but is mindful that volunteer youth workers are just as valuable to the sector.

*“Youth social action”* is a concept best defined by the #iwill Fund, and is the definition used by UK Youth to define youth social 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.”<sup>9</sup>***

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<sup>4</sup> National Youth Agency (2020) “Youth Work Curriculum” (page 5)

<sup>5</sup> Youth Scotland, (2020) “What is the purpose of youth work?”

<sup>6</sup> Council for Europe (2020) “Youth Work” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-work>

<sup>7</sup> National Youth Agency “Youth Work”

<sup>8</sup> National Youth Agency (2020) “Youth Work Curriculum” (page 6)

<sup>9</sup> #iwill Fund

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Therefore, youth social action means practical action undertaken by young people in the service of others to create positive change. 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 activism.

The overall research project seeks to understand how youth social action can become a habit for young people, and in particular, young women and girls. Habit forming refers to something becoming a routine behaviour through repetition that has become a subconscious action for a person.<sup>10</sup> Psychology Today (2018) defines habit formation as *“the process by which behaviours become automatic. Habits can form without a person intending to acquire them, but they can be deliberately cultivated – or eliminated- to better suit one’s personal goals.”*<sup>11</sup>

The #iwill Fund aims 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’.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the overall definition of a youth social action habit, also includes the idea it can be encouraged and developed.



<sup>10</sup> See Butler et al, 1995; Gardner & Rebar, 2019; Lamb et al, 2019; Taylor-Collins et al, 2018; Webster, 2008

<sup>11</sup> Psychology Today (2018)

<sup>12</sup> #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](http://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloadmanager-files/iwill_reviewdoc_digital_2017.pdf)

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## Value of Youth Social Action

The last decade has seen an immense drive to encourage and foster more significant habits of leading social action among young people. Arguably starting with the Conservatives Election Manifesto in 2010, which articulated their vision of the Big Society. They stated: *“Our alternative to big government is the Big Society: a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.”*<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the spotlight on social action was heightened by events such as the London Olympics and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, which brought communities and societies together despite the adverse economic conditions being felt due to the continuing ripple effect of the 2008 financial crisis. A difficult labour market, as well as lower health, education and employment outcomes were affecting the most disadvantaged in society and most keenly felt by young people.<sup>14</sup>

In 2012, the UK government commissioned an independent review entitled ‘In the Service of Others: a vision for youth social action’. The panel were tasked with answering how Government, business, the voluntary and education sectors can work together to support young people to engage in social action between the ages of 10 and 20.<sup>15</sup> The findings, published in 2013, suggested there was a lack of knowledge and understanding of social action, including its value for young people, among their communities, within much of the education sector and, critically, among employers. It reported that the youth sector would benefit from this spotlight on social action and innovate to ensure that young people have a range of choices and opportunities to engage. The report suggested that developing better understanding and recognition of this value would tackle this and answer the Government’s starting question.<sup>16</sup> The findings from the review found that the concentration on the benefits of social action for just the education sector ignores other crucial areas of benefit. Most notably, the long-term benefits for youth organisations that work directly with young people outside of the school environment, those for a community receiving the outputs of social action and how sustainable and continuous social action is achieved for young people and communities. Indeed, the findings of this report typify the lack of depth and understanding of the value social action brings to the youth sector.

Government commitment to social action contributed to the establishment of the #iwill Fund in 2016. The Fund is an England wide joint investment that brings together £50 million in funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and The National Lottery Community Fund, creating a central investment pot. The National Lottery Community Fund believes that when young people are leading social action, communities

<sup>13</sup> Conservative Party, Invitation to join the government of Britain, April 2010, p37

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office (2012) In the Service of Others A vision for youth social action by 2020

<sup>15</sup> In Service of Others: A Vision for Youth Social Action by 2020, (2013)

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet Office (2012) In the Service of Others A vision for youth social action by 2020

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thrive. The #iwill Fund aims to make social action part of life for as many 10 to 20-year-olds as possible by distributing investment through working with other funders. The #iwill campaign aims to increase participation in youth social action (volunteering, fundraising and campaigning) by 50% by 2020.<sup>17</sup> Without a doubt, the establishment of the #iwill Fund represented an important turning point in evidencing and demonstrating the value of social action. One of the #iwill Fund learning hub strategic objectives is to *“build our understanding of what youth social action achieves, how to reach under-served groups, and how to sustain youth social action.”*<sup>18</sup>

Given the level of investment behind it and, as this review will show, youth organisation enthusiasm for it, arguably youth social action is an essential activity for rebuilding society – particularly for young people facing the challenges outlined above. While critical thinkers, practitioners, government officials and researchers have stressed the short-term value of social action; the longer-term and sustainable impact, as well as the benefit for youth organisations, has had less focus devoted to it. They are essential components of meaningful and impactful social action. Indeed, they are identified as such by the principles used by #iwill Fund. The six principles are: must be youth-led, be challenging the young person’s capabilities, have a clear social impact for the community, allow progression to other opportunities, be embedded in a young person’s life and enable reflection about the value of the activities.<sup>19</sup>

Understanding the background to youth social action as a tool for youth organisational development is important. However, it should not detract from the very real issue that there is a dearth of literature demonstrating that youth social action has very real benefits for the youth sector as well. Given the challenging funding environment that youth organisations operate in, activities that contribute to their survival need to be assessed through that lens. This review suggests that the benefits for youth organisations of delivering social action lie in the impact upon organisational reputation, capacity building, opportunity to network and grow within their communities and meet their own strategic objectives.

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<sup>17</sup> #iwill 2017a. Making social action part of life for all young people by 2020.

<sup>18</sup> #iwill Fund, 2019, “The Socio-Economic Participation Gap in Youth Social Action” [#iwill Learning Hub](#), Page 2

<sup>19</sup> Ockenden et al., 2013 in Spencer & Lucas (2018) Understanding the role of creative self-efficacy in youth social action

## Strategic Benefits for Delivery Organisations

It is striking how little research has been done into the benefit of youth social action on the organisations that are leading its delivery. Indeed, there is very little published practitioner evidence or applied research despite the crucial role they play in working with young people to lead on social action within their communities. While there is comparatively extensive literature on participant outcomes and community benefits of social action, the under-researched organisational benefits offer the starting point for many interesting points of future study. This section reviews the available evidence on how social action effects youth organisations in the short and longer-term. While there is a lack of robust evidence, there is much to point to positive impacts for the reputation of youth organisations, the capacity and skills of youth workers and growing networks to create further opportunity.

### Organisations positioning and reputation is enhanced

A notable positive benefit reported in the EmpowHer evaluations for youth organisations is that they have found that being linked to the social actions conducted by young people raises their profile within the local community. A benefit that is also extended to key stakeholders and young people connected to the action.<sup>20</sup> The association with young people leading on positive social action allowed youth organisations to better position themselves within their communities and build trust to lead with local youth work. The delivery organisations reported feeling that they were acknowledged and valued for the work they were doing with young people. Anecdotal evidence from evaluations produced by UK Youth and feedback from the UK Youth Movement shows that the delivery organisations' profile improved, leading to the community, stakeholders and funders choosing to work with them, as well as consult with and gain advice from them on youth related issues.<sup>21</sup> The benefit of a raised and positive profile within a community are likely far-reaching. From leading to the collection of good will to the opening of doors to new opportunities.

### Internal capacity development

The youth sector organisations delivering social action, particularly those doing social action for the first time, benefited from skills development of their youth workers to deliver social action. The skills gained were transferable and also helped youth workers deliver other programmes and core activity or services they offered. Thus, embedding programme learning into institutional knowledge. This capacity building was gained from training, learning and toolkits the core partners and funders provided.<sup>22</sup> The EmpowHer programme

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<sup>20</sup> UK Youth, (2018, 2019) EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>21</sup> UK Youth (2018, 2019, 2020) EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>22</sup> Ofsted (2016) Social action: good examples from schools and colleges; #iwill Fund Learning Hub Quality Practice Workstream, (2019). *Impact Accelerator Initial Insights*

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illustrates this benefit in practice. For the programme, UK Youth conducted a skills audit to uncover specific expertise and specialist knowledge from the delivery partners, and ensure it was shared at events or individual training sessions. This audit has fed into a training and learning plan available to each delivery partner to support with the professional development of youth workers. Furthermore, the Young Women's Trust developed a Community Organising Training for EmpowHer youth workers, covering the theory and principles of community organising, its application to social action projects, the importance of stories, building relationships and how to identify the power a community already holds.<sup>23</sup>

An activity that leads to the upskilling and capacity building of youth workers is a benefit not to be underestimated in a challenging funding environment. The APPG on Youth Affairs report 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. Poor funding has undermined salaries, career progression and job stability. The report states:

**"Youth work projects, jobs and volunteering opportunities are increasingly short-term and insecure. There has been a reduction in previously secure, relatively unrestricted funding for youth services (primarily from central government) and a consequent reduction in the scope and reach of youth work, and the length of time that youth services are able to dedicate to individual."** <sup>1</sup>

The report also found that the lack of security had led to a de-skilling of the work force and the loss of experienced staff, leading to an increase in stress for those who remain due to increased pressure on their time by increased young person need, and a growth in the administrative aspect of their roles. Furthermore, this has led to an increased reliance on volunteers.

Another example of how increasing organisational capacity to deliver social action is a critical benefit for the delivery partners, is the Social Action Quality Mark (SAQM) and toolkit for EmpowHer. This quality mark is an off-the-shelf resource that has been developed by UK Youth in consultation with the #iwill Fund to provide a framework designed to enhance the quality of youth organisations' social action activity. The SAQM is accompanied by a user guide which includes useful information and additional resources for embedding quality youth-led social action, as well as ongoing trainings and support.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> UK Youth (2019) EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

## Improvements in social cohesion and partnership working

A benefit reported by youth organisations from youth social action was grounded in the links it allowed them to make with other stakeholders. Indeed, the evidence<sup>25</sup> indicates that partnerships with local organisations improved as a result of social action projects, resulting in enhanced connections with local networks and funders to demonstrate the power of the programme and attract additional funding or be invited to partake into other opportunities. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that social cohesion improves as the local community and stakeholders understand more about the work of delivery organisations. Some studies suggest that one of the strategic benefits for delivery organisations is that after social action projects local stakeholders and community members see them in a more positive light, and this helps them to build trusted partnerships.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this positive benefit for delivery organisations, it is notable that much of the evidence demonstrating this benefit comes from social action programmes conducted with schools as the lead delivery partners. The Youth Trust (2020) in 'How Social Action Benefits Pupils, Schools and Communities' found social action positively influenced school exclusion problems, Ofsted (2016) reported how social action might aid the development of other challenging areas such as attendance, behaviour and academic standards. The Jubilee Centre suggested 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. Arguing that this might involve signposting between organisations and more significant partnerships between primary and secondary, secondary and college, secondary/college and university/employment, and university and employment.<sup>27</sup>

## Youth focus

Working with young people on youth-led social action builds trust between the delivery organisation and young people. Some organisations have reported that it increases their reach among young people, and longer term engagement is improved as participants are more likely to go on to volunteer with the youth organisation.<sup>28</sup> This in turn enables and encourages youth organisations to offer a better and broader selection of opportunities and services to young people, and makes social action more accessible.<sup>29</sup> The #iwill Fund outlined this as one of the core benefits of social action, they stated: *"Organisations benefit from young people's energy, ideas and capacity to create positive change. They gain a different perspective that can shift their way of thinking and open up new ways of*

<sup>25</sup> Hill et al (2009) *Young People Volunteering and Youth Projects: a rapid review of recent evidence*.

<sup>26</sup> #iwill, (2019). *The Power of Youth Social Action #iwill Campaign Impact Report*. [online] London:

<sup>27</sup> Arthur, J., Harrison, T. and Taylor, E., (2015). *Building Character Through Youth Social Action*. [online] Birmingham: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue

<sup>28</sup> UK Youth (2018), EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>29</sup> UK Youth, 2018, 2019

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working”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most important benefit that youth organisations gain from youth social action is that it improves and enhances their relationships with the young people that they work with. While the reputational, networking, economic and capacity building benefits are important, especially to the ongoing financial viability of the youth organisations running the programmes, their immediate priority is to the young people they serve. It is difficult to achieve this remit as the youth sector faces severe challenges.



<sup>30</sup> #iwill, (2019). *The Power of Youth Social Action #iwill Campaign Impact Report*

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# Challenges Experienced and Impact on Outcomes

In reviewing the literature and programme evaluations, it was very apparent that the youth organisations' strategic benefits resulting from social action were limited and impacted by a number of barriers. These are primarily external factors that have been shaped and implemented by local and central Government, which encourages immediate and short-term solutions, rather than sustainable and long-term services.

## Local infrastructure deficiencies

One of the key barriers identified by the #iwill charity evidence reviews is the lack of infrastructure<sup>31</sup> to enable longer-term social action to become a consistent activity for the youth organisation. 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."*<sup>32</sup> As a result, the strategic benefits for delivery organisations are limited by their local infrastructure as it is challenging for the youth organisations to set ongoing or longer-term strategic objectives concerning social action for their organisation.

## Short-term programme led funding

Related to the barriers that infrastructure deficiencies present is insufficient funding for youth organisations to realise the real benefits of longer-term social action work. The review indicates the approach quite often utilised by funders is to support social action via resources which are time-bound, and outcomes focussed to the specific programme. These types of programmes concentrate on the efficacy of the programme with little or no focus on more comprehensive and sustainable results and impact for deliverers.<sup>33</sup> The #iwill Fund has been exploring this issue and has suggested that funders and funding use a place-based approach. They propose that funding should focus on the quality of delivery within a broader context and system (the system being the local community), and the ability of the

<sup>31</sup> Referring to the economic infrastructure – such as physical structures, systems, institutions, services, and facilities.

<sup>32</sup> The #iwill Fund Learning Hub, (2019). *Key Learnings from the Last 12 Months*. [online] London: The #iwill Fund Learning Hub

<sup>33</sup> The #iwill Fund Learning Hub: #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, (2019). *Increasing Youth Social Action in Place*. [online] London: #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream; Renasis (2018) Place Based Social Action Learning Review

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delivery organisations to achieve youth social action outcomes with others in that system.<sup>34</sup>

London Youth are critical of this style of short-term 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.”<sup>35</sup> The APPG report also highlights that the reduction in open-access 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.”<sup>36</sup> That the short-term funding environment upends one of youth works’ core principles needs to be taken in the context of how youth workers see themselves. A 2016 report by UK Youth found that when asked what the primary impact of their work with young people was, 48% youth workers said enabling young people to lead happier, more fulfilling lives and empowering young people to make a positive contribution to their community.<sup>37</sup> Arguably, the targeted and short-term nature of funding threatens to erode the core principle of youth centres being a safe space for young people, but also undermines the youth organisations’ ability to offer long term support for young people leading social action.

## Aligning social action with strategic goals

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. Indeed, the EmpowHer programme found youth workers and young women and girls had created a number of new opportunities for young people which aligned with the organisations’ strategic objectives. Examples included: *“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.”*<sup>38</sup> The #iwill Fund Learning Hub paper recommended that partnering between youth social action and other community sector organisations with overlapping aims is the way forward. 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.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that for delivery organisations to truly benefit they ought to

<sup>34</sup> #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, (2019). *Increasing Youth Social Action in Place*. [online] London: #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream

<sup>35</sup> 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>

<sup>36</sup> 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)

<sup>37</sup> UK Youth (2016) “Local Youth Groups Today” <https://www.clearviewresearch.co.uk/static/Local%20Youth%20Groups%20Today%20Report.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> UK Youth, (2019). *EmpowHER Cohort One Impact Report*. London: UK Youth.

<sup>39</sup> #iwill Fund (2019), Renaisi (2018)

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consider aligning their organisational objectives with those of local community organisations.

## Revisiting the Theory of Change

A rapid review of Theory of Changes related to youth social action highlights that the focus tends to be youth outcomes, this is to be expected for organisations that work with young people and whose organisation's aims and mission centres on young people. Some key practitioners have suggested that this is where the problem lies, arguing that the Theory of Change rightly needs to have an emphasis on young people outcomes, however the community and delivery organisation outcomes need to be more prominent<sup>40</sup> so that they can be further explored, researched, and evaluated. The EmpowHer programme is an example of Theory of Change which includes this element, see page 9,

The literature has shown that while there is much research, interest and findings about social action, the consistent focus is on the young people. While there is merit in this approach, the lack of investigation of the benefits for youth organisations does young people a disservice. There are clear strategic benefits for youth organisations to support young people with social action, or to run programmes aimed at equipping young people to lead on this independently. These benefits speak to the challenges the youth sector faces in terms of a limited funding environment, challenges upskilling qualified staff and creating networks that both the organisation and young people can benefit from. There is a need for a much more rigorous and in-depth assessment of these benefits, and those which are not evident from the limited literature available. Where the literature indicates challenges and barriers to youth organisations, support for young people through social actions is also sparse.



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<sup>40</sup> #iwill Fund (2019)

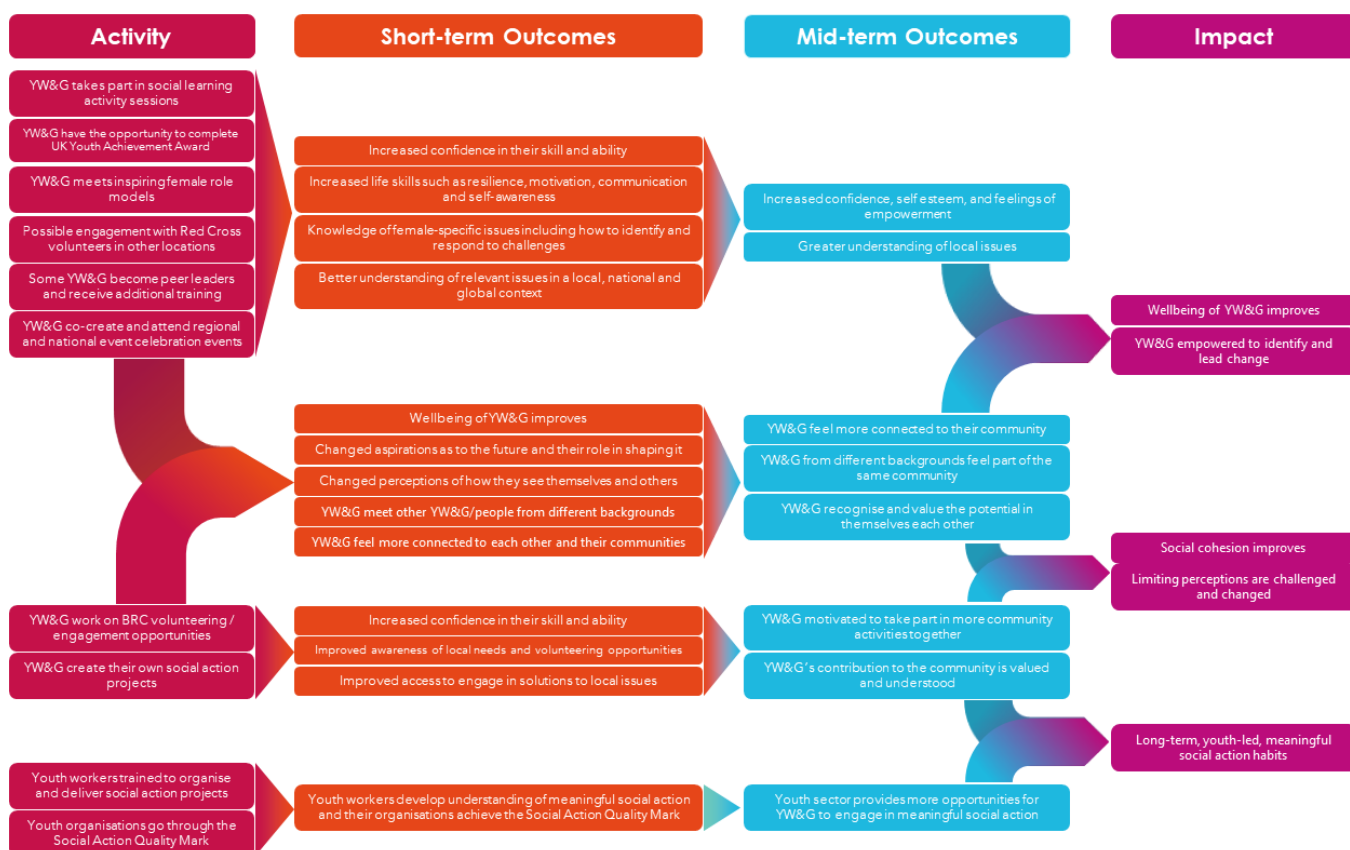
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## Young Person's Journey

The study of a young person's journey from social action programme, to ongoing social action, to their next steps is better evidenced. Presenting the behaviour changes and social action habit formations specifically by young people is something that far more attention has been paid to than the benefits received by the organisation supporting them to do it. As well as a review of the motivations, enablers, and barriers of the young person's social action journey, this review highlights the gaps in the research. The most notable being the lack of gender lens throughout the literature.

The EmpowHer programme core impacts and outcomes, as outlined in the Theory of Change, centre specifically on young women and girls' personal benefits achieved as a result of participating in the programme, as well as establishing long term, youth-led, meaningful action social action habits. The EmpowHer programme wanted to enable young women and girls to lead change, benefit from social cohesion and challenge their own gender-based limiting perceptions.

## EmpowHer – Theory of Change



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The Theory of Change shows that the long-term journey undertaken by participants is central to the programme, while programme evaluations show the impact that a single-gender, small-group, long-term intervention can have on the wellbeing and self-perception of young women and girls. Using the mechanism of social learning and social action, participating in EmpowHER improves the confidence and self-esteem of young women and girls. It encourages them to lead change in their communities.<sup>41</sup> Most importantly of all, it proves that a social action programme starts young people on a journey. This next section will interrogate how that journey is understood in the literature.

## Motivation and intention towards social action

A growing body of evidence suggests that young people participating in social action programmes are motivated to contribute to further social action activity (Elspeth et al, 2016). Indeed, the EmpowHer programme evaluations found that the young women and girls reported that they were motivated to engage in future social action, and some were already doing so. Over a third of participants on the EmpowHer programme across the three cohorts (34%, 37% and 46% respectively over the three cohorts, 2018-2020) stated they would take part in social action in the future. The following quotes from young women participating in EmpowHer Cohort One illustrates the point:

"It's really likely I'll do it again, 100% it's actually fun. It's really enjoyable and just being around such positive people, it makes you excited like you're making a change and the world will one day be better because you're doing something about it" and "My prediction for the future is about helping all those trying, including those that are deprived, and be part of the community by doing events".<sup>42</sup>

More generally, the National Youth Social Action Survey reported that almost half (46%) of 10 to 20 year olds were classified as 'potential' (interested/ uncertain about doing more social action) participants and nearly a third (29%) classified as 'committed' (strong commitment to current and future social action) based on their previous and current involvement, as well as future intention to get involved.<sup>42</sup>

The EmpowHer programme evaluation found that social leadership played a crucial role in achieving sustainable social action for young women and girls. The EmpowHer alumni continue to participate in peer mentoring or events, other Cohort One and Two young women and girls have continued to engage in social action or leadership opportunities. For

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<sup>41</sup> UK Youth, 2018, 2019, 2020; EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>42</sup> Ipsos MORI, (2015). *Youth Social Action in The UK – 2015*

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the groups that have continued, anecdotally, strong community connections, cohesion and focus of the group, and passion for a specific cause, seem to have played an essential role in maintaining interest and engagement in youth social action.<sup>43</sup> This spotlight on the EmpowHer programme reflects the findings of other programmes. For example, the National Citizen Service (2013) independent evaluation reported that approximately 71% of the participants felt more likely to help out their communities in future.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note that multiple studies have found that while the intention to take part in social action is important the evidence does go on to suggest that intentions are not enough. Indeed, the findings of Arthur et al 2018; Marta et al., 2014; Omoto and Snyder, 1995 suggest that intention proves unsuitable as a single measure for the likelihood of young people developing a social action habit or indicator of likelihood of conducting further social action when actual behaviour is tested. However, as outlined earlier the limited available opportunities and lack of funding are likely to be strong factors preventing the intention to materialise into actual further youth social action.

## The longer-term 'habit' formation

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that a 'habit' of social action or 'habit of service' is the ultimate aim of social action programmes and that this habit can be formed or encouraged among young people by social action activities that make a positive difference.<sup>45</sup> Emerging research indicates that a number of factors need to be in place for social action or services to become a long-term social action habit. These are:

1. **To start social action activities at a young age** – The review has highlighted the importance of encouraging the habit of service or social action at an early stage.<sup>46</sup> The Cabinet Office (2015) reported that many of those who are 'committed' to social action started at a young age, arguing there is a need to ensure opportunities are available for younger ages, for example through primary schools and youth groups and offer opportunities that enable young people to participate with their families.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> UK Youth, 2018, 2019, 2020; EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

<sup>44</sup> Ipsos MORI, (2014). National Citizen Service 2013 Evaluation

<sup>45</sup> RSA 2019, Arthur et al. 2018, Collins et al. 2018

<sup>46</sup> Arthur et al, 2018

<sup>47</sup> Cabinet Office, 2015

<sup>48</sup> 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](https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf)

2. **Parents and friends' involvement in social action, as well as their ongoing support** – Families, friends, and teachers, are important role models but friends were more of an influence. Andolina et al, (2003) argue that engaged parents tend to raise involved children. Individual teachers play a vital role to engage young people to talk openly and to debate ideas. Other agencies such as religious institutes, policy organisations, youth organisations offer the opportunities and trusted adult to facilitate engagement. Evidence suggests that inclusive and meaningful social action opportunities, including volunteering, and the influence of role models can improve the wellbeing of YW&G and inspire them to lead change in their local communities. Also, girls and young women point to youth groups as places where they can be themselves, learn new things and build positive and supportive relationships.<sup>49</sup>
3. **The importance of growth mindset** – Young people, must believe they have the time skills, opportunities, and confidence to participate in further social action.<sup>50</sup>
4. **Recognise the double benefit of service** – a key component of habit formation is young people recognising and seeing the benefit of their action for themselves, the community, and other key stakeholders in society, thus see the double benefit.<sup>51</sup>
5. **Value of recognition and reward** – To encourage long-term social action, the young person must feel valued and their efforts recognised and rewarded.<sup>52</sup> The young person must be able to articulate the need and value.
6. **Available opportunities** - 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.<sup>53</sup> Another reason may be a lack of understanding and/ knowledge of social action opportunities which are accessible to them, particularly younger participants. So even if there is a desire to engage in further social action, it can be limited by information.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Girlguiding, (2020). *Girls Attitudes Survey*; Girlguiding & Breeze, B. and Thornton, A. (2006). *Raising A Giving Nation: A Report On 3 Years of Research and Activity with Young People and Schools by The Giving Nation Programme*

<sup>50</sup> Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). *A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service*.

<sup>51</sup> #iwill Fund (2012); Demos (2015).

<sup>52</sup> Arthur et al, (2018); #iwill Fund (2012); Demos (2015)

<sup>53</sup> Ipsos MORI, (2015). *Youth Social Action in The UK – 2015*.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

7. **Resources and capacity** - 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. 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."* There is some emerging evidence from programme evaluations that space to continue social action work after the programme ended is vital for it to be built on and extended.<sup>55</sup>
8. **Managing double barriers** - Barriers experienced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds mean that for many it's difficult to: commit to a regular activity and lead youth social action without support of specific opportunities.<sup>56</sup> It is known from wider research on inequality that *"it is hard for people who lack resources to take advantage of the opportunities available to the rest of society"*<sup>57</sup> service is one such opportunity. 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.

## Longer-term personal outcomes

There is a thorough body of research and evidence regarding the benefits gained by young people as a result of participating in social action. These benefits relate to their journey following social action and demonstrate the breadth and varieties of pathway that social action sets young people on. While often the desired outcome of a social action programme is for that young person to go on to lead further social action, the evidence below demonstrates that the potential influence on a young person's future goes far beyond social action. Therefore, longer term personal outcomes in this study refers to both taking part in further social action activities as well as development of crucial skills for employment and adulthood. While these longer-term effects are harder to quantify, track and measure, the literature goes some way to generalising them in ways that is helpful for us to understand the journey that young people embark upon post-social action. This review identifies seven longer-term personal outcomes:

- 1) **Character building and non-cognitive skills** - One of the lead researchers in character education, the Jubilee Centre, commented in their 'Building Character through Youth Social Action' research that: *"youth social action has a transformative effect on young people's character, and in turn character development benefits both the individual and society, and therefore should be considered in any approach to*

<sup>55</sup> Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). *A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service*.

<sup>56</sup> UK Youth, (2019). *EmpowHER Cohort One Impact Report*.

<sup>57</sup> Darton, Hirsch and Strelitz, 2003 in to add

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measuring the individual and community/societal outcomes of social action.”<sup>58</sup> An assessment of the literature highlights that several studies<sup>59</sup> concluded social action improved the young person’s character qualities such as empathy, grit, resilience, confidence, self-worth, self-esteem and cooperation and problem-solving. As well as non-cognitive skills such as collaboration skills, planning and project management, and communication skills. To a lesser extent, problem-solving skills, resilience and understanding what employers are looking for in employees were also highlighted.<sup>60</sup>

- 2) **Employability Skills** - The evidence<sup>61</sup> indicates that youth social action is likely to have a positive effect on current and future employment outcomes as well as employability skills such as interview techniques. Indeed, the Cohort Three report from the EmpowHer programme reported young women and girls reporting renewed ambition for school, joining a school council and feeling more able to speak up in class. However, the evidence suggested that it also encourages young people to consider careers in sectors that are suffering from skills shortages such as health and social care, teaching and community/ service-related industries, as well as expand their network, secure employment, and consider training and development needs<sup>62</sup> as self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem are improved following social action. Furthermore, Birdwell et al (2015) argue that full-time service year models are better than short-term social action at increasing employment opportunities, they can lead to: higher wages, increased job satisfaction, capable and more confident about securing a job in the future, NEET move into employment and training. The USA AmeriCorps VISTA programme, which has been running for 20 years, is one such full-time model.<sup>63</sup>
- 3) **Wellbeing and mental health** - Evidence from EmpowHer evaluations concluded that participation in social action had a positive impact on young women and girls’ wellbeing and challenged and changed limited perceptions upon completion of the programme. Young women and girls’ self-esteem improves, and they are more optimistic about their future. Youth social action can help to combat mental health issues by giving young people a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth. These findings are validated and supported by critical studies evaluating youth social action programmes such as NCS, Scouts/ Guides and Wildlife Trust and Boeck

<sup>58</sup> Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. and Moller, F. (2017). *A Habit of Service: The Factors That Sustain Service*.

<sup>59</sup> Birdell, Birnie & Mehan, 2013; BIT 2016, CIPD 2013; Arthur et al, 2015

<sup>60</sup> CIPD, 2013. Youth Social Action and Transitions into Work: what role for employers

<sup>61</sup> Birdwell, Scott & Reynolds, 2015; Boeck et al. 2009; Kirkman et al, 2016; UK Youth, 2019

<sup>62</sup> Birdwell, J., Birnie, R. and Mehan, R. (2013). *The State of the Service Nation: Youth Social Action in the UK*.

<sup>63</sup> 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>



et al. 2009.<sup>64</sup>

- 4) **Education development and engagement** - There is some (albeit conflicting) evidence,<sup>65</sup> on the link between youth social action and educational attainment and school engagement. Gorard et al, found the links to less prominent. The #iwill Fund report suggests that youth social action contributes to the development of non-cognitive skills that are relevant for success in the classroom.<sup>66</sup> Completing social action enhances 'non-formal' learning for young people developing skills that are not always developed by formal education. Indeed, one of the main outcomes associated with it is 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<sup>67</sup> of youth social action boosting attainment and employability skills.
- 5) **Active citizenship** - A number of programme evaluations' international case studies found that youth social action activity achieves positive outcomes in young people's attitudes and understanding of civic participation and engagement, community action and service and increased formal political engagement (such as voting behaviour).<sup>68</sup>
- 6) **Improving social cohesion** - The research<sup>69</sup> indicates that young people have a sense of urgency for change for their local community, experience increased confidence in their ability to change things and enhanced community responsibility, as a result of social action. 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, EmpowHer saw 70% of YW&G reporting by the end of the programme that they felt that they could trust the people who live near them. Indeed, The Social Action National Survey (2019) 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%).<sup>70</sup> 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. Some young people believe that their age and inexperience are

<sup>64</sup> Boeck, T., Makadia, N., Johnson, C., Cadogan, N., Salim, H. and Cushing, J., (2009). *The Impact of Volunteering on Social Capital and Community Cohesion*

<sup>65</sup> Gorard et al, 2016

<sup>66</sup> Gorard, S., See, B.H., Siddiqui, N., Smith, E. and White, P. (2016). *Youth Social Action Trials: Youth United Evaluation Report and Executive Summary*

<sup>67</sup> Birdwell, Birnie & Mehan, 2013; Demos (2015); DfE (2012); Ofsted, 2018; Boeck et al. 2009

<sup>68</sup> ibid

<sup>69</sup> Birdell, Birnie & Mehan, 2013; Boeck et al. 2009; RAS 2018; Ipsos MORI 2020; #iwill Fund, 2018, Demos 2015

<sup>70</sup> Ipsos MORI, (2014). National Citizen Service 2013 Evaluation

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limiting, but report building confidence in their ability to make a difference through participation.<sup>71</sup>

- 7) **Leadership skills** - The EmpowHer evaluation found that young women and girls are more motivated to take the lead and are more confident in their skills following the social action activity. Their confidence in themselves and the ability to advocate for their beliefs improved. In EmpowHer, the emerging evidence from the programme shows social leadership can be seen through the Young Women's Trust Be Your Best Self Workshops, where young women and girls returning to act as peer mentors to further cohorts, and previous participants using their EmpowHer experience as a foundation on which to continue to advocate for change, and through the change in some young people who take on a leadership role within future EmpowHER groups. In addition to EmpowHer alumni engaging in peer mentoring, other Cohort One and Two young women and girls have continued to engage in social action or leadership opportunities. For the groups that have continued, anecdotally, strong community connections, cohesion and focus of the group, and passion for a specific cause, seem to have played a significant role. In Cohort Three, an EmpowHer Ambassador pilot was introduced to further encourage leadership among the young women and girls.<sup>72</sup>

Each of these outcomes represents an opportunity, a pathway, or an open door for young people to take as part of their journey. However, what the literature does not point to is the relationship between the social action and the outcome. While it is important to note that social action can lead to better educational outcomes, the development of leadership qualities and active citizenships, amongst other things, it is not clear what it is about social action that determines these outcomes. Equally missing from the literature is an understanding of the pathways that young people take from social action to those outcomes, whether they continue to do social action and the continued role of social learning. Finally, it is clear that much of the analysis has focused on young people, while outcomes specific to the journey taken by young women specifically are missing. There is clearly further interrogation to be done of the journey that young women and girls go on as they complete social action. The evidence presented above suggests specific outcomes and growing momentum towards social action habits, however, the next stage of this research will be well placed to evidence the role that gender has.

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<sup>71</sup> RSA, 2018

<sup>72</sup> UK Youth (2018, 2019, 2020) EmpowHer Programme Evaluation

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## Key recommendations and Conclusion

The review of the literature into the strategic benefits for youth organisations' of providing youth social action has highlighted some interesting areas for UK Youth and Spirit of 2012 to explore in the research phase of this study. The evidence presented is patchy and limited, demonstrating a clear gap in the evidence base; therefore, the recommended areas to explore in the research phase are:

1. A fuller understanding of the social action which youth organisations specialize in and how they ensure that the social action programmes are sustainable.
2. How the youth social action is embedded into the youth organisation's existing provision and the types of youth social action projects that become embedded into the wider/strategic service provision of youth organisations.
3. Key short and longer-term strategic benefits for youth organisations.

Impact, outcome, and the young persons' journey evidence base is in its early stages with little focus on longer-term and sustainable social action. The emerging findings demonstrate the need to research this area in greater detail to understand the extent and the journey. The areas to explore in the primary research are:

1. Identify pathways and progression routes to continued social action and social leadership, including those beyond the primary youth organisation for young women and girls.
2. Outline behaviour changes and social action habit formations specifically by young women and girls from disadvantaged background.
3. The role of social learning, role models, leadership opportunities and personal autonomy, plus other interventions.
4. The specific personal outcomes and journey for young women and girls.

As 2020 draws to a close, the UK is entering a period of an unprecedented challenge. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, young people will yet again disproportionately feel the impact of events outside of their control. Surveys conducted by respected stakeholders, include the Office for National Statistics, the Resolution Foundation, and Young Minds, during the

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pandemic have highlighted that the majority of young people are concerned about the impact of coronavirus on their future prospects.<sup>73</sup> Younger workers (those aged 18 to 24 years) experienced the most significant increases in unemployment. The rise in youth unemployment is linked to younger workers' tendency to work in industries that were worst affected by the pandemic. Indeed, the number of NEET young people (not in employment, full-time education, or training) equates to 14.9% of the youth population.<sup>74</sup> Young people reported concerns related to physical and mental wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, lack of safe space and trusted adults to turn to, challenging family relationships. Finally, young people are concerned about falling behind academically, and the early research indicates they are at higher risk of bullying, face higher online pressure and a higher risk of engaging in criminal activity than other groups.<sup>75</sup>

Never before have young people so needed the benefits that come from social action. The current climate and the situation young people find themselves in highlights the need for youth social action to be embedded into the fabric of society, as the idea of local service is so important personally to the young person and the community. To enable this, the social action remit needs to move forward and funders need to think about supporting longer-term sustainable social action and forming habits of service. The evidence clearly indicates that progress has been made in the youth social action domain in the past decade, via campaigns, programmes and funding. Strong foundations have been laid to encourage and foster long-term habits of social action among young people, the young person's journey and pathways have been explored and there is a wealth of evidence on the longer-term outcomes young people achieve as a consequence of participating in youth social action. However, the connections between these is less well researched and the gender lens has not been applied to the findings.

While this review has demonstrated and validated the agreed research questions of the overall research project, it has also shone a light on gaps in previous work. While there is much research into the journey taken by young people after social action, there is little comprehensive research evidencing that youth social action has benefits that extend to the youth organisation leading it and the related barriers. Despite this, the literature does suggest that there is the promise of a positive body of data to be gathered about the impact on youth organisations to be uncovered by the next stage of research for this project. Indeed, this project is well placed to turn that suggestion into statement. The next step is to build on the evidence hinting at the important findings for youth organisations and to spell out clearly the journey for young women and girls.

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<sup>73</sup> BSA, 2020

<sup>74</sup> ONS 2020; The Resolution Foundation, 2020

<sup>75</sup> UK Youth 2020; Young Minds 2020; Lee 2020

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