

# What we've learned from EmpowHER about youth volunteering and social action

A briefing for community organisers, policy and decision makers and practitioners

## What is EmpowHER?

The EmpowHER programme was launched in 2019 to mark the centenary of women's suffrage. Jointly funded by the #iwill Fund (a joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Spirit of 2012), it aimed to encourage young women and girls to have the confidence and ability to use their voice for positive change in their communities through social action.

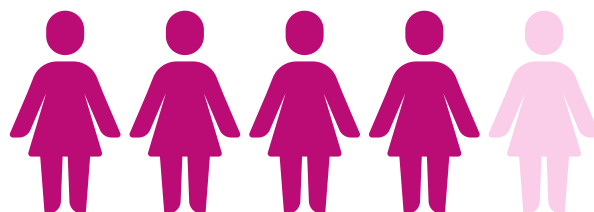
## What has EmpowHER achieved?

1800

girls completed the programme (at least 30 hours) with a 91% retention rate

EmpowHER reached out beyond the 'usual suspects' who take part in volunteering - more than

4 in 5



girls had at least one personal barrier that can make participation more challenging<sup>1</sup>

64%

of girls improved their wellbeing during the programme and the effect was

3 x

as strong for those who began the programme with low wellbeing

62%

of girls improved their sense of social cohesion<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 83% - Personal barriers are measured across UK Youth's programmes and include homelessness, low income, ESOL, SEND, BESD, NEET, refugee/asylum seeker, young carer, poor mental health, physical disability and low educational attainment

<sup>2</sup> Pre/post measurement of feeling accepted by others, feeling trust in people who live near me and often meeting people who are different to me

Young women & girls led more than 240 social action projects over the course of EmpowHER including:

- A community memorial garden for COVID-19.
- A school-based campaign tackling negative language and behaviours towards girls and LGBTQ+ young people, with a workshop facilitated by experts.
- A partnership with a local homeless shelter, delivering over 50 parcels to homeless people in the community – inspired in part by one of the participants sharing her father’s experience of homelessness.

Social Action for International Women's Day	Iqra's journey
<p>Inspired by role models and interested in self-care, wellbeing and equality, EmpowHER participants from Wigan Youth Zone planned an event for International Women’s Day. Attended by over 200 people, the event spread awareness of gender inequalities as well as celebrating the achievements of women. Activities included a colour run, equality pledge wall, games highlighting inequality between genders, balloon drop and performances by the young people.</p> <div> </div>	<p>Before EmpowHER, Iqra had not been involved in social action. “Because it was at a local community centre I was able to go, and honestly if I didn’t start EmpowHER I would have just stayed at home watching Netflix with a bag of crisps.” She and others from her group participated in first aid training and organised a first aid community day to share what they’d learned. This experience has given the young women and girls the confidence to speak publicly and they feel empowered by the skills they acquired. “It did bring my confidence up, and I felt more comfortable, and proud of myself for doing something for the community.” Iqra went on to support other young women and girls in their EmpowHER groups.</p>

### What we’ve learned from EmpowHER:

- **Young people are ready, willing and able to be part of the volunteering workforce and do not always need to be directed towards specialised provision.** Of course, there are specific safeguarding requirements that need to be met when working with young people. But these should not automatically prevent volunteering opportunities being opened up to – and actively promoted to – younger age groups. For example, young volunteers helped out at a vaccination centre, with the coordinator commenting: “[They] have been a delight. They have been dedicated, always there, always on time. They just get on with it... they use their initiative, they know they can do stuff and they know they can lead.” Organisations and causes in need of more volunteers should reach out to schools and youth centres as they are likely to find talented and committed recruits.
- **Supporting youth volunteering and youth social action contributes to a more cohesive society.** Opening up opportunities to young people doesn’t just provide more volunteers, but enriches the experience for everyone. Volunteering is a chance for people from different backgrounds to mix so investing in a diverse volunteer workforce, including across the generations, helps promote understanding. Furthermore, giving young people the space to lead their own projects through programmes like EmpowHER changes people’s perceptions about young people for the better –

two thirds of youth workers said this programme had improved their relationships with the community. Our research also found that this worked both ways. Through taking part in EmpowHER, young people broadened their horizons and learnt more about their community, leading to increased feelings of trust towards others.

- **To maximise the gains from youth social action, funders and policymakers should look to incentivise partnership working.** Young people and youth organisations worked in partnership with national organisations (British Red Cross and Young Women’s Trust), their schools, and many local organisations to create their projects, leading to unexpected collaborations which have continued beyond the scope of the original programme. In the Leaders of the Future research, UK Youth found that 75% of youth organisations who took part in youth social action said they had strengthened existing community links, 75% said they had created new ones. Community organisations often lack the time and resource to collaborate, and beginning new partnerships can be risky if funders expect things to go right all the time. One of the secrets to EmpowHER’s success was the attention UK Youth and British Red Cross paid to building and maintaining relationships between local and national partners, at a local level, and between young people and those who were supporting them.
- **We need better systems to record and recognise the skills young people gain from all of their volunteering.** EmpowHER is a high-quality programme that teaches girls about some of the issues in their community, develops their skills, nurtures their own ideas and gives them the confidence, tools and connections to put those ideas into action. Its impact on participants has been tested by a robust, multi-year evaluation. Yet it can be challenging for girls who have completed this scheme – and others like it – to explain to employers, universities or other volunteering initiatives what they have achieved. Spirit of 2012's recent report we’ve called on the Government to develop a volunteer wallet or passport to put together people’s volunteering experiences in one place, so that it is easier for people to demonstrate their skills and secure the next opportunity.
- **Volunteering is an effective mechanism for improving young women’s wellbeing.** This programme deliberately reached out to girls with low wellbeing. Many young people are struggling with low self-esteem and feeling pessimistic about the future. Across the programme, average levels of life satisfaction, happiness and sense that life was worthwhile all improved, and the effect was more than three times as pronounced for those with the lowest starting points. Volunteering is neither a panacea for youth mental health issues, nor a substitute for medical and therapeutic support. However, our evidence suggests that well-structured, supportive social action programmes can play a powerful role in improving wellbeing. Researchers heard from one young woman who said that her social action had “saved her life” by giving a sense of “purpose and responsibility, which was taken away when I was struggling and not coping”. Whilst this experience may be exceptional, the data strongly supports the fact that through volunteering young people developed a sense of agency, purpose and optimism about the future that improves overall wellbeing.

## What next?

There are many conversations about the future of volunteering, and both local and national governments are keen to capitalise on the surge of volunteers who came forward during the pandemic. We urge everyone who is engaged in these conversations not to overlook the role that young people can play in our communities – a role that can have profound benefits for themselves and for their communities.

For EmpowHER itself – in Autumn 2021 Spirit of 2012 was delighted to award a further two years’ worth of funding to UK Youth to trial different approaches to making the programme sustainable. You can find out more Spirit of 2012's website.