

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

A briefing for funders

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.

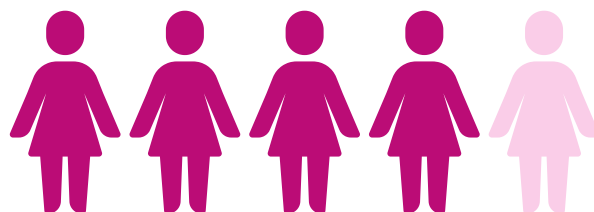
What has EmpowHER achieved?

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 challenging¹

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 cohesion²

¹ 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

² 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>

Lessons for funders:

- **Fund learning and reflection points so that grant-holders can make changes to delivery during the programme:** EmpowHER was broken down into four cohorts of activity, with funding provided for learning and reflection points of two months in between each cohort. This allowed the in-house evaluation team to share evidence with youth workers throughout the programme, rather than provide them with a summary at the end. This worked particularly successfully with EmpowHER, where the whole evaluation was done by an internal team. Even where organisations would prefer an external evaluation, there are clear benefits to funding internal staff capacity to review what the evaluation is telling them throughout the project, and make changes to delivery as a result.
- **Ringfence dedicated funding for access costs:** EmpowHER successfully recruited girls who, for a variety of reasons, had additional barriers to taking part in social action. This required investment of money, time and resources, and funders who are serious about reaching those who have not traditionally taken part need to be comfortable with this. UK Youth tracked their reach on an ongoing basis so they could make adjustments if they found some groups were under-represented. They budgeted for a flexible and responsive ‘access fund’ to reduce the barriers associated with certain groups participating, to be used at the discretion of the delivery partners. Examples of use

of the access fund included transport for girls with high anxiety, replacement care for young carers, and a Digital Inclusion Fund in response to the pandemic. Funders should explicitly recommend at application stage that grantees allocate money to access so that applicants know they will not be penalised if there are higher cost-per-person figures that cover these costs.

- **Plan for measuring community benefit from the start.** Among the main reasons for funding social action to improve wellbeing above other activities is the 'double benefit' – the good it brings to the community, as well as to the volunteers. However, getting data on those specific benefits is difficult in programmes where each group is working to a different goal. For example, how do you compare a campaign to change PE-kit to increase girls' confidence, with volunteering at a COVID-19 vaccine centre, or a befriending scheme at a residential care home? At the outset, Spirit of 2012 agreed with UK Youth that it would be the responsibility of girls running each project to think about what success would look like, and reflect on whether they had made a difference. However, as we did not want to give up the goal of understanding broader community benefits at the programme level, we decided explore the effect of social action on cohesion. UK Youth measured whether girls were more likely to meet with people who are different to them and more likely to trust others, and in parallel, looked at how social action changed adults' perceptions of young people in their community. Understanding community benefit is important and needs a proportionate but ambitious approach planned in from the start.
- **Coalitions of funders working towards the same goal can be a powerful mechanism for change:** Throughout EmpowHER we benefited hugely from being part of the #iwill Fund: an England-wide joint investment in youth social action that brings together £54 million in funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and The National Lottery Community Fund, creating a central investment pot. Meeting regularly with other funders helped us to interrogate our thinking, learn from different approaches, and find out about complementary work. Carving out space to collaborate with other funders who are working on the same theme enriched our experience of EmpowHER, and we are keen to do more to apply a similar approach to other topics.

What next?

Spirit of 2012 has awarded a further £500,000 to UK Youth to look at different ways of making EmpowHER sustainable on a reduced funding model. The project will explore how to scale the programme through youth-worker training, and support youth organisations to develop local and national partnerships for social action delivery. Sustainability of a project is always difficult to measure, so we are exciting to explore this in detail, alongside providing more young women and girls with social action opportunities that improve their wellbeing and sense of connection with others.

