

Youth Social Action and its role in Youth Work

Findings for the Youth Sector

Definitions and scope

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. Much was learnt from evaluation work, including about the positive impacts of social action on young women and girls. To extend these learnings, with the continued support of Spirit of 2012, UK Youth undertook a research project focused on two questions.

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

Below is a summary of the findings for youth workers and those who work with young people.

Social action is a crucial part of youth work

Youth workers told us social action is 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. While 95% of youth organisations agreed or strongly agreed that the delivery of youth social action influences other aspects of their work and services.

The benefits of social action for youth organisations

The most pertinent finding is that young women and girls go on a journey with social action that sees them directly gaining from the youth organisations benefits from doing social action in the first place. Overall, social action has three main benefits for youth organisations and young people. These are:

- **Increased and strengthened relationships** - Youth workers outlined how social action improved the reputation of the youth centre, led them to meet other youth workers, improved relationships with other allied organisations and reinforced their relationships with young people. It encouraged young people to overcome negative stereotypes and specifically in young women, self-limiting perceptions.
- **A more engaging offer for young people** – Social action gave young people the opportunity, skills and support to become leaders in their community. A youth worker said that social action "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." This led directly to improved wellbeing, happiness and ambitions for the future in young people.
- **Access to professional development and capacity building** - 62% of youth workers told us that their organisation had increased its internal skills and capacity development due to delivering social action programmes. While young people told us about the employability and work ready skills they gained, as well as their gains in confidence and self-assuredness.

The barriers to social action

This research found several barriers preventing youth organisations from delivering social action these are young person personal circumstances, lack of local infrastructure, long term or sustainable funding, and available opportunities to participate in social action.

Key learnings and recommendations for youth workers

The findings from the research highlights the following key learnings and recommendations for the youth sector and youth workers.

Youth work by co-creation- This research found that social action works best when it embraces the autonomy and leadership of young people, and flourishes when communities are engaged and included. Collaboration between young people, youth organisations and community stakeholders create a space for consensus built social action. The research found this encourages responsiveness to community need, puts young person energy at the centre and creates a positive starting point for social action to be embedded.

Recommendation -Youth organisations can build their youth work offer by including young people consistently in programme design through mechanisms, such as Youth Boards. 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. They can take this a step further however, by drawing in community stakeholders to build relationships and partnerships across the community for social action to flourish.

Create pathways for continued social action -This report has shown that young people often continue with public service, if not social action, after an initial programme has ended. What this means for young people is individual and hard to generalise. But, consistently, this report found that youth organisations were central to supporting and signposting those next steps.

Recommendation -Youth organisations should work on their internal processes to continue their work referring and signposting young people to their next opportunity. However, this can be taken further by working with local organisations to create pathways to volunteering, employment and education opportunities. This is particularly important for young people that are “ageing out” of youth services and need support finding their next opportunity. Finally, youth organisations should capitalise on social media and platforms like Youth Card.

Single-gender spaces -The young women and girls on the EmpowHER programme thrived in the single gender space. They told us that being in that environment gave them the chance to grow their confidence and self-esteem. It encouraged them to make friends and learn to work with the other girls as they led change in their community. This coupled with a high quality, flexible social learning curriculum, and the inclusion of role models deepens young women’s understanding of their community, ignites passion in social action causes and reduces limiting perceptions.

Recommendation -Youth organisations should create female leadership opportunities within their youth organisation, which can be enhanced and supported by single gender spaces. Alumni programmes, role modelling and peer mentoring all are mechanisms that youth organisations can do to create female leadership, alongside single gender sessions and spaces. 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.

Recognition of social action - The report illustrates the powerful insight which is created from young people telling their story. 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.

Recommendation - Youth organisations need to lead the way in providing a platform for sharing the stories of their work and collaborate with other volunteering focused organisations in their area. 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

Further information

You can contact UK Youth at info@ukyouth.org to request further information.