

ESTABLISHING YOUTH VOICE: FINAL REPORT SUMMARY

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About Establishing Youth Voice

This paper is a summary of the final report from an evaluation of youth voice practices across three specific initiatives. The evaluation was commissioned by the National Lottery Community Fund and led by YMCA George Williams College. This summary, and the final report, are published alongside a series of six 'How to...' guides informed by the findings of the evaluation. All the project reports and guides can be found [here](#).

From 2021 to 2023, eight young evaluators worked with the evaluation team at the Centre for Youth Voice (part of YMCA George Williams College), to establish how youth voice is occurring in practice and the difference it makes across the three initiatives.

Together, we sought to explore:

1. How has youth voice been happening in practice?
2. What has enabled or inhibited youth voice practice?
3. In what ways has youth voice practice impacted on: young people; funders; delivery organisations; communities?

Our evaluation focussed on three key initiatives for young people to be heard:

- **The #iwill Fund:** A £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that, together with a range of Match Funders, supports young people to access high quality social action opportunities.
- **The Young People in the Lead Advisory Panel:** Since 2020, 10 young people from a range of projects funded by The National Lottery Community Fund have steered and advised the organisation's broader work.
- **Youth Policy Development Group:** Since 2019, with support from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), up to 40 young people aged 16-25 from England have engaged with senior officials and Ministers from across Government.

What we did

We wanted to understand the stories that connect evidence from the three initiatives to likely outcomes and impacts. There have been multiple opportunities for practitioners, young people, academics and others to contribute to the evaluation:

- **Workshops:** to kick start the evaluation we consulted on the project design, key questions to explore and what types of outcomes to look for that may be associated with youth voice practice.
- **Data trawl:** we reviewed over 250 documents, such as monitoring and evaluation reports, and evidence submitted by practitioners and young people. We looked for what activities took place in different projects and programmes, any learning captured, and what outcomes and impacts were recorded.

- **Social inquiry:** we held 16 interviews and focus groups involving nearly 50 representatives from #iwill Fund Match Funders, delivery organisations and young people engaged across the three initiatives.
- **Advisory panel:** A group of 13 practitioners and researchers with expertise in youth voice met twice to check the quality and robustness of our emergent results.
- **Outcomes summit:** we ran a one-day workshop with 70 people from #iwill Fund Match Funders and delivery organisations, young people, academics and other youth voice practitioners. We all reviewed the emergent findings, giving views on strengths, weaknesses, and potential gaps.

What we found

How is youth voice happening in practice?

Looking at the evidence, especially from the data trawl, about activity in the #iwill Fund, we think that:

- **Youth voice activities happen across England:** there are opportunities for young people to participate across England, although some youth voice opportunities have a specifically regional focus.
- **Youth voice activities mainly target specific groups:** 77% of Match Funder programmes in the data trawl targeted young people from specific socio-demographic groups including socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, young people with special educational needs/additional support needs, disabled young people, those with poor mental health and young people from minoritised ethnic groups.
- **Groups and meetings are common activities:** young people are most commonly involved in youth voice opportunities through advisory groups, co-designing projects or leading programme development. The most common task young people participate in is attending meetings.
- **Digital engagement is increasing:** digital facilitation of youth voice practice has become a key mechanism since the pandemic, with 22% of youth voice activities in the data trawl taking place online.
- **Activities are led by specialist workers:** a youth worker or internal specialist often facilitates youth voice practice.
- **Support is available for young people involved:** young people are most commonly supported to participate in youth voice through wrap-around support. Many get access to training and specific support for that youth voice activity.
- **Learning is not always captured:** monitoring, evaluation and learning processes are patchy and underdeveloped in many organisations.
- **Some poor practices occur:** some youth voice activities may be happening in 'decorative' ways or through one-off opportunities with likely limited scope for influence.

What is enabling youth voice practice?

- **Long-term resourcing:** ensuring the right level of finances, protected staff time, and relationship building activities enables more meaningful youth voice activities and practices.
- **Quality relationships:** young people engaging in youth voice activities benefit from high quality socio-emotional support from a trusted practitioner over time, supporting their wider participation.
- **Linking with others in young people's lives:** those facilitating youth voice activities need to build strong links with other adults in young people's lives.
- **Having a menu of options:** enabling a wide range of opportunities to be involved and lead builds the accessibility of youth voice activities for young people.
- **Sharing success:** celebrating success and capturing learning contributes to building youth voice into everyone's consciousness and responsibility across an organisation.
- **Senior leaders backing youth voice:** funders' and delivery organisations' senior leadership support helps embed youth voice activities and ensure that their views are heard within the organisation.
- **Having young role models:** young people perceived that working alongside other young people, especially those with experience of youth social action, helps their engagement in youth voice activities.
- **Linking directly with decision-makers:** having direct contact with people in positions of influence and seeing the difference youth voice activities make encourages young people to get involved and stay involved.

What is inhibiting youth voice practices?

- **Negative perceptions of young people:** dominant and often negative views of young people in society impact support for youth voice activities. Where senior leaders or decision-makers don't value young people's views, they are not always heard.
- **Youth voice is tougher in generic organisations:** delivery organisations that are not youth-exclusive face greater barriers to undertaking youth voice activities.
- **Digital engagement can make relationship building harder:** digital participation is challenging in youth voice practice where it hinders/undermines relationship building.
- **Giving young people inaccessible information:** young people engaging in youth voice activities can often be expected to understand complex information, systems, processes or context, sometimes without sufficient support or guidance.
- **Lack of awareness of youth voice activities:** young people are often unaware of opportunities to be heard, or can lack access to training or support that would enable them to participate in youth voice activities effectively.
- **Lack of tailored support to those most intensively involved:** young people active in several groups face particular challenges with expectations of commitment, which they can find difficult to navigate.
- **Poor planning for young people finishing or completing youth voice activities:** young people can 'age out' and feel the ending of youth voice activities is poorer without positive progression to other opportunities.

- **Getting the right staff with the right skills:** practitioners recognise the need for capacity and skill development, and how staff turnover can impact projects and activities.

What difference are youth voice activities making?

For young people

- **Contributing to socio-emotional skills:** The mostly commonly identified impacts through the data trawl included young people engaged in youth voice having increased confidence in their capabilities (31% of data trawl sources), improved leadership skills (11%), strengthened peer relationships (8%), and improved teamwork (8%).
- **Stronger social connections:** many young people have increased external connections in the community or wider networks and have an increased sense of responsibility towards peers and/or the local community.
- **Gaining employability skills:** the most common employment outcome from youth voice activities is improved employability skills. Many young people have gained skills they can use for work and volunteering. Youth voice activities contributed to raised career aspirations and young people's view of their employment prospects.
- **Contributing to health:** more than half of data trawl items (55%) identified youth voice activities as contributing to young people's improved mental or physical wellbeing.

For funders

- **Greater understanding of young people's lives:** many funders better understand the issues in young people's lives and the value their funding can create.
- **Greater promotion of youth voice:** some funders are actively promoting youth voice, including with those that they fund, beyond youth social action.
- **Changing how funders work:** some funders have changed their processes to be more youth inclusive or are planning to in the future.
- **Continuing to grow youth voice activities:** when funders recognised the value of their youth voice work – for the young people they were working with and on the quality of their grant making – this encouraged them to invest further in this process.

For delivery organisations

- **More relevant programmes:** delivery organisations perceive that youth voice activities enable them to develop more relevant youth social action programmes. The process has often developed their staff skills.
- **More collaboration and celebration:** organisations feel that they are influencing their partners to consider incorporating youth voice in their work.

For communities

- **Stronger connections:** youth voice activities are perceived as contributing to strong connections between young people and their communities - both geographic and interest-based.

- **Increased profile of young people:** youth voice activities are perceived as raising the profile of young people within the wider community.

What next?

What are the implications of our findings?

Implications for policy makers

- **Youth voice matters:** youth voice plays a critical role for young people and the organisations that work with them. Policy makers play an equally critical role in supporting, enabling and embedding youth voice in cross-governmental policy making.
- **Building a workforce skilled:** We need to understand better the competencies, knowledge and skills that practitioners need to deliver high quality youth voice activity and what level of training or experience is proportionate for this. There is a role for policy makers in supporting and resourcing further research into the skills and needs of the sector to enable consistent high quality practice, and particularly to explore the equitable distribution of opportunities for both young people and practitioners.
- **Improving access to senior leaders and decision-makers:** policy makers and people in positions of influence should gain more direct access to young people, and in turn make themselves more accessible to listen and respond to young people's voices.

Implications for funders

- **Improve data collection:** The evidence base could be strengthened by improving data consistency, including by disaggregating data from those young people specifically involved in decision-making within programmes or projects. This would help us to better understand the direct and indirect impact of young people's voices in decision-making.
- **Align outsourced partners:** Further work is needed to explore the most effective collaboration model when engaging third-party organisations to support youth voice.
- **Continue to celebrate success:** Funder should ensure they amplify stories of change and that specific youth voice activities are clearly highlighted.

Implications for practitioners

- **Invest in relationships:** practitioners leading youth voice activities need the time, skills and capabilities, and suitable line management/supervision, so they can offer holistic support to young people.
- **Improve practices:** Different organisations undertake various forms of youth voice activities - such as running meetings or groups - differently. We need to learn better what creative and engaging sustainable delivery looks and feels like, especially when offered online.
- **Further embedding equity and inclusion:** A commitment to removing barriers is present in much of the youth voice practice but could be further improved. More data is still needed on the voices that we are *not* hearing, and why.

- **Improving progression from youth voice activities:** consider the end of young people’s experiences early and scaffold further progression opportunities.
- **Better supporting those most actively involved:** There are opportunities for better ensuring cohesive support for young people who are involved in multiple youth voice opportunities, and strengthening the leadership skills development they receive.



Alongside the full report we have published six 'How to...' guides, each based on learning generated through this evaluation, the views of young people engaged in the project and wider good practices.

YMCA GEORGE WILLIAMS COLLEGE

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College now hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Voice at YMCA George Williams College advocates for and supports a stronger role for the voices of young people in evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Underpinned by the belief in participation of young people in the decisions that affect them, The Centre for Youth Voice develops and shares relational, structural, and practical approaches to embedding the voices of young people, and directly supporting them to develop their research and evaluation skills.

To find out more about our work, visit youthimpact.uk or follow us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.

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