

Mapping organisational journeys

*Power of Youth Charter research
report*

March 2024

Commissioned by:

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Introduction

The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) is working with UK Youth and Volunteering Matters to support 'Area 2'¹ of the Evidence & Impact Strand of the #iwill movement. The aim of Area 2 is to map organisational journeys with the Power of Youth Charter (POYC), and to explore how different organisations implement their Power of Youth commitments.

This report shares learning from Wave 1 of IVAR's delivery (July 2022–May 2023). We outline activities to date and share emerging findings on the Power of Youth Charter commitments, looking at:

- The role of the Charter
- Areas of progress and challenge
- Organisations' support needs
- Tips for getting started with the Charter

In Appendix one, we share case studies of four signatories outlining their journey with the Charter and youth social action.

Methods & activities

- Inception meetings and scoping interviews with key stakeholders (members of UK Youth, Volunteering Matters, a Charter signatory and an #iwill ambassador).
- Workshop exploring the POYC commitments with seven Young Assessors and representatives from five Charter signatories to co-design a set of indicators for assessing progress in the five Charter commitments.
- Recruitment, training and fieldwork of a cohort of eight Young Assessors who designed and delivered research with 12 signatory organisations.
- Online survey of signatories, developed in collaboration with Young Assessors, to gather self-assessment and reflection on progress towards the commitments. We received 52 responses to the survey.
- Case studies with four Charter signatories about journeys with the Charter commitments and how the Charter fits into their wider organisational strategy. Across the five case studies we spoke with 12 staff/volunteers and four young people through interviews and focus groups.

This report outlines findings from the above activities, using quantitative data and anonymised quotes to illustrate key points.

¹ UK Youth Invitation to Tender '#iwill Evidence and Impact Strand'.

Learning so far about the Power of Youth Charter commitments

This section explores: the role of the Charter; key themes from organisations' journeys; challenges facing signatories as they put the commitments into action; and current support needs.

This analysis is based on data collected by Young Assessors and IVAR through workshops, fieldwork with 12 Charter signatories, survey responses from 52 signatories and case studies with five signatories. The sample of organisations provided a range in terms of:

- Sector (voluntary/non-profit, public sector/government and private sector)
- Geography (signatories are spread across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- The degree to which young people are the primary delivery focus or organisational mission (i.e. youth/non-youth focused organisations)
- Annual income (under £250k, £250k–£500k, £500k–£1million, over £1million)

1. Role of the Charter

Becoming a Charter signatory brings a range of benefits to organisations. In this section, we outline organisations' aspirations for signing the Charter, and the added value it brings to their work.

1.1 Motivations for signing the Charter

Out of 52 survey respondents, 34% signed up to the Power of Youth Charter in 2022, 20% signed up in 2021 and 30% signed up in 2020 (16% didn't know the year they signed up or preferred not to say). Our research so far has surfaced four common motivations for signing the Charter:

Being part of a national movement and brand

Signatories welcomed the prospect of being '*part of something bigger*', regardless of the size of their organisations, and valued the '*solidarity*' underpinning the Charter. Being connected to a national movement and brand is an attractive part of the offer and acts as a 'quality mark' for some:

'Being linked to a national programme, partner with other organisations and so being a part of a bigger initiative rather than our own individual strategies felt quite important.' (Charter signatory)

'To be known as a reputable and reliable industry for our young people.' (Charter signatory)

Accountability

Signatories wanted to use the Charter to publicly demonstrate their commitment to young people and *'meaningful youth engagement'*:

'We wanted to formalise and externally recognise the commitments the organisation has already made to listening to, and engaging with, young people.' (Charter signatory)

'It felt important to make these public commitments as they do hold you accountable.' (Charter signatory)

Alignment with organisational strategy and practice

Organisations feel a sense of *'shared vision and goals'* and *'alignment with the ethos behind the charter'*:

'The commitments almost perfectly matched what we were doing with our projects – the commitment to young people, listening to their voice, putting them at the forefront of the work and helping to make them co-creators.' (Charter signatory)

'We see [the Charter] as a framework that echoes our existing practices and our core DNA as an organisation.' (Charter signatory)

Progressing practice

The Charter is a way to progress practice with youth engagement and to *'support young people to have a voice within their community'*:

'It's a reminder and nudge to see if there are more opportunities to do social action. It reminds us that young people doing great social action can help influence and inspire others to do more.' (Charter signatory)

'To access new ideas and perspectives, while connecting up with other likeminded organisations to work together to have the greatest impact on embracing and growing the power of youth.' (Charter signatory)

1.2 The role and value of the Charter

In practice, the Charter appears to meet the above expectations of signatories. We found it adds value through:

- Creating opportunities to celebrate
- Leveraging new funding opportunities
- Connection and inspiration
- Acting as a flexible tool for reflection

Creating opportunities to celebrate

The Charter provides a shared language and chance to spotlight young people's contribution:

'A way to really celebrate the great work so many young people do in their communities across Northern Ireland.' (Charter signatory)

'We don't look at [our Charter commitments] every week but it gives us focus every year with #iwill week – that's a chance to reflect on our work and try to celebrate, promote, and give feedback to the young people on their achievements. It is a nice prompt to stand back and reflect.' (Charter signatory)

Leveraging new funding opportunities

The Charter acts as a quality marker for funding applications, with organisations using it as a way to showcase how the commitments are embedded in their work:

'It provides a framework for putting funding bids together or to help us frame reports back to funders – the commitments are a good starting place to think through what we want to achieve with a project and help us reflect on what we have achieved.' (Charter signatory)

Connection and inspiration

For some organisations, the Charter has connected them to a community of like-minded people and organisations:

'The Power of Youth Charter commitments are a description of methods or processes of doing youth work and working with young people, which has been very affirming.' (Charter signatory)

'The Power of Youth Charter has connected us to a community of organisations that face similar struggles and understand our challenges.' (Charter signatory)

There is an appetite for building on this through more opportunities to learn and share resources with other signatories.

Flexible tool for reflection

For some, the value of the Charter lies in its flexibility. Organisations can adapt and tailor the commitments for different groups of young people – using them as principles rather than as a concrete set of practice. For example, an organisation which works across multiple schools explained the importance of contextualising the commitments to different school environments, capacities and needs.

Some organisations described how the commitments outlined positive ways of working that they have been practising for years:

*‘All the commitments and principles are transferable – they are not just about young people so reflect on and learn from work you might be doing with other groups.’
(Charter signatory)*

2. Organisational journeys with the Power of Youth Charter

IVAR and a group of Young Assessors have been researching signatories’ journeys with the five commitments. This section shares trends from the Assessors’ fieldwork, four case studies (see Appendix one) and survey findings about progress with the commitments.

2.1 Confidence levels across signatories

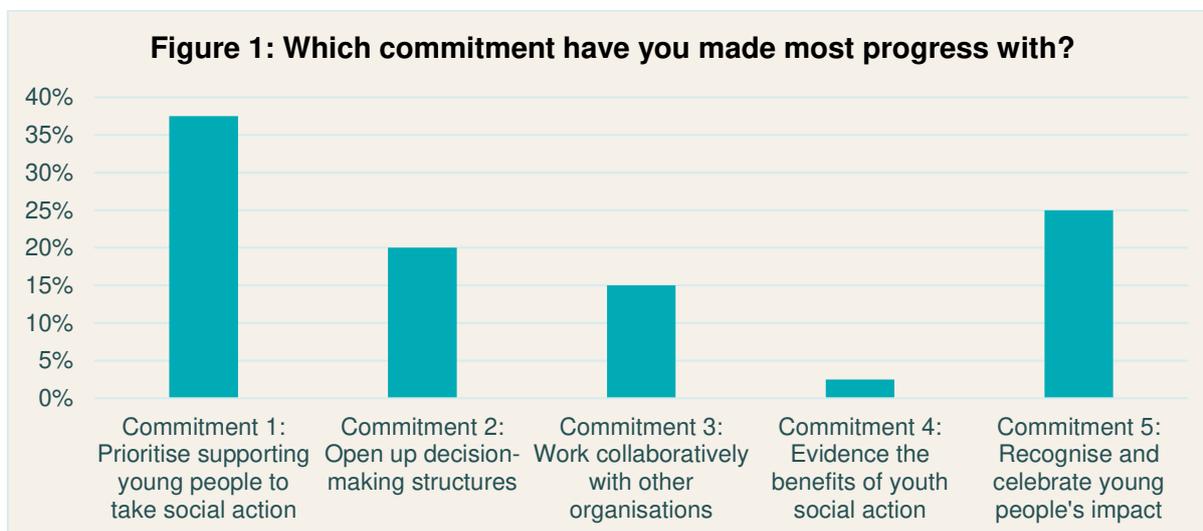
The majority of Charter signatories (82.5%) are confident or very confident in supporting young people to take action in the areas they care about:

- 27.5% of respondents are very confident
- 55% of respondents are confident
- 15% of respondents are somewhat confident
- 2.5% of respondents are neutral

Organisations with an annual income less than £500k were more likely to feel confident (67%) or very confident (33%) in supporting young people to take action than larger organisations (those with an annual income of over £500k), for whom responses were more mixed (45% confident, 27% very confident).

2.2 Progress with commitments

Organisations have made most progress with commitment 1: Prioritise supporting young people to take social action, followed by commitment 5: Recognise and celebrate young people’s impact (see Figure 1).



This pattern was echoed in conversations with young people during Young Assessor and case study fieldwork:

'I would describe [organisation] as conscious – they are really trying to become aware of who they're impacting and who they're trying to reach based on what the world is looking like and who is around them. This makes me feel more comfortable and safe in this space as there is an actual effort made to be aware and conscious.' (Young Assessor)

'I also feel equal to the people, it doesn't feel like it is patronising just because I am a young person. There is no divide in that way. I feel very much like I have a valid voice in what I do.' (Young person)

Examples of progress with commitment 1: Prioritise supporting young people to take social action (YSA)

- **Delivery of youth social action opportunities:**
 - A mental health ambassador training scheme in partnership with a youth council.
 - Working with young people to create an awareness-raising campaign and magazine on sexual harassment.
 - Supporting young people to produce their own TikTok campaign about violence against women and girls.
 - Regular opportunities for young people to engage: *'dedicated content and opportunities'*.
 - Setting up a Change Makers Volunteer programme to empower young volunteers to identify the barriers and needs of young people, and support them to take action.
- **Consulting young people about their needs and preferences** for engaging in youth social action:
 - *'Young people working with other young people to get ideas and views on what a Youth Centre could look like'*.
 - A series of internal meetings (including working with an #iwill ambassador) to discuss how to structure internships and work experience schemes for 2023.
- **Increasing resource/capacity** to allow for more delivery.
- **Reviewing the definition of youth social action** to ensure approaches and opportunities for young people remain relevant, meaningful and accessible.
- **Widening engagement:** *'we had amazing input from a group of young people from x which is a deprived community in x who had been involved in gangs and knife crimes, but we nearly didn't get them, as it's very difficult to encourage them to come along. I guess we're always mindful that we're hearing voices but not from all of them'*.

Examples of progress with commitment 2: Open up decision-making structures

- **Prioritising youth voice** has included youth forums, committees and boards:
 - Leading the development of a Young Carers National Voice and supporting young carers to be part of a campaign for young people to be recognised in the Health and Care Act (including speaking at the House of Lords): *'it was a collaborative approach working with local MPs and other young carers services'*.
 - Quarterly youth voice participation meetings run and led by young people (from voluntary sector and council young people's groups). These meetings are attended by councillors, who get to hear the views of young people on issues that are important to them.
 - Setting up sub-committees with young people to *'ensure they are part of the decision-making process within all our workstreams'*.
- **Sustaining engagement:** *'We've had some brilliant young people join us for the summer school and some of them have actually returned to us as members of our team'*.

Examples of progress with commitment 3: Work collaboratively with other organisations

- **Collaborating with local organisations:** Partnering with local voluntary organisations, statutory partners and young people to create their own version of Children's Services' 'Extra Familial Harm Strategy' – <https://startingpoint.org.uk/uncategorized/the-young-voices-project/>
- **Young Ambassadors from schools in Ipswich are leading the Social Mobility Alliance in Ipswich.** They are collaborating with local schools, health infrastructure organisations and universities to lead and design what the priorities should be.
- **Leading the development of a Young Carers National Voice**, working with local MPs and other young carers' services. Young carers campaigned to be recognised in the Health and Care Act – including speaking at the House of Lords.
- **Working with the National Children's Bureau** to ask whether children felt that learning about loss and bereavement should be included in the curriculum. Through a co-design process, this organisation was able to get young people's voices heard and included in a policy paper recommending change.
- **Partnering with schools and youth organisations** to co-create education projects around food waste and climate change.

Examples of progress with commitment 4: Evidence the benefits of youth social action

- **Staying in contact:** Developing processes for staying in touch with young people to hear about their next steps:
 - *'[Organisation] works with the #iwill partnership to try to establish a long-term dedicated resource for keeping in contact with the young people as contact can be hard to maintain whilst balancing other operational commitments'.*
 - *'It is about having that close relationship with young people we work with so we can follow that story even after they have moved away from Edinburgh and no longer work with us'.*
- **Personal stories from young people to showcase their YSA:** *'Let the young people be your evidence – personal stories are far more interesting and engaging than facts and figures' (Young Assessor reflecting on an interview with a signatory).*

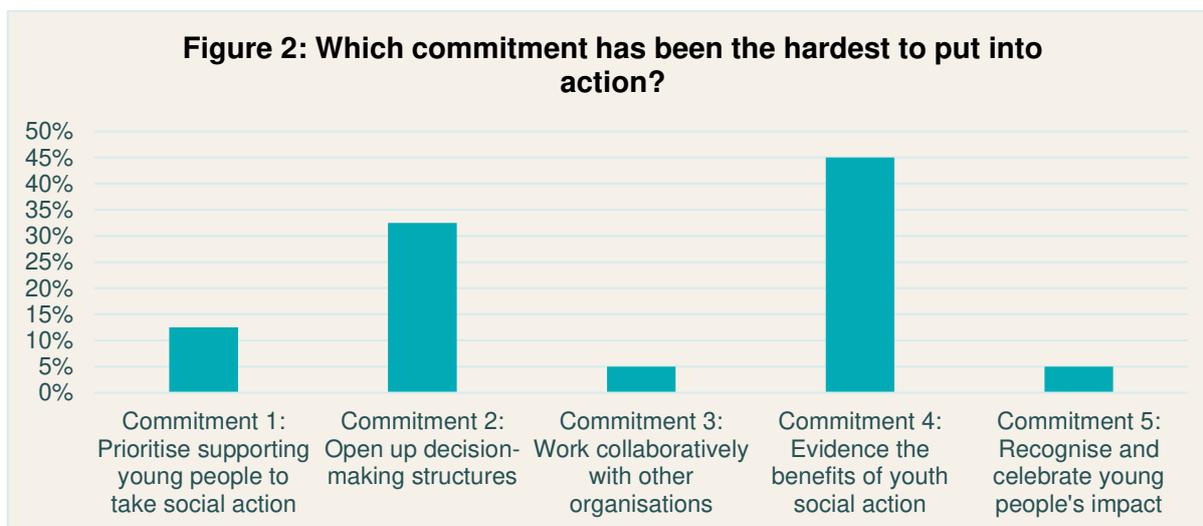
Examples of progress with commitment 5: Recognise and celebrate young people's impact

- **Awards ceremonies,** for example a 'Summer Celebration' event to showcase the different ways Young Ambassadors have provided support and the impact of their involvement.
- **Personalised letters for young people** to demonstrate the impact they had had – one organisation shared what they had noticed about the young person's growth and skill development: *'It was an opportunity to recap on everything they had achieved in an informal setting. Showcasing the event in our newsletter also lets others know what difference young people's involvement is having'.*
- **Celebrating winning awards:** One organisation's Youth Panel has been voted into the Shaw Trust Disability Power 100.
- **Feedback and recognition:** One organisation described how they *'continually reward our young people for their personal progress and the effort they have made within the company. This will be through prize draws, manager recognition, paid bonuses and gifts'.*
- **Harnessing social media:** *'Our social channels are a constant inspirational stream of the great things our young people are achieving'.*

2.3 Commitments where progress has been harder

While there is clear evidence of signatories progressing the commitments, we also heard about challenges. Organisations in the survey said time and internal capacity (40%) and funding (20%) were the main barriers to implementing their Charter commitments. Other barriers included staff turnover (10%) and not enough young people engaging with them (7.5%).

The survey revealed that Charter signatories have made the least progress with commitment 4: Evidence the benefits of youth social action (45%) and commitment 2: Open up decision-making structures (30.5%). Below we outline further details on the challenges of progressing these commitments and commitment 5, where signatories shared challenges despite it being an area of progress (see Section 2.4).



Challenges of evidencing the benefits of youth social action

The Young Assessor fieldwork uncovered three reasons why organisations find commitment 4 hard to implement:

- Limited time, resource, expertise and staffing capacity to track the benefits of youth social action and demonstrate impact: *'we're still on a journey to find the best way to approach our monitoring and evaluation'*.
- Lack of *'direct access'* to data for evidencing impact, for example, challenges evidencing the impact of a campaign, or evidencing longer-term impact on young people: *'We only work with young people for a short time, and so we've struggled to find ways to measure meaningful impact after they have left us'; 'being one step removed from the results of any action so the measurement of the impact is very difficult'*.
- Lack of funding for research/monitoring.

Challenges of opening up decision-making structures

Organisations have found it easier to open up decision-making within projects than organisationally: *'it's part of the DNA of doing good youth work – speaking and listening to young people and using their views to develop and guide a project'*.

Challenges of applying this ethos to organisational governance include uncertainty about how to ensure representation from a diverse range of backgrounds and the need to make governance processes more accessible and welcoming:

'It isn't as easy as just setting up a youth board or getting a young person or two on your board. To be truly representative of young people from all backgrounds and to constantly reflect the changing nature of society in our governance is hard. Governance can be stuffy, exclusive and in a different language. So, the key is how to shift culture to make things young people friendly and a place that they will get something out of.' (Charter signatory)

'There are decisions made all the time in the organisation, so I think we've struggled with integrating it with those day-to-day.' (Charter signatory)

One organisation working to diversify the membership of their advisory groups and involve more young people has found outreach and partnership working is key:

'We pledge to continue to deepen our efforts to ensure our widening-access internship in particular is truly accessible and promoted to people from backgrounds who are often less able to obtain vital opportunities like this to kickstart their careers.' (Charter signatory)

Challenges of celebrating and evidencing young people's impact

Carving out time to step back and celebrate young people's impact is an ongoing challenge, particularly for smaller organisations. Many found it hard to step back from immediate delivery needs and day-to-day services, often providing a lifeline for young people, to prioritise celebration and evidence:

'The impact is there and we know they are having an impact, but we need to create the time to step back, record the impact and celebrate the young people.' (Charter signatory)

Another signatory – an organisation with an annual income of under £500k – echoed this challenge as a small team with limited resources and capacity:

'We are very good at being present for young people, good at linking them in with opportunities that will benefit them but celebrating them is slightly different, and we haven't absolutely hit the mark due to capacity.' (Charter signatory)

In the survey, there was a slight variation between youth and non-youth focused organisations' responses to commitment 4 (Evidence the benefits of youth social action) – 35.5% of youth focused organisations found commitment 4 the hardest commitment to put into action, compared to 78% of non-youth focused organisations who struggled with this commitment.

2.4 Resources and support needs

We asked signatories what support and resources would help their organisation make further progress with the commitments:

- 41% of survey respondents said: an 'impact tool' for self-assessment
- 20% said: examples of good practice
- 15% said: peer learning opportunities
- 13% said: annual visits from trained #iwill ambassadors for sounding board conversations and advice

We did not see a great deal of difference between youth and non-youth focused organisations or sectors in terms of support needs.² However, there was some variation based on organisational income:

- Smaller organisations (annual income of under £250k) are more likely to want peer learning opportunities (38%) and annual visits from #iwill ambassadors (38%).³
- Larger organisations (annual income above £250k) were most keen for an impact tool (12.5% of organisations with an annual income under £250k selected an impact tool, compared to 55% of organisations with an annual income over £250k who selected an impact tool).

Other support needs included funding and financial assistance to help support their work with young people and support to collaborate with other local organisations. Many signatories are balancing ambitions for youth leadership alongside limited budgets. Organisations shared concerns about the sustainability of youth leadership development work when they are under-resourced to hire a venue, cover transport costs or compensate for staff time:

'We are proactively trying to have younger people on our governing bodies but it can be challenging as a member of staff needs to accompany them to the meeting and support them to feel empowered to contribute. Within the current context of tight school budgets, this can squeeze already stretched staff and needs to be balanced with our existing commitments as a mainstream education provider.' (Charter signatory)

There isn't a magic bullet to overcome these constraints. Organisations recognised the value of passionate people, determined to champion young people, who help to ease the challenge by going above and beyond. However, this needs to be handled with care to avoid overwhelm and burnout.

2.5 Tips and learning for others

Signatories have shared tips and learning for others looking to get started with youth social action and the Power of Youth Charter, as well as tips for refining practice.

² There was a slight difference in appetite for sharing examples of good practice: 16% of youth focused organisations would like to see examples of practice, compared to 33% of non-youth focused organisations.

³ The figure for larger organisations was 7% interested in peer learning and 7% interested in annual visits from ambassadors.

Tips if you're getting started with youth social action

- **Look at what you're already doing:** See where you can build and grow opportunities for young people. Don't be intimidated by some of the language around youth social action – it could be what you are already doing.
- **Be open-minded and go where there's appetite:** Let yourself be surprised by who might want to do social action (or who might not). It is not for everybody, don't force it – let them come to it in their own time.
- **Offer a range of opportunities** which allow young people to take part in as little or as much as they are able. People can sometimes forget that young people are busy people.
- **Don't expect young people to come to you:** Try to arrange to meet young people in places where they already meet or are connected with. Their need to feel psychologically safe in familiar environments cannot be underestimated.
- **Join the Volunteering Matters Young Ambassador programme:** Working with a mentor can help young people gain confidence, bravery and widen their outlook.
- **Always feedback to young people:** Even if you have no further news, go back and say, *'I have no further updates but I haven't forgotten about what you said'*.
- **Demonstrate the benefits and outcomes:** Young people's main motivation is wanting to make a difference, so share progress/change that's resulted from their work.
- **Recognise support needs and respect limitations:** If you want to take young people outside of their comfort zone and into youth leadership and activist roles, you have to build trust and tailor support for them. They need structure in place to understand the decisions they're contributing to and develop the skills and confidence they need to participate. Sometimes we can throw people in the deep end without any structure in place and it can put young people off.

Tips for refining & strengthening practice

- **Embedding a culture shift:** Work on creating a culture that believes services are better when you work in partnership with people by talking about – and getting young people to talk about – how youth voice and involvement is making a difference.
- **Build long-term relationships:** Working with young people requires skills, patience and trust. Organisations need to maintain a level of flexibility and ensure young people and their needs remain at the heart of their projects.
- **Keep working at how you involve young people in decision-making:** You may never get it right – but maybe that's the point – to keep evolving and developing how you do this all the time.
- **Embedding youth voice throughout the organisation:** Support from senior leadership really does help. Having young people talking at events about the benefits and outcomes is also really important. It's often about sowing seeds and helping to embed cultures.

Appendix one: Charter signatories' stories

'Nothing about us without us!': Participation and collaboration in healthcare at Solent NHS Trust

Who we are: Solent NHS Trust provides community and mental health services in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Our work: Solent NHS Trust has been on a journey to involve more young people in the design and delivery of services. Staff are committed to creating a range of opportunities which involve children and young people *'not just as beneficiaries, but as key stakeholders of their health service'*.

Our Power of Youth journey so far – key milestones

Solent NHS signed up to the Charter in 2022 to make a public pledge and demonstrate commitment to children and young people's participation.

The Charter provides another way of signing up to something we believe in. It holds us to account for what we said we would do and helps us be specific about what we are going to do to grow the power of youth within our organisation. Key to this work is embedding a culture where young people have more voice and influence, and co-produce healthcare.

A key milestone has been the recent recruitment of three new 'Participation Facilitators' – a completely new role – aimed at supporting staff in clinical teams to involve communities and grow opportunities for young people to get involved.

Where we've had success

Community engagement

Working closely with young people requires skill, continuity and time to build relationships and trust. We need to be flexible about the ways young people can make their voices heard, making sure we go to where they are without an agenda and ask what's most important to them. It's unrealistic to expect that people will come to you – you need to go out to communities. Solent NHS Trust takes a strengths-based approach and believes communities have knowledge about their own healthcare and the skills and ideas to improve services.

Key to this 'going out to communities' approach is building relationships with young people and then developing new projects together based on their interests and capacity.

Staff recently supported [The Agency](#), a youth social action programme to empower young people to create the change they want to see. Young people are funded to develop their ideas and present them to a panel of community experts – including staff from Solent NHS.

Plans to use creative methods like Slam Poetry will help young people to talk about difficult issues and get their voices across. Some services like Gender Clinics have 10-year waiting lists, so understanding how to make the waiting experience a little bit better is really important.

Opening up decision-making

Children and Young People Advisory Groups help improve Children and Mental Health Services (CAMHS), making them *'a bit more warm and friendly, and less like a therapy waiting room, but a safe space young people come in to'* (Youth Ambassador). Members have co-produced promotional materials, co-designed spaces like waiting rooms and given presentations showcasing their work to other teams and NHS organisations. Young people are uniquely placed to spot changes needed that clinicians and managers may not.

Youth Ambassadors also play a key role delivering training, like LGBTQ+ awareness, and have already seen changes like staff having their pronoun on their lanyard.

Young people also sit on interview panels for positions within CAMHS: *'we'll say things like what we think they would be like giving therapy'* (Youth Ambassador).

They also carry out inspections of services, reviewing what they think the service does well and where it might need to make improvements: *'our role is to look through the eyes of young people'* (Solent NHS Young Inspector). Young people can see the difference their input is making:

'It honestly gives me a lot of joy. I've made friends. And it feels good that I've made a difference. It picks me up if I know I've got interviews later and makes me feel cheerful.' (Youth Ambassador)

'It's given me confidence and I can say that so proudly being part of something good. Now I'm off to do arts awards, I work for the council, I take up volunteering opportunities. I've realised that there is so much in the world to unlock.' (Youth Ambassador)

Celebrating young people's participation

In 2022 Solent NHS held their first Summer Celebration, showcasing some of the different ways Youth Ambassadors have provided support and the impact of their involvement. The staff team also asked young people how they would like to be recognised for their involvement and they are using their ideas to shape the 2023 celebration.

Challenges we've encountered

Opening up decision-making, especially engaging people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, has been a particular challenge.

Staff and members are ambitious about diversifying the membership of Advisory Groups, as well as finding different, creative and flexible ways to involve more people. Outreach

and partnership working is key, meeting people where they are and not going in with an agenda, as often groups are keen and clear about what we could do to support them. The ambition is to get out into more schools and colleges and promote our opportunities for involvement with young people, particularly to underrepresented or silent voices.

Evidencing the benefits of working with young people is hard. We talk about benefits regularly and have developed promotional materials and a quarterly newsletter to demonstrate outcomes. In future, we may consider more structured ways of evidencing benefits, developing the approach with young people and clinicians.

What it's required to put the commitments into practice

- **Embedding youth voice at every level of the organisation:** Support from senior leadership really does help and we have ideas about bringing in teams who perhaps have not yet had the capacity to start their journey of involvement. Having young people talking at events about the benefits and outcomes is also really important. It's often about sowing seeds and helping to embed cultures. We'd like to get to a place where young people can directly hold trust board members to account.
- **More training and support for staff in clinical teams** will help embed the culture of engagement.
- **Demonstrating the benefits and outcomes** is really important because young people's main motivation is wanting to make a difference.
- **Reaching more young people** by doing things at times, and in venues that are accessible.
- **Putting a progression plan in place** with training and support for young people, as well as payment for certain roles.

Tips or advice for others getting started with youth leadership and engagement

1. Work on creating a culture that believes services are better when you work in partnership with people by talking about – and getting young people to talk about – how youth voice and involvement is making a difference.
2. Try to arrange to meet young people in places where they already meet or are connected with. Don't just set up a room somewhere and expect young people to come to you. Their need to feel psychologically safe in familiar environments cannot be underestimated.
3. Offer a range of opportunities which allow young people to take part in as little or as much as they are able. People can sometimes forget that young people are busy people.
4. Always remember to use deep listening skills when engaging with young people. They will appreciate that you genuinely care about the issues affecting them.

Always feedback to young people even if you have no further news – go back and say, *'I have no further updates, but I haven't forgotten about what you said'*.

Putting youth work at the heart of the community: Projects4Change case study

Who we are: Projects4Change started in 2018 to respond to the needs of young people in the Northeast. *'We love youth work'* and believe in its power to change young people's lives.

Our work: Projects4Change provides youth-led projects for young people, including detached youth work, group work activities, opportunities, residential, advice and information for 11–19-year-olds. Our projects help to maximise young people's potential by supporting them to direct our service to meet their needs, leading to positive outcomes and a brighter future. Our projects are for all young people but particularly address the needs and voices of under-represented and disadvantaged young people.

Our Power of Youth journey so far – key milestones

We were inspired to sign up to the Power of Youth Charter in 2020 as the commitments closely aligned with our projects and the processes we follow for youth work delivery:

'The commitments almost perfectly matched what we were doing with our projects – the commitment to young people, listening to their voice, putting them at the forefront of the work and helping to make them co-creators.'

The Charter has helped to give Projects4Change a national presence and is a quality marker for funding applications to highlight how embedded the commitments are in our work. It has also connected us to a community of like-minded people and organisations:

'The Power of Youth Charter commitments are a description of methods or processes of doing youth work and working with young people, which has been very affirming.'

Where we've had success

Supporting young people to take social action

The Change Makers Volunteer programme focuses on empowering young volunteers to identify the barriers and needs of young people, and supporting them to lead action. To do this well, we recognise the importance of educating young people on how government works and how they can influence power within existing structures.

Young people attended café sessions in Newcastle, where MPs were talking about youth issues. The young people talked about their needs and what services are missing. Some of the young people went to Parliament to share their 'Changemaker' consultation report with the Newcastle MP Chi Onwurah.

She asked a question in Parliament on youth mental health on behalf of the group about the minimum standard for mental health services within schools:

'We are all about raising the voices of young people, taking action with and for them, and opening up decision-making structures.'

Opening up decision-making structures

We always seek opportunities to link young people into decision-making structures. For example, one of our young people sat on the board of the Newcastle Youth Fund. We have a young representative on our board of trustees who was one of our Change Maker Volunteers. The Change Makers Volunteer programme consults with young people and gives feedback to the board of Trustees via the young representation. In addition, we have young people sitting on interview panels; sometimes they are the Panel! For example, young people led on recruiting an artist for a gender-based violence youth-led project:

'Projects4change creates the space where young people can talk about frustrating things, where they feel safe and what they say matters ...' (A Change Maker, 2018 batch and youth worker at Projects4Change)



Challenges we've encountered

We have found it challenging to **properly recognise and celebrate young people's impact** through our projects. We are a small project with limited resources and capacity to host award ceremonies to celebrate our young people:

'We are very good at being present for young people, good at linking them in with opportunities that will benefit them but celebrating them is slightly different, and we haven't absolutely hit the mark due to capacity.'

However, we do celebrate young people through our nurturing presence – by ensuring they are supported to get to where they want to be, can do what they want to do and that their needs are recognised and catered for. We also consult with them regularly to ensure their voices are heard and we often pay young volunteers on the Change Makers programme to show that we value their work:

'We try to invest in our young people; that is how we show we recognise them.'

Championing youth voice can also come with challenges – we have gotten into trouble due to championing 'unpopular' opinions of young people, where their views differ to those in power, i.e. local council, MPs and politicians. But it is essential to remember that people in power are in service of young people. Our role is to educate people in power and the community – including politicians and councillors – to be open-minded and listen to young people.

What is required to put the commitments into practice

Listening and facilitating change

The key is prioritising meeting the needs of young people and supporting them. The rationale for calling ourselves Projects4Change was to ensure we embed change in how we work and are open to listening and facilitating change for young people:

'Young people know that their ideas and thoughts are valued. We are here to listen to what young people want to do – no idea is a bad idea.'

'Projects4Change is very much youth-led and is particularly good at listening to what young people want and need. For example, if any project needs to happen at Projects4Change, it will mostly come from a young person or a group of young people who would have said they wanted to do that!' (A Change Maker, 2018 batch and youth worker at Projects4Change)

Our 'Counselling in Nature' project

We set up this project to respond to the social prescribing and counselling needs raised by our Change Maker volunteers. They identified challenges in accessing mental health services, such as long waitlists, counselling breaking down or not connecting with counsellors. The group made a list of what would help them in counselling, for example, counselling in a natural environment with someone who you had an established relationship with, doing animal care, hiking, etc. This formed the basis for our project.

Investing in relationships

Like many other projects, we have had difficulty recruiting staff but good youth engagement starts with a quality workforce. It comes down to investing in youth work and equipping young people to lead, getting young workers qualified, training them and giving them the skills they need to engage appropriately with others. From the Change Makers Volunteer programme, two are employed and now working with us, and one is getting a degree in youth work and is our youth worker:

'I was actually the last person in our friendship group to join Projects4Change ... and now I'm the last person to leave!' (A Change Maker, 2018 batch and youth worker at Projects4Change)

Empowering by equipping young people

We met Les through our detached youth work. He was passionate about the area and supported us to raise funds at community events. Although he was homeless, in and out of care, we brought him through the project. We looked out for opportunities for him and sent him on a year-long residential course at *The School of Adventure Leadership* in Scotland. He then returned to Projects4Change as a youth worker, working with us for 16 months inspiring local young people to access the outdoors. He now works at an outdoor facility managed by UK Youth:

'Poverty is hurting young people and robbing them of their potential and we have to ask ourselves, what are we doing about it?'

Tips or advice for others getting started with youth leadership and engagement

Put young people first!: *'Make sure that your young people always come first because there is no us without them!'*

Build long-term relationships: Working with young people requires skills, patience and trust. Organisations need to be flexible and start by putting young people and their needs at the heart of their projects.

Find support: Find allies and like-minded people who can support you. This is crucial because you cannot do this alone. The Power of Youth Charter has connected us to a community of organisations that face similar struggles and understand our challenges.



‘Let children decide what youth social action looks like’: ASSET Education case study, St Helen’s and Cliff Lane Primary Schools

Who we are: [ASSET Education](#) is a Trust of 14 primary schools in Suffolk, working together to provide high-quality education for all.

Our work: We seek to equip and empower the next generation of children to create a more compassionate, equitable and sustainable world where they personally and collectively thrive. Youth social action sits neatly within this:

‘We want children to leave our Trust feeling that they have the knowledge they need to understand the world, but also a view of the world they want it to be. We want to empower them as young activists to create that world.’

Our Power of Youth journey so far – key milestones

ASSET Education was set up in 2015 to improve primary education in Suffolk. Three Ipswich schools came together with a desire to focus on social justice and tackling inequalities. The Trust has been expanding ever since, and now includes 14 schools across Suffolk. We don’t have a single ASSET template for youth social action – we have a vision across all 14 schools. Each school has a distinct personality and meets the needs of their own communities so youth social action looks different in every single school.

Most of our youth social action work was triggered by working with a Young Ambassador from Volunteering Matters. We signed the Power of Youth Charter in June 2022 – around this time the trust also committed leadership time to the creation of the Ipswich Social Mobility Alliance. We knew young people’s voices were going to underpin any place-making work.

Where we’ve had success

Supporting young people to take social action

We equip children to leave us feeling like they can go into secondary education with a sense of how they can make positive change. Everyone has something to offer in our schools – we nurture and grow an ethos of activism. Children are empowered to be curious, headstrong, and to question *‘how do I count and what can I do?’*.

The children are instigating change in areas that are important to them. For example, children at St Helen’s set up an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion group, and Cliff Lane children set up a Young Planetarian group to focus on environmental issues. Our students stand up for what they believe in.

One pupil decided that the M&S clothes range for boys and girls was unfair – the girls’ t-shirts had ‘dream big’ logos and the boys’ t-shirts had ‘be the hero’. She moved the clothes around in store so that they reflected the kind of world she wants to see.

Working collaboratively to foster inclusion

St Helen's children worked with Gecko Theatre Group which uses movement and music to help people tell their stories. Gecko worked with a group of children from the Roma population across six local schools to create a physical theatre production based on the children's experience in Ipswich. The group performed at Dance East (another partner organisation), helping to show that the children are valued here and are a celebrated part of our community.

We also collaborated with Volunteering Matters to set-up the Wolf Leaders programme to tackle racism and discrimination. Gecko worked with our children to develop a 'Tell Your Story' project: *'we are one group and we all come from different backgrounds and with different stories, but we've all come to this one place – this Ipswich'*.

Developing a collective place-based vision

Young Ambassadors from ASSET schools are leading the Social Mobility Alliance in Ipswich working with other local schools, health infrastructure organisations and universities, leading and designing what the priorities should be. This project showcases our commitment to a place-based approach to youth leadership.



Underpinning this is the importance of truly listening to young people and contextualising practice across the 14 schools. **Youth social action is in our DNA, but each school knows how best to empower their own children.** This approach allows each school to meet their communities' needs whilst supporting shared vision.

Challenges we've encountered

It's resource intensive to work in this way

Bringing together children from 14 different schools across Suffolk for a pupil parliament advisory board brings with it financial constraints that are often less visible in discussions about what it takes to do this work. Face-to-face is our preference, but this requires staff time, a venue and transport.

We are proactively trying to have younger people on our governing bodies but it can be challenging as a member of staff needs to accompany them to the meeting and support them to feel empowered to contribute. Within the current context of tight school budgets, this can squeeze already stretched staff and needs to be balanced with our existing commitments as a mainstream education provider.

Although there isn't a magic bullet to overcome these constraints, goodwill (used carefully!) can ease this challenge – passionate people that are dedicated and determined often go above and beyond.

Culture shifts in secondary schools

ASSET primary schools are modelling a new culture within mainstream education – one that celebrates social action and activism. However, creating young activists can be challenging for the transition to secondary schools – if their culture isn't underpinned by this approach it risks halting the progress young people are making. We know some of our children have had to adapt their expectations of adults sharing power when they make this transition.

What is required to put the commitments into practice

Recognise support needs and respect limitations: If you truly want to empower children, asking what they want to do isn't enough. If you want to take primary school children outside of their comfort zone and into youth leadership and activist roles, you have to build trust and tailor support for them. They need structure in place to understand the decisions they're contributing to and develop the skills and confidence they need to participate. Sometimes we can throw people in the deep end without any structure in place and it can put young people off.

Contextualise the commitments: We've avoided being prescriptive. Know your community and your school and contextualise the commitments.

Be ready to act on decisions: If you ask children what they think and then don't act on it, you do more damage than if you never asked in the first place. Opening up decision-making structures needs to be followed up with action. Our primary schools have systems in place to listen to young people and then act. Showing evidence of this is powerful for young people to see.

Staff time and goodwill: You need a team of people who are passionate about putting young people at the heart of decisions. But this does also need to be adequately resourced.

Tips or advice for others getting started with youth leadership/engagement

- Start by making YSA a priority – you can't make space for this work unless it takes priority, especially within mainstream education.
- Work with a Young Ambassador – we'd recommend that all schools join the Volunteering Matters Young Ambassador programme. A group of our pupils worked with a mentor (from Volunteering Matters) and have gained confidence and bravery. It's widened their outlook about what's possible and has cemented this ethos throughout our schools.



Living the values of the Charter through all our work across the community: County in the Community case study

- **Who we are:** County in the Community
- **Our work:** County in the Community was set up when Newport County AFC got promoted into the football league in 2013 and became a registered charity in 2015. Using the power of sport, education and training, we aim to change lives, inspire physical activity, improve health/wellbeing and build greater community cohesion. We engage with all members of the community in southeast Wales – regardless of age, ethnicity, physical ability or economic status.

What the Power of Youth Charter means to us

As a community-focused organisation, we at County in the Community (CITC) have always been passionate about empowering young people. Our journey with the Power of Youth Charter began through our work with the Premier League Kicks programme when we learnt about the #iwill campaign and then signed up to the Charter.

Young people in Newport face all sorts of big issues in their lives and we've always strived to provide a safe, consistent space for them – somewhere away from the streets where they are welcome, can play sport and be listened to. The Power of Youth Charter resonates with everything we do.

Our work with young people is proper community work. It is about supporting young people to make positive decisions and take more positive paths in their lives. We provide positive role models in a world where young people get tarnished with the same brush, so we try to help them escape that. We want to be a safe space for them and provide continuity in their lives. We will always turn up, we will always be on time to support them every week.

For us, the Charter outlines ways of working that we were doing anyway, part of our bread and butter. So we don't look at it every week but it gives us focus every year with #iwill week – that's a chance to reflect on our work and try to celebrate, promote and give feedback to the young people on their achievements. It is a nice prompt to stand back and reflect.

The Charter commitments are universal for us, it's not just about young people as we are open to the whole community – if you take the word 'young' out of the Charter – it is what we are trying to do with everything we do from cradle to grave.

Where we've had success

We've seen great success in several areas, particularly in being as inclusive as possible. The first three commitments in the Charter are all underpinned by making your work as inclusive and open as possible. We welcome anyone who wants to get involved, regardless of age or other potential barriers. We will always say yes and let people from the community join in activities if they turn up.

We are living proof of how important it is to listen to young people and let them into the decisions you make as an organisation. It would be easy for us to just stick to offering work based around football, we were born out of a football club after all. We listen to what young people want in the sessions, including why some of their friends don't want to come along, and that has led to the variety of activities we now offer – be that basketball, dodgeball or adding music to sport sessions to get friends who are not sporty to come along and be safe.

The Charter is also a really good framework for us for putting funding bids together or to help us frame reports back to funders – the commitments are a good starting place to think through what we want to achieve with a project and help us reflect on what we have achieved.

Challenges we've encountered

One key challenge is trying to get young people to take the step from sport and being in a safe place off the street to social action.

We are a place where any young person can come and get involved; a place for them to get off the street and a place to feel welcomed. It can be a big leap to ask them to do some social action or push it on them. Youth work always has to be voluntary and for many young people, they can see 'social action' as eating into their sports time.

So, we've had to innovate to make it more appealing. For example, after a football session we added on 40 minutes of deeper time to sit down, have conversations, eat pizzas and homemade mutton curry. Through this they start to understand their wider connections to the community, explore some of the problems and maybe think how they could volunteer to improve it.

If you want to do this work well, you need to be honest and realise that not all young people will want to get involved in social action stuff and that's OK. For some it will always just be about sport; whilst others will want to do more in their community.

Recognising and celebrating young people's impact can be hard to find time for when we are so busy in providing the day-to-day services young people need so desperately. The impact is there, but we need to create the time to step back, record the impact and celebrate the young people.

Tips or advice for others getting started with youth leadership/engagement

We believe that the Power of Youth Charter and its commitments underpin all of our work across the community here in Newport. But if you are thinking of getting involved in #iwill and signing up to the Power of Youth Charter, here are a few tips on how to get started:

- All the commitments and principles are transferable – they are not just about young people, so reflect on and learn from work you might be doing with other groups.
- Let yourself be surprised by who might want to do social action (or who might not). It is not for everybody, don't force it – let them come to it in their own time.
- Use #iwill week as an opportunity to celebrate – a chance to stand back and realise what young people have done; let them get on your social media and share this – we can all celebrate our young people more often.
- Join the video call that #iwill offer. We loved the one on youth forums. You can learn lots from the work other youth organisations are doing – it gives you confidence to try new ideas if you know others have tried it before.
- Don't be intimidated by some of the language around youth social action – it is probably what you are doing anyway as part of your bread and butter work.

