

the state of the service nation youth social action in the uk

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THE STATE OF THE SERVICE NATION: YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION IN THE UK

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PARTNERS CREDITS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The concept of ‘youth social action’ is relatively new and its precise definition varies. At its core, youth social action entails ‘a practical action in the service of others’ that provides clear benefits to the individuals taking part as well as the community. Youth social action also tends to be youth-led, process-driven, activist in nature, and group-based.
- Data pertaining to the number of young people taking part in social action projects, and the impact that has, is limited. The majority of data requires analysis of ‘youth volunteering’ as the closest proxy.
- The most recent data available (2012-2013) shows that under a third (29 per cent) of those aged 16 to 24 in England and Wales are involved in some form of regular (monthly), *formal* volunteering. Formal volunteering tends to be defined as ‘giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment’. Approximately 40 per cent take part in less frequent, formal volunteering at least once a year.
- Rates of *informal* volunteering among young people tend to be higher. Informal volunteering is defined as ‘giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives’. In the most recent figures from 2012, 38 per cent reported taking part in informal volunteering in the previous month, and 65 per cent at least once in the previous year.
- When including those engaged in less regular and informal forms of volunteering, three quarters of 16 to 24 year olds in the UK report engaging in some type of volunteering.
- UK participation rates in regular and formal youth volunteering are comparable to those in the United States and Australia, but much lower than they are in Canada, where 58 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 are regular formal volunteers.

- Rates of engagement in youth voluntary activity vary by ethnicity, gender, age, region and education and income levels.
 - People with higher education and income levels are more likely to volunteer, but research suggests there may be increased levels of certain types of voluntary activity among some marginalised youth groups.
 - Girls and young women only slightly outnumber boys and young men overall, but gender does have an impact on the type of activities undertaken.
 - Those on the younger end of the age bracket are more engaged than those on the older end.
 - Participation rates are highest in Wales and lowest in the North West and London.
- The types of formal volunteering activities that are the most common among young people include organising and helping run events as well as raising money. Campaigning and secretarial, clerical or admin work are the least popular types of voluntary activity. Young people under 16 are most drawn towards activities in the fields of sports and exercise, children, and hobbies/arts, while activities connected to religion or politics are unpopular.
- While volunteers are seen by a majority of young people as 'caring', a significant minority have negative associations with volunteers, who they perceive as 'boring', 'not cool' and as 'having nothing better to do'. These views are more common among disaffected, hard to reach and marginalised youths.
- The term 'social action' might suffer less from negative and stereotypical connotations. When asked about specific activities rather than 'volunteering' as a whole, young people's interest in voluntary action turns out to far exceed current rates of participation, across all gender, ethnic and socio-economic groups. This was particularly true among the youngest in the group compared to those aged in their mid-teens. This suggests there are gains to be made in trying to get more involved in

social action more regularly and at a younger age.

- Evidence from academic research and programme impact evaluations suggests that participation in practical social action activities is positively correlated with meta-cognitive skills, character capabilities, emotional wellbeing, educational attainment, school engagement, as well as other dimensions of active citizenship like formal political engagement, social cohesion, and lower crime and anti-social behaviour.
- International case studies show that youth social action activity achieves positive outcomes in young people's attitudes and understanding of civic participation, community engagement and service. Participants also reported growth in self-confidence, self-worth, and work- and life-skills. In the only school-based programme, Free the Children, teachers and participants reported that their educational aspirations were significantly influenced by social action work.
- Young people are attracted to social action by a combination of altruistic and self-interested reasons, with self-interested and instrumental motivations such as learning new skills, good for career, and making new friends being cited by them as important far more than any other age group.
- Independence and control over the voluntary activity seems especially important, although some are sceptical about the pressures of leadership and too much responsibility. Research suggests a need for the right balance of practical and emotional support from adults in youth social action projects, especially when participants are younger.
- Lack of time, information, awareness, confidence, and negative peer pressure are among the most cited barriers to involvement. Word of mouth is the main route into volunteering and social action for young people, and young people have a stronger preference for face-to-face methods of recruitment than older age groups.

- The latest census figures show that there are approximately 8,400,000 young people between the ages of 10 and 20 in the UK.¹ On the basis of the self-reported formal volunteering figures, we estimate that between 25 and 30 per cent are currently involved in social action activities of some description. This means that approximately 1.7 million more young people need to get involved in voluntary action in order to reach the target goal of getting half of all 10 to 20 year olds involved in youth social action.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents an overview of existing research into youth ‘social action’ activities in the UK. The research is in support of the Cabinet Office and the Prince of Wales’ campaign to double the number of young people between the ages of 10 and 20 years old in Britain taking part in ‘social action’ projects.

The latest census figures show that there are a total of 8,423,337 young people between the ages of 10 and 20 in the UK.² On the basis of the self-reported regular formal volunteering figures discussed in detail below, we estimate that about 30 per cent of these 8.5 million are currently involved in social action activities of some description. This would mean that approximately 1.7 million more young people need to get involved in voluntary action in order to reach the target goal of getting half of all 10 to 20 year olds involved in youth social action.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the following:

- What we mean by social action
- What we know about how many young people already take part in social action
- What organisations are delivering youth social action projects, and what kinds of activities are included
- What are the impacts of youth social action on the young people taking part and the communities where their activities take place
- What Britain can learn from other countries and programmes abroad about delivering high quality social action projects and increasing the number of young people taking part.

Our findings are based on publicly available surveys run by the government, polling companies, academics and organisations that provide volunteering and/or social action type projects for young people. The report does not include data that is private or proprietary to organisations delivering social action projects. While we include data from other countries – most notably the US,

Canada and Australia – our research pertains primarily to the UK.

Defining youth social action

The Cabinet Office defines social action as ‘a practical action in the service of others’. This simple and inclusive definition includes both ‘formal’ volunteering, with an organisation, and informal forms of volunteering, either alone or with others.³ While academics and practitioners disagree about the precise definition of ‘social action’ activities, there are points of common agreement about what social action entails.

The most important aspect of youth ‘social action’ is the *double benefit principle*. In order for an activity to qualify as social action, it must benefit both the wider community as well as the young people taking part. Research from Demos and others suggests that these benefits are often mutually reinforcing.⁴ However, as we highlight below, there are limitations to the evidence around the impact of social action type activities, particularly with respect to benefits for the community.

Another key component of youth social action is that it should be led, directed and designed by young people themselves. The Institute for Volunteering Research argues the aims of ‘youth social action’ projects are to instil a culture of participation, a sense of agency among young people, as well as ownership of social problems that impact our community.⁵ However, it is also recognised that facilitation and practical and emotional support from adults is key to the success of youth social action projects. This is especially true when the participants are younger.

Additional aspects of social action that are discussed in the literature include the need for projects to be: activist in nature; regular or sustainable rather than one-off; embedded in young people’s lives at school or in their communities; and take the form of group-based activities where possible.

In terms of the relationship between ‘social action’, ‘volunteering’ and ‘service learning’, it has been argued that ‘social action goes

beyond volunteering or service learning...[and] is a multi-step process in which youth address an issue they care about, learn about it and potential solutions to solve it, then take action to create positive changes on the issue.⁶

The types of activities that can be described as ‘social action’ are incredibly diverse. They can include everything from the Girl Guides and The Scouts – particularly for younger age groups within the 10 to 20 year old range – to less formal and ad hoc forms of mentoring and activities taking place in schools, and also to longer, more structured programmes that are available for older teenagers. These include the National Citizen Service and City Year in the UK, and Americorps in the US. The types of activities that exist, and at what ages young people can take part in them, is discussed in further detail below.

With respect to evidence about the numbers of young people taking part in social action, and the impact that it has, the majority of data that exists relates to young people’s ‘volunteering’. This is because the term ‘social action’ is relatively new and the definition remains somewhat contested. Moreover, measurements of the impact of volunteering are primarily based on self-reporting from the participants themselves. There are very few longitudinal studies or objective measures that demonstrate the impact of volunteering or social action on either the young people taking part, nor the community or beneficiary of the volunteering / social action project in the UK.

I. Youth volunteering in Britain in the 21st century

Almost all available data on youth volunteering levels are based on self-report surveys. Given their different understandings of what voluntary action entails, as well as the different way survey questions about volunteering are phrased, reported participation rates can vary, and might not always be fully reflective of the total number of young people engaged in some form or other of social action and volunteering.

The most robust and valuable source of evidence in the UK comes from the UK Citizenship Survey, which ran from 2001 to 2010-11. After this survey ended the scaled-back Community Life Survey was launched and managed by the Cabinet Office.⁷ The Citizenship Survey was conducted biannually and interviewed nearly 10,000 people with a booster survey for ethnic minorities reaching almost a further 7,000. The new Community Life Survey has a smaller sample size that will reach approximately 7,000.⁸

Other notable sources for youth volunteering figures in the UK include: a 2009 Ipsos MORI one-off survey of 1,997 16 to 25 year olds in England commissioned by vInspired, the National Volunteering Service; the 2010 Ipsos MORI Young People Omnibus survey of 2,756 11 to 16 year olds across England and Wales; and the 2007 Helping Out survey commissioned by the Cabinet Office and undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research and the National Centre for Social Research with a total sample size of 2,156.

The most recent data available, collected in the second half of 2012 and early 2013, found that under a third (29 per cent) of young people aged 16 to 24 in England had been involved in some form of formal volunteering over the previous month. Formal volunteering is defined by the Survey as ‘giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment’.⁹

As seen in Figure 1 below, this percentage has remained relatively stable over the last decade: with the highest peaks coming in at 29 per cent in 2012 and in 2005. Similar figures are found in Scotland, where around 30 per cent of young people formally volunteered at regular intervals over the course of the previous year during 2011. The rate in Scotland has been relatively constant since 2007 and fell to its lowest level in 2009 at 28 per cent.¹⁰

As table 1 below shows, young people in England are neither the least nor the most likely to engage in regular volunteering compared to other age groups.¹¹ However, young people do spend the second highest number of hours on average volunteering of all age groups just behind those over 65: around 13.5 hours per month.¹²

Table 1: Regular formal volunteering in England in 2012 by age group

Age	Formal Volunteering Rate (%)
16-25	29
26-34	25
35-49	31
50-64	30
65-74	30
75 and above	28

The Community Life Survey, August 2012 to January 2013

The August 2012 – January 2013 Community Life Survey results also find that 44 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds have volunteered at least once in the previous year, a rate that has remained relatively constant since 2001 at around 40 per cent.¹³

Other surveys have found significantly different results. The 2007 Helping Out Survey conducted by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR), which used the exactly the same definition of formal volunteering as the Citizenship Survey, found that 57 per cent of young people (16-24) formally volunteered in some way over the previous year, 43 per cent of whom were regular volunteers while 13 per cent were occasional volunteers.¹⁴

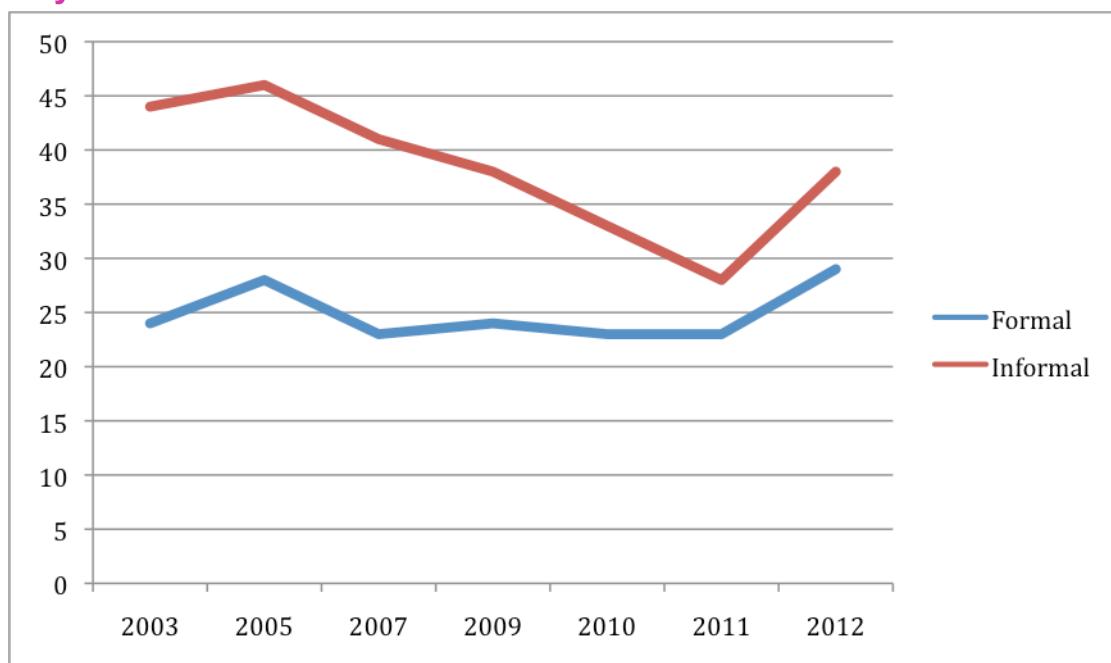
Informal volunteering

As might be expected, larger proportions of the youth population are involved in *informal* than in formal volunteering. The Citizenship Survey defines informal volunteering as ‘giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives’, including activities such as offering advice, checking-up on someone, or even baby-sitting.¹⁵ According to the Community Life survey results, from August 2012 to January 2013, the rate of informal monthly volunteering for young people (16 to 25) in England was 38 per

cent, while 65 per cent of the same age group took part in informal volunteering at least once over the previous year.

As Figure 1 below demonstrates, the percentage of young people taking part in informal volunteering has decreased substantially between 2005 and 2011, but appears to be on the rise again.

Figure 1: Rates of formal and informal volunteering in the previous month for individuals in England and Wales aged 16-24 years.¹⁶



Combining the numbers of young people who participate in any type of volunteering (either formal or informal) at least once a year, recent surveys suggest that approximately three quarters of young people take part in some voluntary activity.¹⁷

The research also suggests that youth volunteering is overwhelmingly part time. The 2009 Ipsos MORI survey of 16 to 25 year olds found that only three per cent were working as a full time volunteer at the time of the interview, while eight per cent had done so in the past.¹⁸

International Comparisons

Although available figures on youth volunteering vary per country in terms of the definition of formal volunteering used and the

precise age group, the UK participation rate in regular formal youth volunteering seems comparable to that in other European countries, the United States and Australia, but much lower than it is in Canada.

A special 2011 Eurobarometer survey found that, across all 27 European Union member states, 26 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds were engaged in organised voluntary activity, although there is some significant variety in individual countries: in Slovenia, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands close to 40 per cent of young people volunteer.¹⁹

In the United States the regular formal volunteering for 16 to 24 year olds was just 23 per cent in 2012, while the rate for just those between 16 and 19 was slightly higher at around 27 per cent.²⁰ In Australia 27 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds were involved in regular formal volunteering in 2010.²¹ By contrast, the regular volunteering rate in Canada for the 15 to 24 group was 58 per cent in 2011, making young Canadians the age group with the highest rate of volunteering.²²

The demographics of youth volunteering

Rates of youth volunteering vary by age, gender, ethnicity, and education and income levels.

According to a 2009 evidence review by the Institute for Volunteering Research, those on the younger end of the 16 to 24 age bracket (16 to 19) tend to volunteer more than those 20 and over both formally and informally, and at both regular and irregular intervals.²³

Though less conclusive, there are some indications that girls and young women overall are more involved in volunteering than boys and young men. However, gender does appear to have a clear impact of the type of activity in which young people are involved, with boys more likely to be involved with sport type voluntary activities and girls outnumbering boys in social service type activities.²⁴

Data from the 2005 Citizenship Survey shows that British White and British Black 16 to 24 year-olds had higher rates of both formal and informal volunteering than their Asian peers. Rates of younger white and black volunteers were, respectively, 48 and 47 per cent for informal and 30 and 29 per cent for formal volunteering. This compared to 38 per cent of Asian 16 to 24 year olds who reported volunteering informally at least once in the previous month and 25 per cent who volunteered formally at least once in the previous month.²⁵

Evidence also suggests the young people with higher education and income levels are more likely to volunteer. However, some researchers have found that there may actually be increased levels of certain types of voluntary and community work among some marginalised youth groups.²⁶ For example, young ex-offenders, young people who have been homeless, have disabilities or identify as LGBTQ have been found to be disproportionately active in voluntary activity in comparison to their relative proportion of representation in the population. 2010 research from v, an organisation that specifically targets young volunteers, found that ethnic minorities were also disproportionately represented in its programmes with BME volunteers making up 13 per cent of participants while only representing 4 per cent of the 2001 census population.²⁷ Although there is not conclusive data and the Citizenship Survey sample size of ethnic minorities is too small for strong comparisons to be made, evidence does suggest that it is possible to engage a high proportion of marginalised youth through social action.

Most common volunteering activities

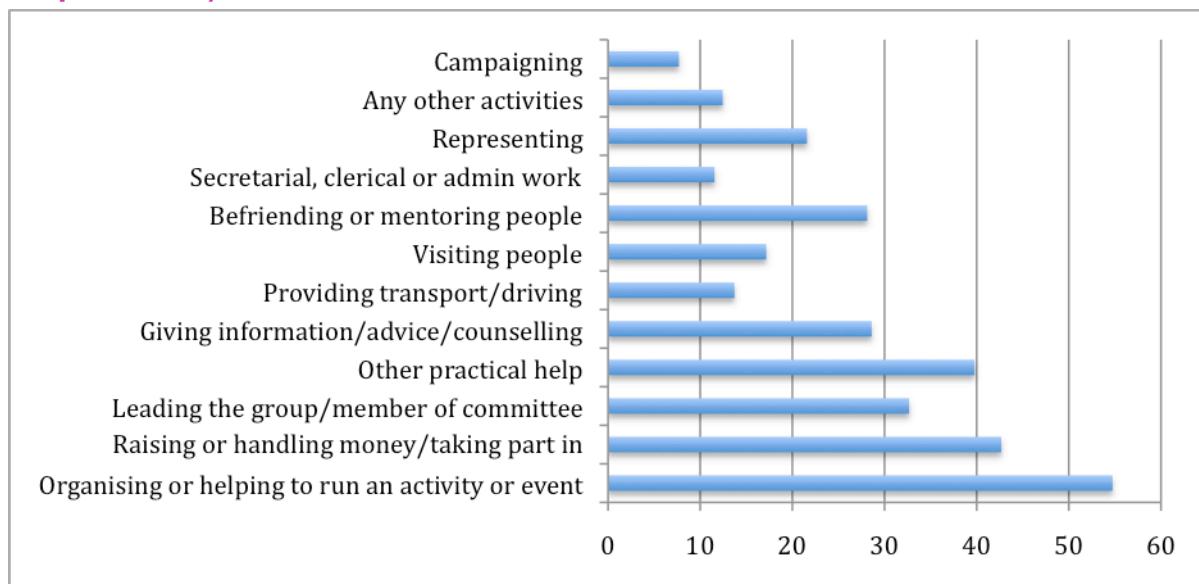
Young people take part in different types of voluntary activities than other age groups, and the preferred types of activity within this age group vary by several demographic indicators.

The 2007 Helping Out survey found that the vast majority of young volunteers between the ages of 16 and 24 (73 per cent) are found in the voluntary and community sector, while 20 per cent are in the public sector and 7 per cent in the private sector.²⁸ According to the

2010 Citizenship Survey, those who volunteer formally at regular intervals tend to volunteer with sports and exercise organisations (67 per cent), social, recreational and arts clubs (45 per cent), youth/children's activities (37 per cent) and education/schools (36 per cent). Least popular were trade unions, citizen groups (both 3 per cent), justice and human rights and political organisations (both 6 per cent).²⁹

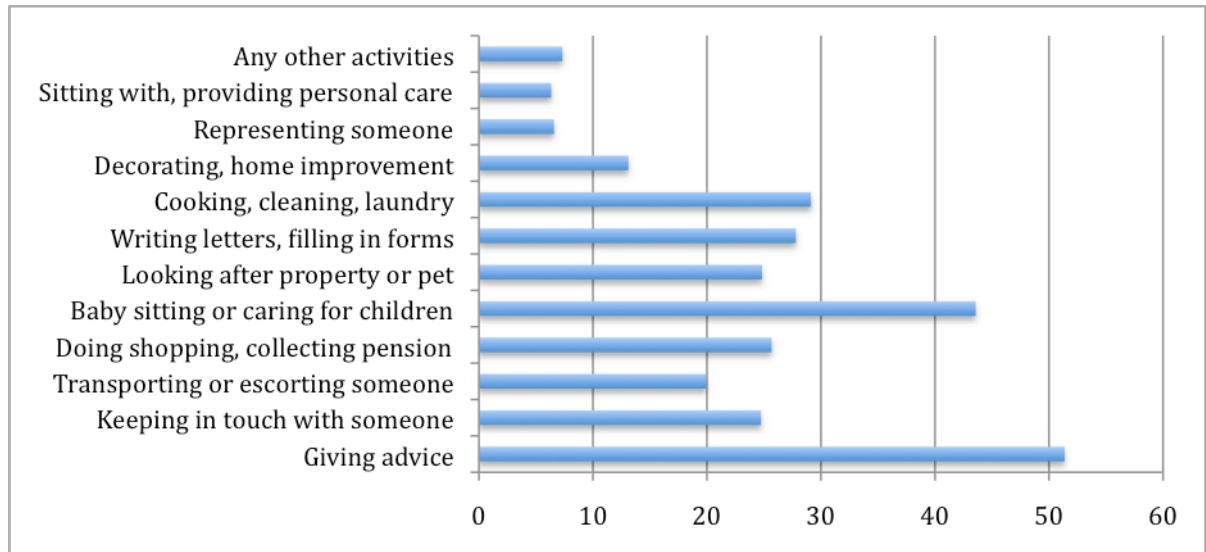
The 2010 Citizenship Survey also found that organising or helping to run an activity or event is the most popular type of formal volunteering (55 per cent), followed by raising or handling money (43 per cent), and leadership activities (33 per cent). Campaigning (8 per cent) and secretarial, clerical or admin work (12 per cent) were the least popular.³⁰

Figure 2: Types of formal volunteering activities in which 16 to 24 year-olds participated in 2010 (percentage of respondents).³¹



In terms of informal volunteering, the most popular activities are giving advice (cited by 51 per cent) and babysitting (44 per cent), while personal care (6 per cent) and representing someone (7 per cent) are the informal voluntary activities young people are least likely to engage in.

Figure 3: Types of informal volunteering activity in which 16 to 24 year-olds participated in 2010 (percentage of respondents)³²



On the lower end of the age group, the 2010 Ipsos MORI survey of 11 to 16 year olds found that volunteering in the fields of sports and exercise (51 per cent), children (48 per cent), hobbies/arts (47 per cent) and the Olympics (31 per cent) tended to be most popular among this age group. Volunteering in the fields of religion (10 per cent) or politics (9 per cent) were the least popular. It also found that boys and girls have tended to be interested in different types of volunteering. While boys were much more likely to express an interest in sports/exercise (57 to 34 per cent) and the Olympics (35 to 26 per cent), girls were far more interested in doing voluntary work with children (69 to 27 per cent), hobbies/arts (56 to 38), the elderly (36 to 19) and the environment/animals (36 to 23).³³

Range of programmes and schemes in the UK

The number and type of social action and volunteering opportunities currently available for the 10 to 20 age group varies across the age range and across interest areas. The differences between the programmes can be separated into spectra in the following dimensions: formal/informal, structured/unstructured and intensive/flexible (see Figure 4 below). While there is not a perfect link between age and these dimensions, age is a significant

factor in determining the type of social action that is available to young people. Our research has shown that there is currently a very limited number of specific social action programmes for young people in the UK, particularly for the younger end of our age range (10 to 14 years). Within the programmes we investigated there is also a shortage of age-specific data for participation rates. This is because programmes that cover large age ranges such as the Girl Guides (10 to 18) or vInspired (14 to 25) do not include detailed breakdowns of their participation rates. As a result it is difficult to gain a detailed picture of the landscape of youth social action in the UK today. The programmes outlined here, therefore, demonstrate that social action is still a broad concept and an emerging movement in British civic life.

Social action activity for under-14s tends to be focused on local schemes. There are few formal social action structures for this age group beyond Scouts, Girlguiding, local efforts led by community groups, school-based initiatives and family-oriented day activities. While these activities certainly fall under the category of volunteering their group approach, double-benefit and, to a lesser extent, activist qualities also allow them to be classified as social action. Organisations such as Scouts and Girl Guides offer young people the opportunity to learn new skills but also have service components built into their programmes. They both encourage young participants to develop an awareness of social issues and a sense of civic responsibility that, by our definition, moves their activities beyond the realm of simple volunteering into social action.

Social action activities for the 14 to 18 age group are also primarily focused in schools. These activities tend to become more formal and less structured though they still offer a high degree of flexibility in terms of time-commitment and responsibility level. Participants have increasing autonomy, institutional support becomes less rigid and the types of opportunities broaden. Activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, Prince's Trust programmes, youth community service activity, tutoring, mentoring and other forms of volunteering also become available to young people in this age-group. Other popular programmes include joining various cadet

corps. Leadership and activism activities also begin at this age with organisations such as vInspired offering a number of resources for community activity and social action experience being offered by groups such as Changemakers and National Citizen Service.

The first programmes designed explicitly on the principles of social action are seen in this age range. These programmes are mixed with others that still have social action components such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award and the more traditional volunteering programmes that include mentoring and cadets' corps. These older programmes focus on volunteerism but are beginning to provide a greater emphasis on civic education and activism in their areas of their work – for example the Duke of Edinburgh award uses the language of 'empowerment' and helping young people to 'create positive changes for themselves and society'.³⁴ Organisations such as Changemakers demonstrate the new generation of dedicated social action movements. They offer an intensive three-month programme to develop leadership and community activism skills among young people aged 16 to 25. The three-month programme incorporates a residential component and a series of day and half-day conferences, events and workshops to develop young people's interests and skills in activism.³⁵

The emerging field of youth social entrepreneurship opportunities also become available to young people in an age range that cuts across these boundaries under the education infrastructure discussed here. Youth as young as 11 can gain access to funding and mentorship through organisations such as UnLtd which provide a large network and pool of resources for social entrepreneurs of all ages. Live UnLtd Awards give young people aged 11 to 21 up to £5,000 to start a social venture and access to a mentor who will help them implement their ideas.³⁶ Since 2009, 1,431 awards have been made with a significant reach to minorities with 40 percent of those recipients coming from the BME communities.³⁷ Recent RBS research found that as many as a fifth of young people are interested in establishing their own social enterprise which suggests that this it could have an important role in the future landscape of youth social action.³⁸ Beyond UnLtd, there are currently few

schemes that target youth with social action objectives for their businesses. Programmes with a long history of success such as Young Enterprise that see some 225,000 young people learn about and start their own businesses provide a model for how young people could be engaged in enterprise-based social action.³⁹

From school leaving age, young people have the broadest opportunity for social action. They can take part in activities that could require them to stay away from home such as the National Citizen Service; they could go abroad through gap-year schemes offered by the European Voluntary Service or travel to other parts of the country with opportunities offered by the Community Service Volunteers. There are also swathes of student-led voluntary opportunities organised at universities and colleges across the country that play a significant role in social action work for their communities.

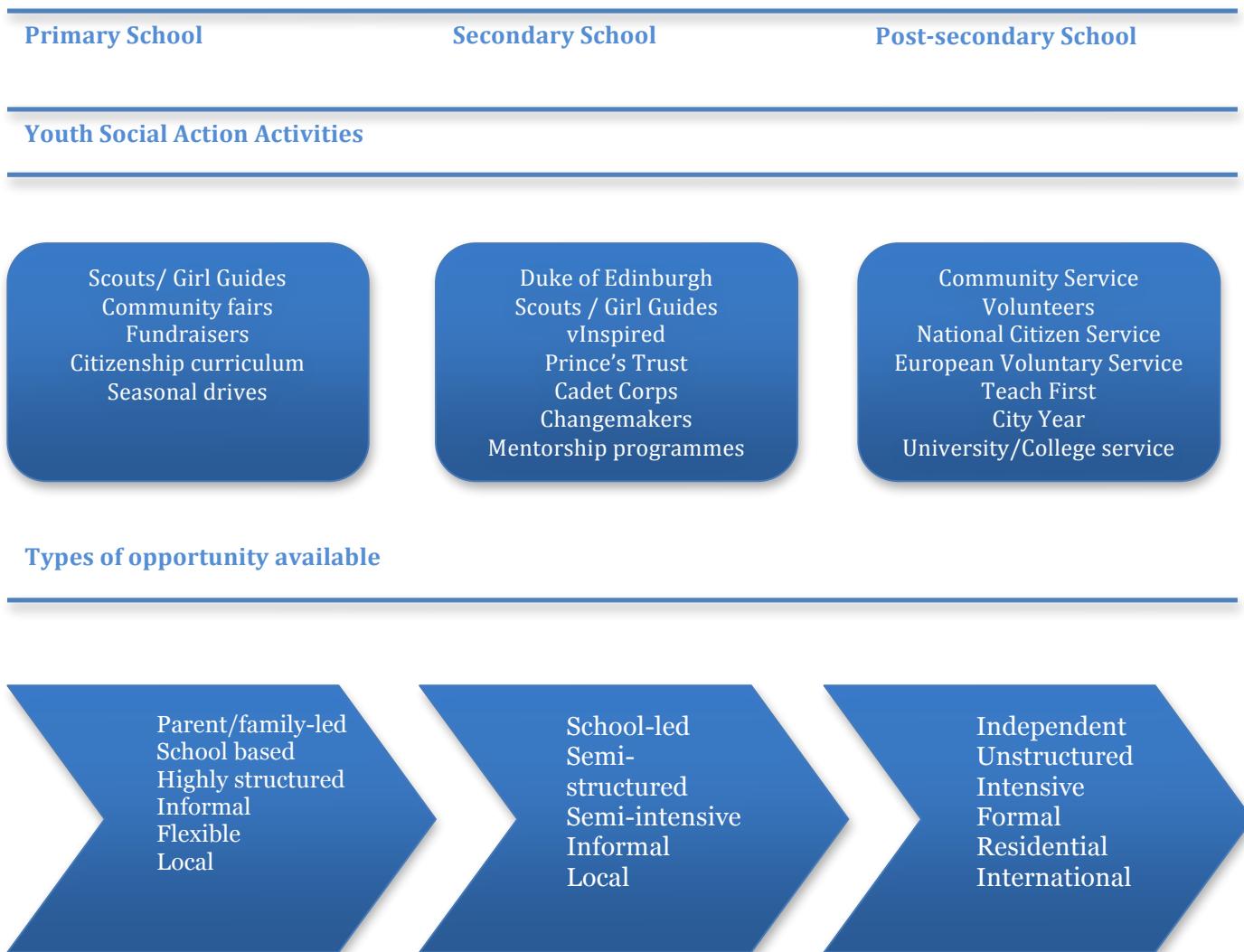
Outside of the National Citizen Service which is designed specifically as a social action activity and falls under the Cabinet Office's Centre for Social Action, the majority of opportunities available again fall under the traditional structure of volunteering. For example, Community Service Volunteers offer school leavers the chance to work as a care-assistant for people with disabilities for 6 to 12 months. As part of the programme CSV participants live with a group of 4 to 5 others and also take part in skills development and service-learning programme.⁴⁰ Therefore, although the original model is one of volunteering, adaptations to the programme also include elements of the activism and group participation that brings it onto the spectrum of social action.

These limited examples demonstrate that as an emerging movement there is enormous scope to expand youth social action activities and incorporate greater elements of it into existing service-oriented programmes. In younger age groups, where a significant burden for engaging in social action activity falls on teachers and families, who are often already stretched, there is a wealth of potential to be freed.

Table 2: Main social action programmes in the UK and most recent number of participants

Age	Activity	Number
10-14	Scouts	121,400 ⁴¹
10-17	Girl Guides	546,400 ⁴²
10-17	St John Ambulance	14,000 ⁴³
10-18	Sea cadets	14,000 ⁴⁴
13-20	Air cadets	40,000 ⁴⁵
14-18	Explorer Scouts	38,800 ⁴⁶
14-24	Duke of Edinburgh	275,000 ⁴⁷
14-25	vInspired	144,00 ⁴⁸
16-17	National Citizen Service	10,000 ⁴⁹
18-35	Community Service Volunteers Gap Year	1,200 ⁵⁰
Over 18	Teach First	2,000 ⁵¹
18-25	City Year	100 ⁵²

Figure 4: The types of youth social action activities available in the UK



II. Young people's perceptions of, and attitudes to, volunteering

Achieving the campaign's aim of increasing the number of young people who take part in social action projects depends on understanding young people's attitudes towards volunteering and engaging in voluntary activities.

On the one hand, the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering found that many young people have a positive perception of volunteers,

perceiving them as caring, committed, and competent individuals.⁵³ However, other research from the IVR has suggested that a narrow, stereotypical perception of volunteering and volunteers - as older, richer and female, and people who have ‘nothing better to do’ - prevails among young people.⁵⁴

A minority of young people perceive volunteering as ‘boring’ and ‘not cool’ (and almost half think their friends do⁵⁵). A significant minority (15 per cent) in a 2006 survey said that their friends would laugh at people doing voluntary work.⁵⁶ This is particularly the case among disaffected, hard to reach and marginalised youth, who also tend to have limited knowledge of what volunteering involves.⁵⁷

Young women tend to have a more positive view of volunteering than young men, with disadvantaged and unemployed male teenagers in their mid-teens especially likely to have negative attitudes. BME, disabled and ex-offender youths are also more likely to hold negative views.⁵⁸

The biggest division in perceptions of volunteering, however, is between those who do engage in volunteering and those who do not. Those who have volunteered are consistently more positive about it than those who have not taken part in volunteering. This suggests that facilitating young people’s first access to voluntary activities through taster sessions and programmes close to them in their schools or communities has the potential of encouraging a more positive perception of volunteering and increased participation.

Similarly, a 2006 survey⁵⁹ of 13 to 19 year olds in the UK found that among those who had not engaged in volunteering, the most common association with it was ‘working for free’, and volunteering was predominantly perceived negatively. A number of them said they ‘did not see the point’ in volunteering, given that they would not be paid, or said they did not have the time to volunteer or would rather spend time in a paid job than to volunteer. Whereas respondents associated work experience with ‘helping themselves’ through gaining skills that made them more employable, volunteering was exclusively seen as ‘something to help other people’.⁶⁰

In 2004, an IVR research bulletin noted that many of the alternative ways of referring to (particular types of) voluntary action, such as ‘community service’, suffer from similarly negative connotations. Part of the appeal of the term ‘social action’ in this context is that it might not suffer from the same negative connotations that young people have with the term ‘volunteering’. Highlighting the connection with developing skills and gaining experience relevant for their future career could draw more young people to social action programmes than to more traditional volunteering schemes.

What is clear is that there is a sea of untapped potential in terms of getting more young people involved with social action activities, especially among those on the younger end of the 10 to 20 age group. When asked about specific activities rather than ‘volunteering’ as a whole, young people’s interest in voluntary action turns out to far exceed current rates of participation, across all gender, ethnic and socio-economic groups. A 2010 survey found that no less than 91 per cent of the 11 to 16 year olds surveyed said they would like to get involved in at least one of the types of volunteering presented to them.

Those young people who do engage in voluntary action tend to overwhelmingly have a positive experience. In a 2007 survey, nearly all regular young volunteers (97 per cent) felt appreciated by their organisation, and 92 per cent said they were given opportunities to do the sort of activities they enjoyed. A significant minority, however, said things could be better organised (28 per cent) and felt that there was too much bureaucracy (20 per cent).⁶¹

III. The argument for youth social action: impact and evidence

The participation of young people in practical activities that aim to help others has long been thought to have a positive impact not only on the direct beneficiaries of the action itself, but also on the young people engaged in the action and society at large. As discussed above, the emerging definition of youth social action has at its core this idea of a double benefit for both the young person and the

community. To a large extent, these benefits are interlinked, overlapping and mutually reinforcing. Below, evidence of a positive impact of youth social action on the individual and the community is discussed in turn.

A 2010 scoping study by the Institute for Volunteering Research about longitudinal research into the impact of youth volunteering identified important limitations to the extent to which we can make robust statements about any positive impact and causal links. Furthermore, much of the evidence of the positive impact of youth voluntary action is based on user-feedback and not independently assessed.⁶² The Institute of Volunteering Research and our own findings reveal that there is a significant shortage in the amount and quality of research into the extent and impacts of youth social action.

[The impact on young people](#)

The skills and experiences provided by youth social action activities are precisely those that theories of youth development characterise as the most important for young people to build character capabilities, meta-cognitive skills and academic abilities. There is a small body of American literature that attempts to directly link these theories to the outcomes for volunteering broadly. We refer to the two studies that provide the best evidence we can use to substantiate the extensive qualitative and attitudinal research showing the outcomes for youth social action. Our analysis is drawn from Wilson's 2000 widely cited study on volunteering and Epstein's 2009 longitudinal study of AmeriCorps. These are used alongside the impact evaluations for a range of youth social action programmes across the developed world.

Across disciplines and methodologies, there is an abundance of evidence showing that social action activities can provide young people with improved personal and life outcomes. 'Personal outcomes' encompasses their emotional and character well-being and 'life outcomes' include educational attainment and career development.

At the personal level, detailed qualitative studies have shown significant self-reported character benefits to participants. The character qualities that most programmes develop include leadership ability, team-working skills, problem-solving techniques, personal-organisation skills and professionalism. These benefits are seen in case studies from the UK, France, Australia, Canada and the United States of America as well as in academic research.⁶³

Unsurprisingly, these benefits feed into other meta-cognitive gains for programme participants. The vast majority of participants in social action programmes such as the case studies provided below (consistently around 80 per cent) report that they gained in self-confidence, a sense of purpose and a sense of direction from their activities. This qualitative data is supported by academic evidence that shows young people gain in social resilience through meaningful social participation.⁶⁴ All of these benefits were reported in programmes targeted at different age groups, with various structures and after different lengths of time since completing the programme. These findings are further supported by evidence from the UK's Citizenship Survey which in 2008 found that 35 per cent of young people involved in regular, formal volunteering said their voluntary action gave them a sense of personal achievement, 31 per cent said it broadened their experience of life, 21 per cent said it gave them more confidence, and 16 per cent said it made them feel like a less selfish person.⁶⁵

There is also a strong link between positive personal outcomes and improved life outcomes. Young people involved with youth volunteering both subjectively and objectively report career benefit from their participation. Data from Epstein's 700 semi-structured interviews with former AmeriCorps participants shows that they have a greater than average job satisfaction.⁶⁶ Findings in the same study and other evaluations show that many people changed their career and education plans as a result of their social action work. This was as high as 72 per cent in the Canadian Katimavik programme, profiled below.⁶⁷ This suggests that experience with social action might lead young people to gain a better understanding of what they want and are able to do.

Programme evaluations and academic research consistently show that one of the best outcomes from youth social action is in the sphere of education. Many former participants explain how they became more motivated to achieve in school, more determined to continue their education and felt that they gained a better understanding of what they wanted to learn. There is an intuitive link between these improved educational aspirations and the increased confidence and expanded skill-set discussed. Young people with more confidence, experience and skills are better able to approach their education positively. While teachers involved in a Free the Children programme reported improved attainment for children involved in it, a causal link is hard to determine.

Academic research can show more of a causal link between social action-type activities and educational outcomes. Research on positive youth indicators points specifically to the improved educational and career outcomes for those young people who receive precisely the type of experience provided by youth social action activity such as forming strong bonds with healthy adults and maintaining regular involvement in positive activities.⁶⁸

In an analysis of 213 US primary schools Durlack, Weissberg et al found that social and emotional skills, attitudes and behaviour demonstrated an 11th percentile point gain in academic achievement.⁶⁹ Their analysis found that character qualities such as self-regulation, perseverance and 'love of learning' all closely predicted school success as well as perspective, gratitude, hope and teamwork. Over 70 per cent of nearly 200 programme alumni interviewed said that they had developed close relationships with teachers and mentors that they would not have otherwise developed without the programme. Eighty per cent reported the same but for relationships with students they would not have otherwise met. Similar results were found in other studies, which demonstrates that the group activity of youth social action work does create the types of interpersonal connections that are seen as critical to stronger personal development.

There are also positive links found between volunteering and educational attainment. Youth engagement in volunteering is

correlated with higher emotional wellbeing, which in turn is connected to higher academic achievement and engagement in education. Research commissioned by the Department of Education has found that better emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing is associated with higher levels of academic achievement and school engagement.⁷⁰ Again, the efficacy of social action work at achieving these types of positive educational outcomes is verified by responses to programme evaluations such as the 61 per cent of Free the Children alumni who said that they had had their educational path influenced by the programme.⁷¹

A 2011 Ofsted study into voluntary projects in secondary schools and colleges found that well-managed programmes have the potential to significantly enhance young people's learning experience.⁷² It also found that much of the 'in-house' volunteering pupils and students engage in is linked to their academic studies. The principles of all these findings are being implemented in the latest educational improvement programmes such as those funded by the Education Endowment Foundation's support for Challenge the Gap and Promoting Alternative Thinking which are moving the focus of schemes to reduce the attainment gap into the fields of developing meta-cognitive skills, emotional intelligence and character skills.⁷³

The interim assessment of the Government's flagship National Citizen Service programme (NCS) provides rare UK evidence about outcomes from activities clearly defined as youth social action. The assessment findings suggests statistically significant improvements among NCS participants compared to a similar control group in relation to communication, teamwork, leadership and transition to adulthood. Smaller but still significant positive results were also seen in relation to social mixing and community involvement.⁷⁴ Again, these findings represent a qualitative though thorough programme evaluation that allows limited causal arguments to be made but offer useful evidence of young people's experience with youth social action.

The impact on society

Youth social action can also have a strong, positive social impact on

the communities in which it takes place. Active community involvement has been recognised as a key ingredient for a strong democracy by theorists from De Tocqueville to Putnam.⁷⁵ Evidence suggests involvement in social action helps young people grow an interest in civic participation and increases their desire to be involved in their communities for the rest of their lives.⁷⁶ Evaluations of both the City Year programme and AmeriCorps found their alumni to have higher levels of political efficacy and to be more civically engaged than their peers.⁷⁷

One of the greatest impacts of youth social action beyond voluntary service is the ideological and theoretical component that leads young people to have a greater sense of purpose in their civic engagement ties to the community. Many participants in social action activity indicate that their involvement changed their attitudes towards others, the way they treated other people and the way they saw their place as citizens in the world. Of the nearly 200 Free the Children alumni asked, 90 per cent said they came to feel a greater sense of responsibility for other members of their society and social justice issues.⁷⁸ In a study of 1,400 graduates from Canada's national Katimavik programme 72 per cent of participants reported that they had directly changed their career trajectory as a result of the social action experiences they had.⁷⁹

Many programmes also produce the types of citizens that research shows will have stronger social bonds and a stronger feeling of duty to their community. This is shown by the disproportionate rate of volunteering among social action programme graduates such as the 64 per cent of AmeriCorps NCCC graduates who went on to volunteer regularly compared to 51 per cent for the control group.⁸⁰ Thus, these citizens are more likely to effect positive change in terms of the marginalisation of certain groups and anti-social behaviour.⁸¹ These social benefits are also reflected in the career choices that people went on to make after having been involved in social action. Epstein's longitudinal study of AmeriCorps found that a disproportionate number of young people involved in the programme entered careers in social service – 46 per cent compared to 33 per cent of the control group.⁸²

There is, of course, a social upside to all of the personal benefits described in the section above. Research commissioned by the Department of Education has found that better emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing is associated with higher levels of academic achievement and school engagement.⁸³ Using longitudinal data for children in Avon, the research finds that all these measures of well-being in the 7 to 13 age group are significant predictors of educational attainment in secondary school. Thus, youth social action programmes that provide substantive improvements in all these areas should also lead to improved educational outcomes. Social action that focuses on inter-generational activity provides substantive social benefit especially as young people interact with older generations. This can help to bridge gaps in understanding, develop intergenerational learning and help to reduce the generational isolation felt by some of the elderly and the marginalisation felt by the young. All of these personal and educational benefits, when combined with the skills-gained through participation, also offer social benefit by creating a happier, more-able and more skilled workforce.

IV. International case studies

Green Corps Australia

Green Corps was launched by the Australian Federal Government in the 1996-97 budget. In its original form, the programme was for 17 to 20 year-olds to learn about and participate in environmental projects around the country. Placements would run for six months which would include 14 weeks working on a major environmental project, 134 hours of accredited training for conservation and land management work, and, a handful of other smaller projects.⁸⁴ In July 2009, Green Corps was opened up to people of all ages as an approved programme for income support in the country⁸⁵ and became one of the approved required activities for people applying for a job seeker's allowance.⁸⁶

The programme had exceptionally positive outcomes in the last available evaluation. Participants in the programme had increases

in full-time employment from 6 per cent before the programme to 26 per cent after it. The local reputation of projects and national reputation of the programme meant that employers reported seeking-out Green Corps participants for the skills they signalled.

Eighty per cent of participants reported increases in self-esteem after participating in the programme, which came from the experience of building independent social networks, engaging in very tangible work, and living away from home for the duration of the programme. Green Corps partner communities all reported benefit from the scheme as it provided a reliable workforce, environmental improvement and increased community service. Long-term benefits are expected from the environmental education given to the participants and the communities from the typically high visibility of the projects.

[Free the Children International](#)

Free the Children is an international youth empowerment, activism and social justice charity that works in North American and UK schools. It is based on a model of creating local and global citizens in schools by creating an infrastructure in schools' extracurricular schedules to implement service-learning programmes. Programmes come with a fully structured syllabus and generally involve students 'adopting' a community in one of over 40 developing countries. Over the course of a year children learn about social justice issues, actively participate in volunteering schemes and have the chance to work with the communities they are supporting either domestically or internationally.

Independent evaluative research shows that the programme typically achieves positive outcomes at both the values and outcomes levels. At the values level, 90 per cent of participants reported a greater sense of responsibility for social justice issues. Outcomes for participants were strongly positive in all areas of personal development: it increased self-confidence significantly with 75 per cent saying that they gained a stronger sense of their own identity and 71 per cent saying they became more confident in their skills and abilities.

The programme has also shown improved educational outcomes. Evaluation results showed that 61 per cent of participants reported a better sense of career direction and having their educational path influenced by taking part. One respondent in the research expressed how Free the Children ‘makes me want to strive and achieve at university [...] it has shown me that I must take the opportunities I have now and strive for success and not abuse what I have because in other parts of the world, others don’t have the same opportunities.’ One of the greatest achievements of the programme is that it created a network of life-long social activists. Eighty-eight per cent of participants went on to volunteer for more than 150 hours per year on average.

Katimavik Canada

Katimavik was a nation-wide Canadian youth service-learning organisation that ran from 1977 until 2012 when the Government withdrew funding citing the programmes small scale and high per-person cost.⁸⁷ Their model has placed around 1,000 Canadians aged 17 to 25 in community service projects across the country for a six-month period. Participants live in unfamiliar communities in groups of ten to eleven and take part in direct community work, work full-time at an NGO and go through a service curriculum. The focus was on youth in transition periods of life, particularly after secondary school, or other periods of uncertainty and risk. The programme served around 30,000 young people since it was started in 1977.⁸⁸

An independent programme evaluation of Katimavik found that it almost universally achieved its objectives of cultural education, individual education and community contributions. For participants, education enrolment and completion of further education and training was higher than other members of their cohort. Participants also reported significant influence on their career plans: 72 per cent said they directly changed their existing career trajectory as a result of their experience with Katimavik. As with many similar programmes, Katimavik participants reported positive outcomes by developing a variety of work and life skills, such as work-confidence, time-management, punctuality,

teamwork, leadership and communication. Research also consistently found participants reporting notable shifts in values and sense of civic responsibility. Community partners almost unanimously reported that the Katimavik programme helped them to expand their reach, increase visibility and better fulfil their project goals. A financial evaluation of the project found that the economic contribution of all the volunteers in terms of work hours for the organisations alone was the equivalent of almost \$9.8m compared to an outlay of around \$6.9m. The total economic value contributed to 105 host communities was estimated at \$16m.⁸⁹

[AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps](#)

AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is a subdivision of the national AmeriCorps public service programme. Every year, NCCC gives around 1,200 young people aged 18 to 24 the opportunity to volunteer at a handful of organisations and work on projects that last between six and eight weeks. The programme is fully residential and operates out of five regional centres across the country. Community organisations of all types – secular, religious, federal, state, Native American, academic, environmental – make up the service network of the AmeriCorps programme and set up projects around the country.

AmeriCorps is one of the few social action programmes for which there is longitudinal data on its impacts on participants. Research conducted in 2008 found that 46 per cent of participants ended up finding a public-service related career compared to 33 per cent of comparable members of the population. Similarly, NCCC graduates had a much higher likelihood of volunteering than a comparison group with a rate of 64 per cent compared to 51 per cent of the control group. There were also universal, statistically significant, positive outcomes in all of the following areas: skill development, civic responsibility, educational opportunity, self-esteem, tolerance for diversity, satisfaction from serving, and health.⁹⁰ According to respondents, the main factors making the NCCC a success were the programme's intensity, the people it helped individuals to encounter, the sense of common purpose it created and the feeling of self-efficacy it gave to participants.

Service Civique France

The *Service Civique* was created in 2010 at the request of the French government in order to allow young people between the ages of 16 and 25 to get involved with their community, thereby hoping to ‘reinforce national cohesion and social mixing’.⁹¹ Participants engage in full time voluntary ‘missions’ for a period of between 6 and 12 months in one of nine fields (culture and leisure, international development, education, environment, health, solidarity, crisis intervention, citizenship, and sport). Young people can get their participation in the programme recognised as part of their secondary or university education, get a certificate upon finishing their mission, and receive social benefits, lunch and transportation expenses, and a financial compensation of 467 euro per month directly from the state. They also benefit from training and support in thinking about their future plans. The programme has grown quickly since its start, from 6,000 participants in 2010 to 15,000 in 2011 and 25,000 in 2012. There seems to be a huge potential for growth: the programme was substantially oversubscribed in 2010, when 40,000 people applied for it. Indeed, the French government’s aim is to get 75,000 young people involved by 2014.⁹²

The programme specifically aims to encourage mixing of people from different backgrounds and reach youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. It seems to be doing its job in at least parts of the country: in Ile-de-France, France’s most populated region and home to Paris, 55 per cent of those involved in the *Service Civique* are from so-called *Zones Urbaines Sensibles*, disadvantaged social areas.⁹³ Alumni of the programme report overwhelming satisfaction with the programme: 89 per cent were satisfied and 43 per cent very satisfied with their experience. Almost everyone said they still thought it had been a good idea to get involved (94 per cent), and would recommend their peers to get involved as well (95 per cent). The youngest among them were particularly satisfied. The *Service Civique* also seems to succeed in functioning as a ‘springboard’ for professional life: a large majority of 86 per cent said they acquired useful skills for their professional future, 69 per cent said their experience had given them a better idea of what they wanted to do

in the future, and 61 per cent said their experience helped them in finding a job. Professional skills development (cited by 72 per cent), useful experience for future employment (62 per cent) and self-confidence (53 per cent) were among the most cited advantages of participation. The study found that alumni were much more likely than their peers in a control group to find employment, as well as be more open and confident in their opinions and attitudes than those in the control group: 43 per cent of them thought most people can be trusted, while only 17 per cent of those in the control group did. While 59 per cent of those in the control group said they ‘did not feel at home in France as before’, only 31 per cent of alumni did; 76 per cent of alumni felt like they could change things, while only 56 per cent of those in the control group did.⁹⁴

V. Strategies to increase youth social action

In order to know what the most effective strategies to increase young people’s participation in social action are, it is necessary to look at what motivates young people to get involved, the barriers young people face in getting involved, and the main routes through which they get involved.

Motivations to participate

Motivations to engage in youth volunteering vary according to age, gender, ethnicity and other demographic variables. Several surveys have found that young people are attracted to volunteering and social action by a combination of altruism and self-interest.

The 2010 Ipsos MORI survey of 11 to 16 year olds found that other-regarding and self-regarding reasons to get involved in volunteering were cited in almost equal measure: 35 per cent said that helping others would be the best thing about volunteering, and 12 per cent said ‘making a difference to something I care about’; however, 26 per cent said having fun, 11 per cent said learning new skills and 4 per cent said meeting new people were the best thing about it. There is a stark gender divide here: girls are significantly more likely than boys to name altruistic reasons, while boys are much more likely to name self-interested reasons to be attracted to volunteering.⁹⁵

The findings from the 2007 Helping Out survey confirm the appeal of this mix of altruistic and instrumental reasons for the older cohort of young people as well. While the most cited reason (by 56 per cent) was ‘to improve things and help people’, young people are much more likely than other age groups to go into volunteering to learn new skills (46 per cent against an average of 19 per cent over all age groups), because it helps their career (27 per cent against 7 per cent overall) and the second most likely age group (after those over 65) to say that meeting new people and making friends is a primary motivation (35 per cent).⁹⁶

A 2006 study similarly found that meeting new people and learning new skills were identified as key advantages of volunteering by young people.⁹⁷ Evidence suggests that younger teens are drawn to volunteering because it offers the chance to experience different work settings, while older youths are more focused on employment skills, qualifications and experience.⁹⁸ All this suggests that stressing the benefit of youth social action programmes for the young people themselves and designing them in a way that maximises the opportunity for participants to gain skills and confidence is key to any strategy to increase engagement levels.

For younger teenagers, the Ipsos MORI 2010 study found that 67 per cent of 11 to 16 year old pupils could be encouraged to engage in voluntary activities when they could do so with their friends, the most cited motivator of volunteering by this group. Compared to this, only 24 per cent said they would be encouraged to volunteer if they could do so with their families. 58 per cent said they would like to try it once to see if they liked it, compared to 28 per cent who would be more motivated if there was a routine of volunteering at the same time each week. Almost half (49%) said having volunteering opportunities close to their home would most encourage them to do so.⁹⁹

For younger teenagers, then, the opportunity to engage in social action activities in their own schools or neighbourhoods, in group-based activities with their peers, and to try it once before committing to longer term engagement, seems most likely to get them involved.

Overall, the only motivating aspect cited more by boys than girls in this study was ‘if I could be in charge of my own volunteering activity’ (37 to 30 per cent).¹⁰⁰ Given the lower levels of volunteering among boys, emphasising independence and control over volunteering activity could be an effective way of getting them more involved.

Barriers to involvement

Lack of time, lack of information, lack of confidence and cost are among the most frequently cited barriers to get involved with voluntary activities by young people.

Recent research conducted by the British Youth Council on behalf of the Cabinet Office found that for most young people from across the country a lack of funding to start projects and cover personal costs such as transport meant that they were prevented from taking part in social action in the way they wanted.¹⁰¹

In the 2007 Helping Out people, no less than 93 per cent cited a lack of free time as a main barrier.¹⁰² Many young people in this survey, especially older youths, say they cannot financially afford spending a large part of their free time doing unpaid work. Others say they lack the time because they need to care for a family member or help out around the house. Being too busy with school or college work is a barrier cited by 61 per cent of 13 to 19 year olds who are not engaged in volunteering, while 38 per cent say they are too busy with things outside of school, and 29 per cent said that they needed to earn money in their spare time.¹⁰³

Many also complain that they encounter problems when trying to find information about opportunities, or say the available information is confusing or difficult to digest: 43 per cent of 13 to 19 year olds who have never volunteered before said they did not know what can be done or how to get involved.¹⁰⁴ A lack of awareness of its potential benefits is also keeping young people from getting involved.¹⁰⁵

A detailed account of these concerns from British Youth Council’s 2012 research shows that young people feel a general lack of

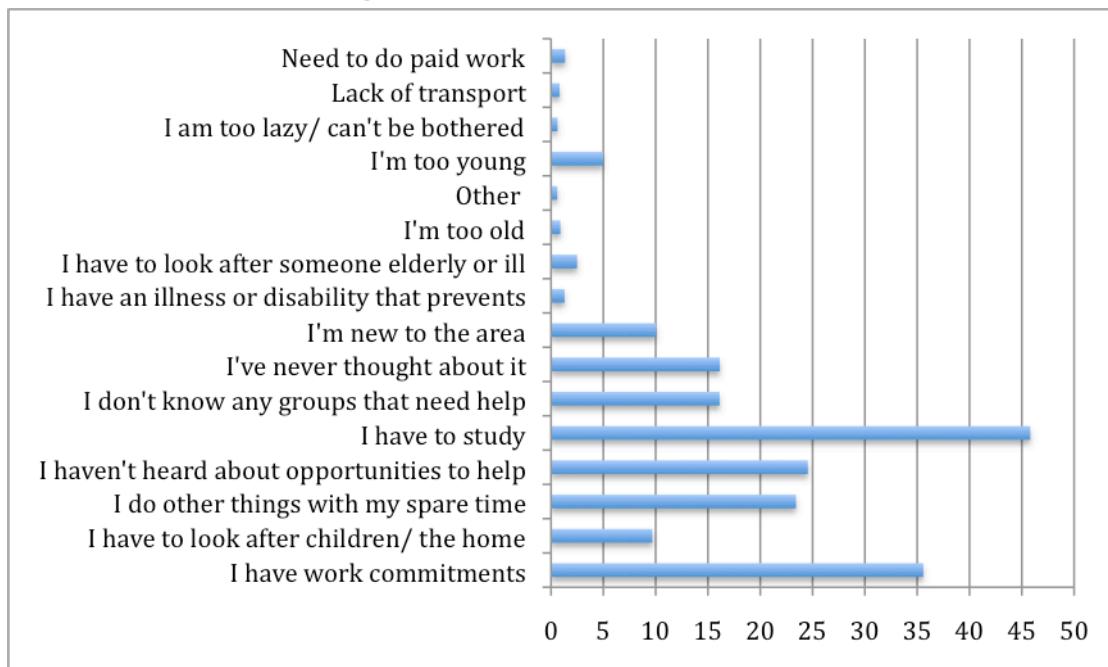
support and active encouragement to participate in social action, which restricts their participation levels. According to this research, it was less about a lack of opportunities than it was a lack of systemic support for social action that leaves young people unaware of what and how they might take part. Simply providing a leaflet outlining opportunities, say the participants, is not enough for meaningful engagement.¹⁰⁶

Lack of confidence or fear of rejection can also be a barrier: some young people feel they have nothing to contribute and that their efforts and achievements will not be valued. This is particularly strong among disaffected young people and those in the youngest age groups, and it has been argued ‘is a reflection of a broader feeling of disempowerment and social disapproval’.¹⁰⁷ This suggests that getting these kinds of young people involved requires having enough structure in place to be able to offer participants sufficient practical and emotional support, by adults or, where appropriate, by older peers.

Other factors that discourage young people from getting involved include worries about risk and liability (51 per cent of young people worry about this according to the Helping Out survey¹⁰⁸), and negative peer pressure. Interestingly, of those young people who do volunteer or have done so in the past, almost three quarters (71 per cent) think the reason others do not volunteer is laziness, while only 20 per cent of those not engaged in volunteering did.¹⁰⁹

In 2012, a Prince’s Trust discussion raised some concerns for organisations providing social action and opportunities to volunteer. In the discussion, a number of young people revealed that they were discouraged from volunteering by some organisations because it was not worth the time and investment to train them. Equally, young people’s fears and experiences of ‘judgement’ for having mental health problems, a criminal background or being a young parent proved to be a barrier. The evidence from such discussions with young people shows that there is a substantial sector-side challenge that needs to be met to include young people in social action work.¹¹⁰

Figure 5: Barriers to formal volunteering cited by 16 to 24 year-olds in 2010 (percentage of respondents)¹¹¹



Routes into voluntary action

It seems of primary importance to involve young people themselves in the recruiting process for social action programmes, and rely on them to convince their peers of the personal benefits of participation.

Word of mouth appears to be the primary route into volunteering for young people: 73 per cent of respondents to the 2007 Helping Out survey indicated this was how they had gotten into volunteering.¹¹² Young people are consistently found to prefer personal, face-to-face methods of recruitment,¹¹³ and word of mouth is a significantly more important route into volunteering for 16-24 year olds than for older age groups.

More specifically, the 2010 Citizenship Survey found that, of those 16 to 24 year olds involved in regular, formal volunteering, 53 per cent found out about it through someone already involved in the group, 44 per cent through school, college or university, and 20 per

cent through word of mouth via someone not involved in the group themselves. Another 20 per cent had first come into contact with their volunteering destination through using the services it provides. Very small numbers of young volunteers said they had first gotten to know about their organisation through TV or radio (2 per cent), the library (1 per cent), promotional events (4 per cent), volunteer or community centres (4 and 3 per cent respectively) or even the internet (13 per cent).¹¹⁴

When asked what would make it easier for non-volunteers to become involved, young respondents (16-25) to the 2007 Citizenship Survey said that, if someone asked them directly to get involved (35 per cent) or if friends or family got involved with them (42 per cent) would. Knowing that it would help improve their skills or get qualifications, or if it would benefit their career or job prospects, was cited by 34 and 32 per cent respectively.¹¹⁵

Prince's Trust research also found that young people wanted more intergenerational support with older people serving as positive role models and mentors for participation. Equally, simple measures such as more accurate information from jobcentres about the impact of voluntary work on benefits payments would help to avoid confusion. Above all, young people express that they want a shift in the culture of youth social action where the focus is on engaging young people's existing strengths and making opportunities to volunteer as accessible as possible regardless of experience or background. ¹¹⁶

[**What should youth social action look like?**](#)

In terms of how they want their social action to be organised, young people seem to find it important to have a large degree of flexibility in terms of types of activities as well as time. While it is important for them to have a degree of control over the planning and decision making, they do not want to be overburdened, and some are sceptical about the pressures of leadership and too much responsibility.¹¹⁷ It therefore seems very important to have sufficient adult support and facilitation in youth social action projects, increasingly so when participants are younger. Moreover,

evidence suggests that young people prefer group and team activities and like the idea of taster sessions.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

Our research strongly supports the notion that involvement in social action has notable benefits for young people and society. More so than traditional volunteering, social action activities, with their focus on self-motivation, leadership, group activity and fostering a sense of collective purpose, seem to provide the types of experiences that developmental experts believe are essential to young people growing up to become happy, healthy and engaged members of society. The positive results reported by evaluations of existing programmes and their participants further supports this link between social action experience and developmental advantages.

Our research has also shown that youth social action is still an emerging movement in the UK. The limited number of activities and data on youth involvement in social action is further proof of this. Data on young people's attitudes show that a re-framing and expansion of traditional volunteering into social action could transform the way young people engage in such activities. The international examples show that young people can be so moved by their experiences of social action that they change their entire educational and career trajectories. Most of these changes lead to the emergence of a more active and engaged citizenry. Therefore, through this research, we believe a well-designed movement to increase the numbers of young people taking part in youth social action is capable of transforming a generation and the nature of civil society.

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NOTES

- ¹ The England and Wales data is from Office for National Statistics; the Northern Ireland data is from their Statistics and Research Agency and the Scotland data from their Census.
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