

# Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund evaluation Final Report

June 2024



Image provided by Youth Focus North East



Department  
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Foundation

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IFF Research alone are responsible for the views expressed in this report, which do not necessarily represent the views, decisions, or policies of the institutions with which they are affiliated. More information on IFF Research can be found at: [www.iffresearch.com](http://www.iffresearch.com).

## Images included in the report

Throughout the report, images are included which were provided to IFF Research by the #iwill Fund projects: Bath Mind, Bodie Hodges Foundation, Priority 1-54, and Youth Focus North East.

The image on the cover of the report was provided by Priority 1-54 and depicts project participants taking part in a group activity.

This research can be cited as follows:

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# Executive Summary

The #iwill Fund is a £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people in England to access high quality social action opportunities. As part of this, Co-op Foundation committed £3.3 million to 48 organisations to deliver youth social action (YSA) projects across the UK from 2019-2022. In 2022, Co-op Foundation offered 35 of these projects continuation funding until 2023. Funded organisations supported young people to improve the design and use of community spaces; to transition from primary to secondary school; and to access safe spaces and support to share their experiences of bereavement.

**What is youth social action (YSA)?** Youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action.<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, Co-op Foundation commissioned IFF Research to evaluate their #iwill Fund. This report presents the successes, challenges and key learnings from funded organisations delivering YSA projects, between 2019 to 2023. This report complements interim evaluation reports, for Year 1 of the evaluation,<sup>2</sup> covering March 2021 – March 2022 of #iwill Fund delivery, and Year 2 of the evaluation,<sup>3</sup> covering March 2022 – March 2023 of #iwill Fund delivery.

## Key Findings

Between 2019-2023, Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund supported over 64,000 young people in the UK to benefit from YSA, through 36 funded projects.<sup>4</sup> This includes over 13,000 young people who directly participated in projects, and nearly 52,000 young people who also benefited in some way as a result of the projects' activities.

### Effective strategies for identifying and engaging young people in YSA and common challenges faced by funded organisations

- In Year 1, some projects relied heavily on schools to identify and recruit young people to their project, either because the project was new or because the project didn't have sufficient community relationships to be able to do this independently. The evaluation found no evidence of an over-reliance on schools for recruitment in Year 3. Successful recruitment of young people in YSA was supported by using multiple strategies that combined both targeted and broad approaches. Strategies included going to where young people are, such as schools and youth groups or services; involving individuals from diverse backgrounds with local knowledge to identify young people and remove barriers to participation (for example, youth workers, practitioners supporting young people, and young people themselves); and advertising projects through social media. As projects became better

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<sup>1</sup> #iwill Fund Learning Hub. (2022). *What is youth social action?* Retrieved from: [What-is-youth-social-action-report-updated.pdf \(iwill.org.uk\)](https://www.iwill.org.uk/what-is-youth-social-action-report-updated.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Co-op Foundation. (2022). *Co-op Foundation #iwill Fund: Year 1 report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Co-op-Foundation-iwill-Year-1-summary-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Co-op Foundation. (2023). *Co-op Foundation #iwill Fund – Year 2 Report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Co-op-Foundation-iwill-Year-2-evaluation-report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The findings are based on 36 #iwill fund projects who delivered YSA between 2019-2023. It excludes 12 projects, 10 of which were removed for data quality reasons and two of which did not submit data.

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known in their areas, word of mouth and community awareness also contributed to successful recruitment.

- Effective strategies for engaging young people in YSA included creating spaces for them to share their experiences and meet with other young people. Other strategies included shifting the power to young people to make decisions in project design and play active roles in project delivery. Embedding support and training for young people within the project and adapting these based on their emerging needs, and involving a consistent, diverse and knowledgeable staff team were also effective ways of engaging young people.
- The Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis had far-reaching impacts on staff and young people involved in #iwill Fund projects, including reducing the capacity to deliver projects, reducing the scale of delivery and changing the focus of some activities. These pressures gradually reduced through Years 2 and 3 of project delivery, and most projects were able to operate as they had originally planned by Year 3. Yet, the lasting effects of these societal challenges on young people's mental health and wellbeing continued to impact projects, with many adapting their programmes to support these needs. Examples included expanding the eligibility criteria for participation to support more young people in need, lengthening recruitment timescales and adding activities to build trust in the project.

### **The impact of YSA on young people**

- Young people interviewed for the evaluation enjoyed their projects and felt their participation in projects improved their personal and social development, and communication, teamwork and planning skills. They described feeling a sense of pride and achievement for having taken part in the project, for example, from helping others, learning a new skill or from creating something as part of a group, such as a website, a poster campaign or an exhibition.
- 'Feeling part of a wider community' was the most commonly achieved outcome for young people taking part in YSA reported by projects (23,259 young people reported to have achieved this). Projects fostered this feeling through peer mentoring and activities that supported young people to share their experiences and views with the wider community. Working towards a common goal with other young people they would not usually mix with also helped young people to achieve this outcome. 'Young people feeling better equipped to cope with challenging situations' was the second most common outcome to young people reported by projects (achieved by 11,588 young people). This feeling was fostered by activities that supported young people with a shared experience (such as bereavement) to express their experiences and emotions.
- Personal circumstances of young people influenced the extent to which outcomes were observed by funded organisations. Grant managers interviewed described factors can make it more challenging for young people to benefit from YSA or require more support than a project has the capacity to provide. Examples included poor mental health or wellbeing, experiences of trauma, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), or family conflict.

### **The impact of YSA on communities**

- Given the diversity of funded projects, the definition of community varied considerably. This spanned from the students in a primary and secondary school involved in a School Transition project and the neighbourhood for a Community Spaces project, to a community of identity, such as LGBTQIA+ or Orthodox Jewish young people. The capacity of

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organisations to measure the impact of their project on their community and the diversity of project activities also made it challenging to evidence community outcomes. Some projects directly involved communities in project activities and others did not.

- Available, limited evidence gives an indication of the impact of projects on communities. Projects based in schools reported positive changes to the way teachers or school staff approached support to young people on particular issues, and awareness of young people's needs. Projects involving campaigning or advocacy shared examples of how people in their communities had told them they appreciated the efforts the young people had put in to improving community spaces for many to enjoy.

### **Sustainability of youth social action**

- Grant managers less commonly shared established plans to continue YSA as a result of the project. In some cases, this was due to funding uncertainty. Organisations who had plans described supporting young people to continue doing advocacy after their participation in a YSA project, to volunteer for activities related to the original project, or to join advisory groups.

### **Recommendations for organisations funding YSA**

- To ensure the grant monitoring process is proportionate to the size of the grant and the capacity of funded organisations, funders of YSA should consider the frequency of reporting deadlines and whether annually is sufficient. To support funded organisations to learn from each other and the work of the funder, funders of YSA should consider more opportunities for knowledge sharing. For example, perhaps a learning digest newsletter that collates published information from the wider #iwill Fund and showcases a funded organisation's learning and more opportunities that bring together funded organisations.
- To ensure continuity of project staffing and stability in how young people engage in YSA, funders should consider providing longer term funding for youth social action rather than one year project funding.
- Future funding plans should consider priority outcomes to achieve when deciding the types of projects to fund. Project design and scope both facilitate and limit achieving some outcomes, depending on what outcomes are the priority for projects.
- Funders should consider proportionate and effective ways of monitoring community outcomes. For example, prioritise one community outcome for organisations to evidence and consider funding a barometer survey.<sup>5</sup> of the community in focus (if multiple projects work in the same community) and this can be used as evidence for multiple projects. Funders should also appropriately resource projects' evaluation activities with allocated budget factored in the project costs from the beginning.

### **Recommendations for organisations delivering YSA**

- Organisations should involve young people in all stages of the project design. Examples include in naming the project, how best to promote project activities to young people, and in

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<sup>5</sup> Barometer surveys are a type of survey that measures the general character of an area where people live that is a combination of customs, morals, attitudes and behaviours.



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identifying suitable locations for project activities, such as young people discussing the project with their teachers and negotiating access to school space.

- Organisations should ensure their engagement strategy includes multiple, different approaches to recruitment. They should also consider the use of online recruitment to engage underserved<sup>6</sup> young people in YSA and alumni networks to further promote projects.
- Organisations should regularly consult young people on their preferences for activity frequency and location and be flexible in adjusting activity frequency across a project.
- Organisations should review their recruitment process to ensure it includes steps for understanding a young person's psychological and practical readiness for YSA and barriers to participation in YSA. With this information, then organisations can then put in place resources and strategies to minimise barriers to participation.
- Organisations should regularly consult young people on their preferences for activity frequency and location, and to be flexible in adjusting these across a project.
- Organisations should consider whether they have continuity plans in place in the event of staff turnover, to minimise young people dropping out or delaying progress to outcomes.
- For some young people, small changes amount to considerable achievements. Organisations should consider how best to capture these steps that are the precursor to achieving the #iwill Fund's intended outcomes. Examples include using creative approaches to capture the voices of young people, such as a case study approach or through young people's creation of blogs, art or videos.
- Organisations delivering bereavement projects should ensure longer timescales and more resources to start these projects and consider a staged approach. Learning from a Bereavement project suggests taking a staged approach to project delivery may be an effective way to support young people's engagement in Bereavement YSA. By staged approach, we mean first allocating a couple of months for onboarding and warming up young people to the YSA. Once the young people feel prepared for YSA, they are then invited to continue the project.
- Organisations aiming to support young people to feel part of a wider community should review their activity plans to ensure they include peer mentoring, activities to support young people to share their views and experiences beyond the immediate group, or working towards a common goal.
- Organisations aiming to support young people to feel better equipped to cope with challenging situations should ensure they include support for young people's emotional literacy (for example, how thoughts and behaviours affect the way we feel, based on a CBT<sup>7</sup> model). They should also ensure that they teach young people stress-response management (for example, breathing techniques), and create welcoming and safe spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> Underserved people are defined as those who are unable to access the support or services they need

<sup>7</sup> Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a type of talking therapy, which supports a person to manage difficult feelings by changing the way they think or behave.

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Organisations should review their project plans to ensure they have the capacity and activities to meet young people's changing needs, particularly in relation to young people's poor mental health and wellbeing as a result of both the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Examples include expanding the eligibility criteria for participation to support more young people in need, lengthening recruitment timescales and adding activities to build trust in the project.



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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The #iwill Fund is a £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities. The #iwill Fund supports the aims of the #iwill movement - to make involvement in social action a part of life for young people, by recognising the benefit for both young people and their communities. By bringing together funders in England from across different sectors and by making sure that young people have a say in where the funding goes – the #iwill Fund is taking a collaborative approach. In 2019, Co-op Foundation, Co-op's charity, committed £3.3 million to 48 organisations to deliver youth social action (YSA) projects across the UK from 2019-2022. In 2022, Co-op Foundation offered 35 of these projects continuation funding until 2023.

Social action involves young people campaigning, fundraising and volunteering, all of which enable young people to make a positive difference in their communities as well as develop their own skills and knowledge. YSA is defined by two main elements:<sup>8</sup>

- A double benefit - YSA should achieve a benefit for the community as well as a benefit for young people in that they gain a greater social awareness and develop a wider perspective.
- Youth led – YSA should be, at least to some extent, youth led. This can mean young people making decisions about the community benefit they are trying to achieve, the activities they pursue, and the length of their engagement.

All funded projects were grouped into three thematic strands (see Appendix A in the [technical appendix](#) for a list of projects):

- Community Spaces projects, aimed at helping young people to improve the design and use of community spaces;
- School Transitions projects, aimed at supporting young peoples' wellbeing in the transition from primary to secondary school;
- Bereavement projects, aimed at providing young people safe spaces and support to share their experience of bereavement.

While the #iwill Fund only operates in England, Co-op Foundation also funded projects in Northern Ireland (two), Scotland (three), and Wales (one). These six projects were included in the overall number of 48 projects (five of which received continuation funding). The report analysed projects across all nations.

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<sup>8</sup> #iwill Fund Learning Hub. (2022). *What is youth social action?* Retrieved from: [What-is-youth-social-action-report-updated.pdf \(iwill.org.uk\)](https://www.iwill.org.uk/what-is-youth-social-action-report-updated.pdf)

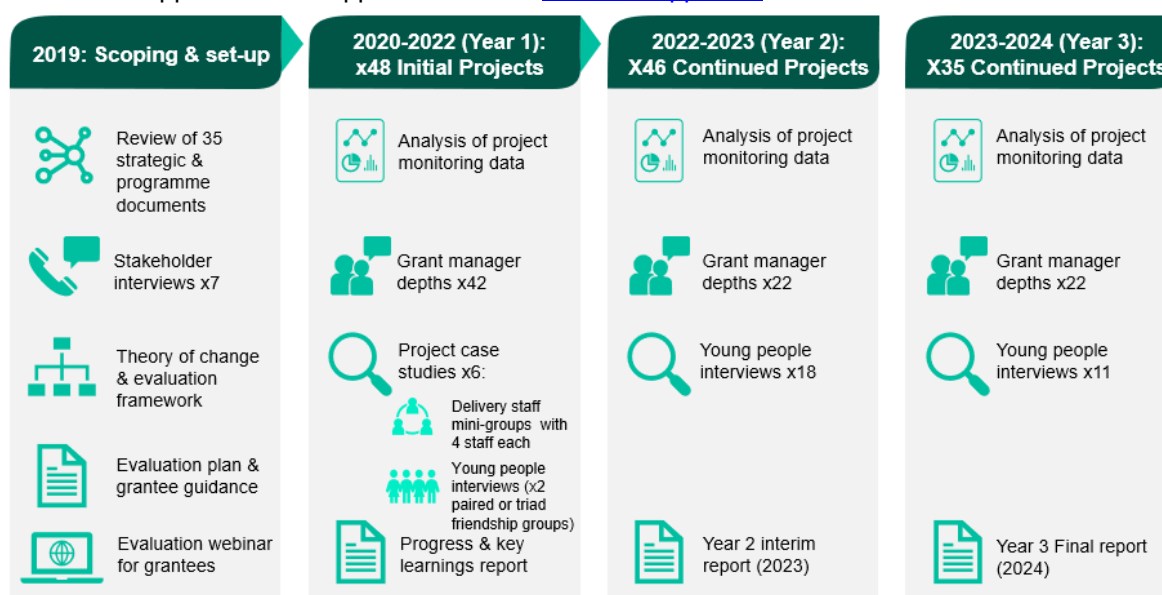
In 2020, Co-op Foundation commissioned IFF Research to evaluate their #iwill Fund. This evaluation report presents the successes, challenges and key learnings from funded organisations delivering YSA projects. This report complements interim evaluation reports, for Year 1 of the evaluation,<sup>9</sup> covering March 2021 – March 2022 of #iwill Fund delivery, and Year 2 of the evaluation,<sup>10</sup> covering March 2022 – March 2023 of #iwill Fund delivery. The technical appendix can be found [here](#). It contains a detailed evaluation approach and monitoring information data, theories of change and research instruments.

## 1.2 Evaluation aims and overview of approach

This evaluation aimed to:

1. Combine existing knowledge and best practice learnings and share this with projects in accessible ways (including the most effective models that could be used in other contexts);
2. Collaborate with grant-holders to capture emerging learnings and enable sharing of stories of their work across the programme and beyond;
3. Produce iterative learning summaries that explain key lessons, to support, influence and inform project action and activity; and
4. Analyse evidence of the overall impact of project activity on youth social action on the individual and the impact of this on the wider community.

The evaluation covers the period from when the first round of projects that were initially funded in late 2019 until funding ended in December 2023. Figure 1.1 summarises Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund evaluation approach. See Appendix B in the [technical appendix](#) for further details.



**Figure 1.1 Summary evaluation approach**

<sup>9</sup> Co-op Foundation. (2022). Co-op Foundation #iwill Fund: Year 1 report. Retrieved from: <https://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Co-op-Foundation-iwill-Year-1-summary-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Co-op Foundation. (2023). Co-op Foundation #iwill Fund – Year 2 Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Co-op-Foundation-iwill-Year-2-evaluation-report.pdf>

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## 1.3 Reading this report

This report presents the successes, challenges and key learnings from organisations funded through the #iwill Fund, delivering YSA projects, between 2019 to 2023. The report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2 How projects recruited young people to youth social action:** presents findings about the reach of #iwill Fund projects. It also discusses experiences of recruiting young people to youth social action, including the recruitment of young people who are underserved and with lived experience of the project focus.
- **Section 3 How projects delivered youth social action:** discusses staffing of the projects and the format, duration and frequency of delivery. It also presents how projects delivered YSA activities, including peer support, advocacy and campaigning. A discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-crisis impacts on project delivery, is also presented.
- **Section 0 Impact of #iwill Fund projects:** presents the impact of the #iwill Fund projects on young people and wider communities.
- **Section 5 Projects' experiences of the #iwill Fund grant administration:** explores grant managers' experiences of Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund grant administration, including successes and suggested improvements. This topic was introduced and discussed with grant managers in Year 3 of delivery only.
- **Section 6 Conclusions and recommendations:** summarises the main findings discussed in the previous chapters in relation to delivering YSA across 2019-23. It provides recommendations for organisations funding YSA, and organisations delivering YSA.

## 1.4 Key terminology

- **Young people or participants:** these terms are used throughout the report. They refer to young people who took part in interviews for this evaluation or young people who were directly engaged in YSA.
- **Beneficiaries:** this term refers to young people indirectly benefiting from YSA. In other words, they did not directly take part in YSA, but they benefited as a result of the YSA action.
- **Partners:** this term refers to local stakeholders, organisations and individuals supporting projects' delivery.
- **Monitoring form data:** this term refers to projects' submission of participation and outcomes data to Co-op Foundation via an online form that all projects were required to complete every six months.
- **Global majority:** 'Global Majority' (shortened from 'people of the global majority') refers to those who identify as Black, African, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and people who have been racialised as "ethnic minorities." These groups represent approximately 80% of the world's population. This term will be used where we might previously have used terms such as BAME and ethnic minorities.

## 2 How projects recruited young people to youth social action

This chapter discusses the reach of #iwill Fund projects across their delivery in 2019-2023. It also discusses grant managers' practices and young people's recruitment experiences, including successes, challenges and learning.

### 2.1 Reach of Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund projects

#### Summary of overall reach of #iwill Fund projects

Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund supported over 64,000 young people in the UK to benefit from YSA through 36 funded projects between 2019-2023.<sup>11</sup> Of these, 13,657 young people directly participated in YSA and a further 51,893 young people indirectly benefitted from YSA.

#### Reach of the projects by strand

School Transitions and Community Spaces projects had the widest reach, both in terms of young people directly participating and indirectly benefiting from their projects. In comparison, organisations delivering bereavement projects reached fewer young people, in terms of both direct participants and indirect beneficiaries. This is expected because fewer young people were affected by bereavement compared with the recruitment criteria for other strands. It was also challenging for Bereavement projects to identify bereaved young people through schools because teachers were often unaware of whether their young people were experiencing bereavement. In addition, teachers also tended to under-estimate the ongoing impact of bereavement on young people and thus the relevance of a project on those who had. Moreover, smaller group sizes were necessary to engage bereaved young people safely and meaningfully.

**Table 2.1 Overall reach and by strand, reported by projects between 2019 – 2023**

Reach of projects	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
Direct participants	13,657	1,383	6,135	6,139
Indirect beneficiaries	51,893	7,002	10,252	34,639
Total	65,550	8,385	16,387	40,778

#### Direct participants

Across the 36 projects<sup>12</sup>, 13,657 young people directly took part in #iwill-Funded projects between 2019-2023. A similar number of young people each took part in School Transitions and Community

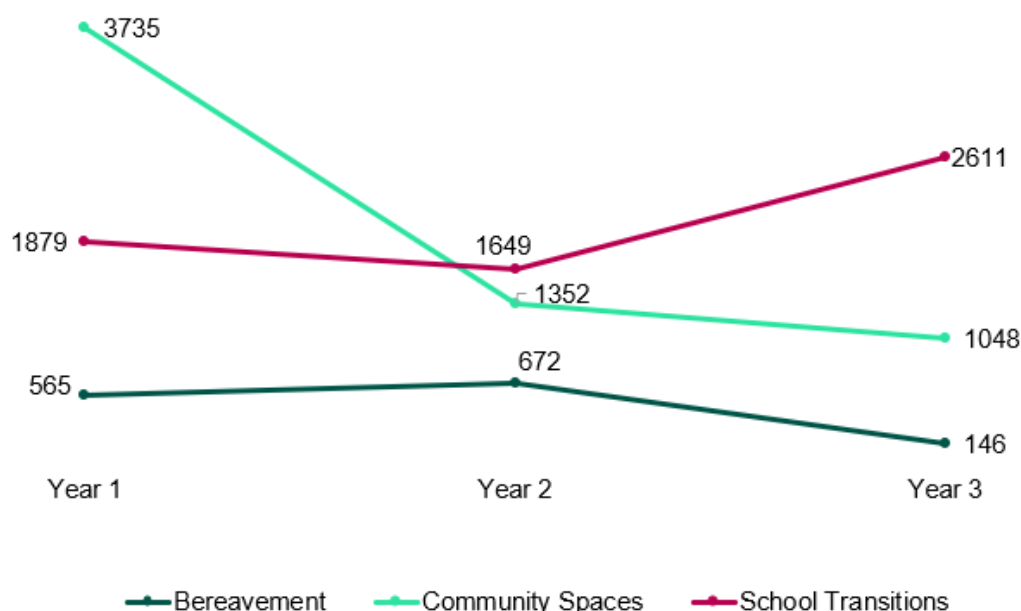
<sup>11</sup> Ten projects were excluded from this analysis due to incomplete or unreliable data provided.

<sup>12</sup> The total number of projects included in analysis in Year 3 was 36 compared to 35 in Years 1 and 2. This is because in Years 1 and 2, one project was not included due to discussions about the data quality at the time. In Year 3, their data quality improved, so this project was subsequently included in analysis.

Spaces projects (6,139 and 6,135 respectively). In comparison, fewer young people took part in Bereavement projects (1,383).

Figure 2.1 shows that, across the duration of the #iwill Fund, the reach of projects decreased between Year 1 and Year 3 for Bereavement and Community Spaces projects. Community Spaces projects experienced a large decline in direct participants, from 3,735 direct participants in Year 1 to 1,325 in Year 2. This is attributed to the recruitment process used by three Community Spaces projects. These projects recruited all their direct participants in Year 1 and worked with the same cohort of young people in Year 2. Therefore, very few direct participants joined the project in Year 2 and 3. The number of direct participants in Year 3 was similar to Year 2 (1,048).

In contrast, the number of direct participants for School Transitions projects increased markedly from Year 1 (1,879) to Year 3 (2,611). This is because two School Transitions projects expanded their delivery in Year 3. One project worked with an additional school and increased the number of peer mentors they worked with at each school. Another project expanded delivery to three additional schools and into a community setting. This was in addition to working with new cohorts in the existing settings from Year 1 and 2.



**Figure 2.1 Overall reach of direct participants, by strand and year (2019-2023)**

Source: Monitoring form responses submitted to Co-op Foundation.

Base: Total number of projects in Year 1 (Bereavement: 16; Community Spaces: 6; School Transitions: 13); Year 2 (Bereavement: 16; Community Spaces: 6; School Transitions: 13); Year 3 (Bereavement: 17; Community Spaces: 6; School Transitions: 13).

Table 2.2 shows Bereavement projects varied in the number of young people that they directly engaged across the three years, ranging from 30 or fewer young people (6 projects) to greater than 100 young people (3 projects). Community Spaces projects each had greater than 50 participants across the years of delivery, while for School Transitions projects, all 13 projects directly engaged over 100 young people.

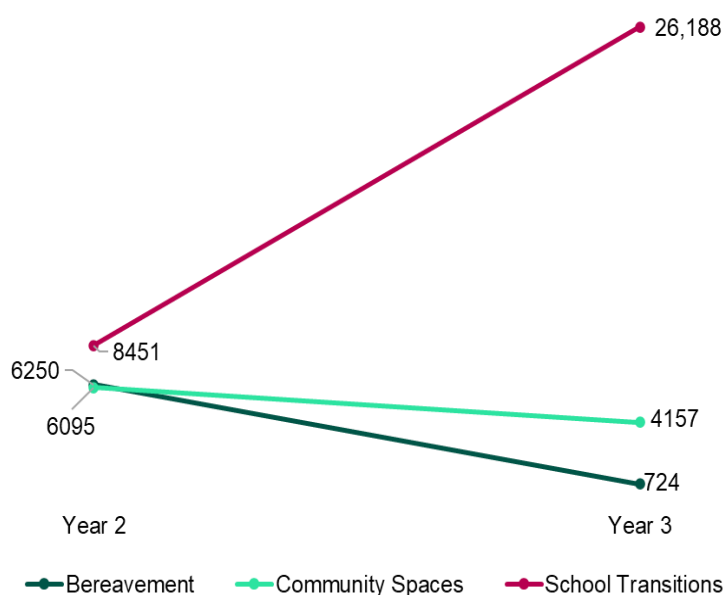
**Table 2.2 Number of young people who directly took part per project, by strand, between 2019 – 2023**

Number of young people who directly took part per project	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
<b>11-30</b>	6	6	0	0
<b>31-50</b>	4	4	0	0
<b>51-100</b>	6	4	2	0
<b>101+</b>	20	3	4	13

Source: Monitoring form responses submitted to Co-op Foundation.

### Beneficiaries

Overall, 51,893 young people benefitted indirectly from YSA projects across all three strands between 2019-2023. As shown in Figure 2.2, and following a similar trend to direct participants, School Transitions projects had the highest number of indirect beneficiaries (34,639 young people) followed by Community Spaces projects (10,252) and Bereavement projects (7,002 young people).



**Figure 2.2 Overall reach of beneficiaries, by strand and year (2022-2023)**

Source: Monitoring form responses submitted to Co-op Foundation. Please note there is no Year 1 data as partners were only asked to provided data on beneficiaries from Year 2.

Base: Year 2 (Bereavement: 16; Community Spaces: 6; School Transitions: 13); Year 3 (Bereavement: 17; Community Spaces: 6; School Transitions: 13).

Projects with peer support elements offered more opportunities for young people to benefit their peers and this was driving variations in the number of indirect beneficiaries between Years 2 and 3 for each strand. Between Years 2 and 3, the number of indirect beneficiaries decreased markedly for Bereavement projects (6,250, 724, respectively), and Community Spaces projects (6,095, 4,157, respectively). In contrast, the number of indirect beneficiaries for School Transitions projects

increased almost three-fold between this time frame (8,451, 26,188, respectively). This trend can be attributed to the fact that more School Transitions projects than other strands continued project delivery to Year 3, and these projects included peer support elements. Additionally, as mentioned above, two School Transitions projects expanded their delivery in Year 3 across more schools. For one of these School Transitions projects, they also expanded delivery into non-school settings by partnering with local youth groups.

As shown below in Table 2.3, the number of indirect beneficiaries per organisation for Bereavement projects varied considerably, with five organisations each reporting between 0-20 and greater than 300 indirect beneficiaries. Community Spaces and School Transitions projects more commonly engaged greater than 300 indirect beneficiaries. It appears projects reached high numbers of beneficiaries through campaigning and advocacy activities, such as social media campaigns and videos young people made about young people issues.

**Table 2.3 Number of projects that have supported each number of beneficiaries, by strand between 2019 – 2023**

Number of beneficiaries	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
0-20	7	5	0	2
21-40	3	2	1	0
41-70	4	4	0	0
71-300	5	1	1	3
301+	17	5	4	8

Source: Monitoring form responses submitted to Co-op Foundation.

## 2.2 Experiences of recruiting young people to youth social action

### Recruitment successes

In Year 1, new projects or projects across all strands without existing recruitment partners heavily relied on schools to identify and recruit young people to participate in their project; the evaluation found no evidence of an over-reliance on schools for recruitment in Year 3. Successful recruitment of young people in YSA was supported by using multiple strategies that combined both targeted and broad approaches. Strategies included going to where young people are, such as schools and youth groups or services; involving people from diverse backgrounds with local knowledge to identify young people and remove barriers to participation; and advertising projects through social media. As projects became better known in their areas, word of mouth and community awareness also contributed to successful recruitment which reduced the need for projects to rely on schools to identify and recruit project participants.

### Forming strong relationships with local schools

Partnering with schools was the most successful recruitment channel across all strands and years of delivery due to their proximity to young people. School Transitions grant managers interviewed unsurprisingly relied on schools to recruit young people, and they built relationships with teachers to assess which young people would benefit from being a mentee and which young people would be suitable mentors. For instance, young people who were more anxious about starting secondary school were often chosen by their teachers to take part as mentees.



*"We had a young person who had been quite badly bullied through the [school] transition and had a really difficult time and would never normally be picked for something like this just because they were quite quiet and reserved. But by being chosen to be involved, they were able to share their experiences. You could really see them growing through the course of the programme and since then they have asked if they could be involved in other things."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

Targeted recruitment through schools was effective for projects looking to recruit underserved young people. For example, a Bereavement project in Year 3 recruited young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) through the schools' support team, and in Year 2 a School Transitions project recruited young people in receipt of free school meals through the school's pastoral care team.

*"It's successful to have that partnership, to have that space in the school, to have people in the school supporting us."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**



*Young people involved in a project activity at school - image provided by Priority 1-54*

### **Making connections and being present in other spaces relevant to young people**

Successful recruitment was supported by youth leaders outside of the school setting, such as religious leaders, counsellors, social workers and youth workers who worked closely with projects and young people. In Year 3, a Bereavement project partnered with housing associations to provide holistic support to homeless young people who had experienced a bereavement.

*"We had a partner, which was a housing association. They have a lot of young people who are struggling with loss or grief, but also have many other struggles in their lives, one of them being not having a place to live."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

*Young people involved in a project activity taking place outdoors - image provided by Bath Mind*

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## Utilising social media

Recruiting through the social media platforms Instagram and TikTok allowed projects to reach underserved young people who did not access mainstream services or where the relevance of the project was less obvious. In Year 2, a Community Spaces project used Instagram to successfully recruit young people who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Grant managers reported that offering an online sign-up option for YSA was successful when recruiting young people with autism or other additional needs. Grant managers felt this approach worked better for young people with additional needs as opposed to an in-person recruitment that involved direct interaction with the project from the start.

*"Lots of the young people who signed up had autism or other additional needs and signing up online was so much easier for them because we got to know them online [before] we met them in person, that really worked for them."*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

## Word of mouth

As projects became more established and had alumni young people, they were more able to recruit through word of mouth. Young people already on the project recommended it to their peers or asked their friends to participate alongside them.

*"I got a couple of my friends to join in [to the project] as well"*

**Young person, School Transitions**

Youth-led YSA projects were also more successful in recruiting using a word of mouth approach. In Year 2, a Bereavement project struggled to get buy-in from schools to recruit young people. In Year 3, it changed its design to be youth-led and more formally involved young people in promoting the project to their peers. Using the voices of young people who experienced bereavement to help recruit and engage young people was successful because they connected with their peers who had been in similar situations.



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*"It was more successful than any other year and I assign that to the fact that they [young people] came in as grief guides, not as part of me, a charity that helps them cope with loss."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

In some cases, young people signed up to a Bereavement project after being signposted to the project by a parent. Additionally, projects delivered by organisations with other support provision, such as other young people programmes or adult programmes, used these connections to recruit. See the Spotlight for an example.

#### **In the spotlight: Established Bereavement project received word-of-mouth referrals**

An organisation ran a programme for bereaved fathers from the global majority, where grief was regarded a taboo topic to discuss. Participating fathers promoted the YSA to their children and encouraged them to consider taking part.

*"Because of the parent's project the centre set up, a lot of Indian Dads were far more amenable to participation, and they referred their kids... These kids have never had counselling before, and now they have, they have made friends outside their usual groups."* **Grant manager, Bereavement**

### **Recruitment challenges and learnings**

#### **Engaging schools on sensitive topics**

Bereavement projects faced challenges with schools identifying bereaved young people because teachers often underestimated the impact of bereavement and were hesitant to address it. One project aimed to address this by recruiting bereavement educators to train teachers and raise awareness of the issue.

#### **In the spotlight: Raising awareness of bereavement in schools**

A school initially considered they had no pupils experiencing bereavement, except for one who took part in the project. The project support worker approached the school and spoke to teachers and the young participant spoke to their class about their bereavement. Following these discussions, some young people felt motivated to come forward and share they had also experienced bereavements.

As a result of this, the school set up a bereavement group that met weekly, with more than 10 young people in attendance. Some of these young people then went on to take part in the project.

*"If teachers understand a child's bereavement they can support the child, and it stops them behaving badly and helps them to keep engaged with school."* **Grant manager, Bereavement**

#### **Maintaining communication with key contact at schools**

Turnover of school staff limited or slowed projects' recruitment through schools. In Year 3, some School Transition projects found it difficult to contact schools once their key contact left. This was consistent with Year 2 findings where a School Transition project found they lost engagement with the school after communication with their key contact was halted because they moved into another role within the same school. Some projects found post-pandemic, schools had pressures on their time with competing responsibilities, and this affected the number of young people the project could recruit. In one case, a grant manager said a school they worked with had been rated inadequate by Ofsted, so they were focussed on young people's learning. This meant this project struggled to persuade schools to take young people off timetable for project activities.



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*“You can develop a link with the school, but really what you've developed is a link with a teacher. And if that teacher moves, you almost have to start again.”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Modifying project design when adopting an inclusive and diverse recruitment approach**

Some School Transitions projects that had become more inclusive in their approach recruited young people with SEND. They found they needed to increase the number of appropriate staff who could support these young people on the project. These young people were often identified by schools who had recognised them as young people that would benefit from the School Transitions project.

### **Clear and accessible language when describing YSA projects**

Language matters when describing YSA projects in advertising materials to young people. For example, in Year 2, a School Transitions project learned that a barrier to recruitment was including the term ‘transitions’ in promotional materials; some young people understood this to refer to gender transition rather than transitioning to secondary school.

## **2.3 Recruiting underserved young people in youth social action**

Projects across all strands recruited young people who were underserved to some extent. Often, underserved people live in deprived areas. Deprived areas typically lack employment and education opportunities, and access to good quality services including healthcare and housing. Deprived areas also tend to have high levels of crime and poor living environments.<sup>13</sup> As a result, people living in deprived areas tend to be underserved as they lack the support, services, and opportunities they need.

The analysis below includes projects from all nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). To define the Deprivation Decile, a definition from the UK government is used.

The Deprivation Decile is a measure of relative deprivation, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019.<sup>13</sup> All 36 projects included in the analysis operated within the top 40% of areas with relatively high levels of deprivation, with over two-thirds of projects operating in the top 20% of most deprived areas. Table 2.4 shows the distribution of projects by deprivation decile of opportunity. Across the Bereavement strand, over half of these projects operated within the top 10% of the most deprived areas.

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2019). *The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IoD2019)*. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8e26f6ed915d5570c6cc55/IoD2019\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8e26f6ed915d5570c6cc55/IoD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf)

**Table 2.4 Deprivation Decile of opportunity, by strand, between 2019 – 2023**

Deprivation decile	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
Top 10%	16	9	2	5
11% - 20%	11	4	2	5
21% - 30%	7	4	0	3
31% - 40%	2	0	2	0

Many projects took additional steps to target young people who were underserved in addition to choosing to operate in areas of high deprivation. Based on grant manager interviews, this included prioritising recruitment of young people from the following backgrounds and communities:

- young people who identified as LGBTQIA+
- young people who are a part of the global majority
- young people who were in receipt of free school meals
- young people who have SEND.

## **Successes**

### **Linking with schools operating within less affluent socio-economic neighbourhoods**

Projects often operated in areas where young people were underserved as a result of living in a less affluent area. Projects partnered with schools in these areas so they could identify and recruit underserved young people. Often, these schools did not have the funds to offer additional support to pupils, or they were located in areas that lacked services for young people. This meant that there was a lack of bereavement support in the local area for young people. Similarly, there was also a shortage of safe spaces for young people from LGBTQIA+ and global majority communities.

### **Online recruitment as a tool to engage young people who may not have access to mainstream services**

Some Community Spaces projects used online recruitment to recruit young people who were underserved. For instance, young people could access a form online and sign up to the project. One project found this method allowed projects to reach young people who experienced additional challenges such as mental health problems. They found using online channels allowed projects to engage with young people who were often hidden or missed by mainstream services. This finding was evidenced in all years of delivery.

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### **In the spotlight: Online recruitment as a tool to recruit underserved young people**

In Year 3, a Community Spaces project found young people aged 10-15 years old presented with more mental health problems compared to previous years, which affected recruitment and initial engagement.

As a result, the project struggled to recruit young people with mental health problems as they were less likely to want to leave their house and sign up to the project in person. For instance, one young person did not leave their house for 6-12 months and had disengaged from education. However, the young person signed up to the project online and enrolled onto the programme digitally.

*“A lot of the children that we’ve supported over the past year have had very low coping skills and very low mental health... For the young people that don’t feel comfortable coming into physical space, we start them off in our programmes digitally.”* **Grant manager, Community Spaces**

## **Challenges and learnings**

### **Reliance on schools to identify underserved young people**

School Transition projects are based in schools and focus on the transition between primary and secondary school, so school engagement is required and these projects’ ability to use other recruitment strategies is limited compared to other strands. This reliance meant some School Transition project grant managers felt they had less control over recruitment.

In Year 3, multiple School Transitions projects wanted to prioritise engaging underserved young people, and often these young people also experienced learning difficulties. Teachers were reluctant to allow these young people to miss lessons for YSA.

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## 3 How projects delivered youth social action

This chapter discusses how projects delivered youth social action, including the format, duration and frequency of YSA projects. It outlines how projects delivered peer support, advocacy and campaigning. It then explores delivery successes and challenges, and the impact of Covid-19 and cost-of-living crisis on project delivery.

### 3.1 Format, duration and frequency of youth social action projects

#### Format

Face to face was the most common delivery format across all strands, followed by blended delivery. Only one of the projects delivered solely online, and this was a Bereavement project.<sup>14</sup> Table 3.1 shows that most School Transitions projects delivered face to face (12), followed by Bereavement projects (11) and half of Community Spaces projects (3).

Grant managers interviewed shared the importance of adapting delivery format according to the changing needs of young people. In Year 3, a Community Spaces was initially delivered online and then progressed to face-to-face activities once young people felt comfortable enough to engage in-person. Format necessarily changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, with projects temporarily switching to online delivery to abide by social distancing restrictions.

**Table 3.1 Project delivery format, overall and by strand**

	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
Face to face	26	11	3	12
Blended	7	5	2	0
Online	1	1	0	0
Unknown	2	0	1	1

#### Duration

Mostly, young people were engaged for a period of between three to six months or longer on projects. This trend was consistent for Bereavement and School Transitions projects but not for Community Spaces. Young people's engagement with Community Spaces projects did not extend beyond six months in duration (see Table 3.2).

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<sup>14</sup> This Bereavement project also reported blended delivery, but according to our data approach as outlined in Appendix B of the technical appendix, we have used their entry in the final monitoring form submission.



**Table 3.2 Duration of engaging young people in projects, overall and by strand**

	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
Less than one week	3	1	0	2
1-4 weeks	1	0	1	0
1-2 months	4	3	0	1
3-6 months	11	3	4	4
More than 6 months	14	9	0	5
Unknown	3	1	1	1

In Year 3 of delivery, some grant managers expressed a preference for a longer project duration to avoid rushing certain elements and to maintain the momentum built from project activities. However, this was not feasible due to resource and staffing constraints.

*"This [reduction in project duration] allowed the project to survive but did limit the impact it could have had."*

#### **Grant manager, School Transitions**

A School Transitions project initially planned a 10-week programme of activities but shortened it to six weeks due to school resource and staffing limitations. They adapted activities in response to this and found that some of their original activities may not have been suitable for younger age groups. This meant that activities were refined and were more age appropriate than their original plans. This adjustment prompted a reconsideration of activity suitability and fostered creativity.

*"It soon became apparent that we were going to have to scale things back quite a lot, so it restricted how much we could do, but I still feel like what we did was successful as well."*

#### **Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Frequency**

Most projects, regardless of strand, delivered activities weekly (see Table 3.). However, Bereavement projects were more likely to meet monthly.

**Table 3.3 Frequency of engagement, overall and by strand**

	All strands (36)	Bereavement (17)	Community Spaces (6)	School Transitions (13)
Daily	1	0	0	1
Weekly	24	9	4	11
Monthly	8	7	1	0
Unknown	3	1	1	1

A School Transitions project found meeting weekly with young people allowed delivery staff to build good relationships with the young people. As a result, the young people felt more comfortable sharing their experiences and thoughts, with project staff than they did with their teachers and were able to discuss more openly what was happening in their lives. As project staff were independent to school staff, this allowed a different element of trust to arise.

*“They felt they could sort of trust us and talk to us maybe in a different way [to their teachers].”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

## 3.2 Delivering youth social action activities

Table 3.4 shows the broad range of YSA activities projects delivered with young people, reflecting the broad criteria of YSA as part of the #iwill Fund.

**Table 3.4 Types of YSA being delivered by projects**

	Type of YSA	Examples
<b>Bereavement</b>	Young people develop resources to help other bereaved young people	Creating YouTube videos to advocate for their project Engaging in community panels to talk about project activity Public speaking through presentations on bereavement
<b>Community Spaces</b>	Young people adapt or create public spaces to improve their use	Improve the design and use of local parks e.g. litter picking, painting birdboxes Youth club created as space where young people can interact, access support, get hot food and exercise Built a mushroom farm due to young people's interest
<b>School Transitions</b>	Older pupils provide 'peer support' to younger pupils or peers	Older pupils act as mentors for younger pupils transitioning into a new environment
	Young people deliver activities to support wellbeing	Raised money and created food parcels for local food bank Sports sessions combined with debating

Across strands and years, projects found successful ways to engage young people in YSA. This varied across projects and included ensuring the project delivery team was stable throughout the project duration, encouraging young people to design and deliver activities using their lived experience and knowledge, creating a safe space for young people to freely express themselves, linking activities to wider social issues, collaborating with project partners and being flexible to adapt to the changing needs of young people.

However, projects experienced challenges in delivery, including working with schools, activity scheduling, maintaining engagement throughout the project, and limitations in activity locations. Despite these challenges, activities remained similar to previous years, within each strand and within projects, with small changes and refinements were made in Year 3 to meet the interests of young people. For example, a School Transitions project shifted from focusing solely on non-contact boxing sessions to incorporating other sports based on feedback from young people in Year 3.

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## Successes

### Ensuring that project delivery staff were stable throughout delivery

Projects with consistent staff within and across delivery years more effectively engaged young people. Consistent staff were more able to build trust with young people, thereby supporting them to share their concerns and their engagement in activities. Young people felt less anxious about engaging in new activities when delivery staff were familiar to them.

*"When they meet each other, they already know us, they've already established a bit of a relationship, a bit of trust...so it reduces the anxiety from the start."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

In Bereavement projects, staff with continuous involvement were better equipped to facilitate activities that encouraged quieter youth to openly express their thoughts on grief and bereavement.

*"We want to make sure they have got the opportunity to share how they are feeling."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

Staff continuity over the project life cycle helped foster relationships with young people, since they were more experienced in building trust with young people after the first and second year of delivery. This familiarity enabled smoother delivery in Year 3.

*"We anticipated all the challenges, and it ran much smoother in Year 3."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### Encouraging young people to share their experiences and express themselves

Projects encouraged young people to share their experiences and express themselves through creative activities. This was through skill development such as training to take on tasks with greater responsibility, learn conflict resolution strategies that helped them interact in a calmer and more direct manner, and providing opportunities to meet with each other in safe spaces.

#### **In the spotlight: Creating a safe space**

Young people felt that their School Transitions project was a welcoming and inclusive space, and this was in part due to the setup of the physical space they met in. This helped fuel creativity and input from all the young people involved.

*"When I walked into a room where it was all in kind of a rectangular shape where you can see everybody, it wasn't one person standing at the front but everyone contributing...It felt really creative and free movement when I was in the room."* **Young person, School Transitions**



Young People taking part in a creative activity - image provided by Priority 1-54

A Bereavement project used creative activities to support more challenging discussions of grief. Creative activities such as painting tote bags were thought to be good for mindfulness, and to also prompt conversations while young people were being engaged in a hands-on activity. Young people described positive changes since being involved in projects in expressing their feelings and how hearing from others with lived experience was especially helpful in feeling less isolated.

*"Since joining I've been more confident to speak about stuff. Before I didn't really speak about the situation and what happened but now I feel more confident because other people have been through it. We all speak about it together."*

#### Young person, Bereavement

Projects also supported young people's skill development to better equip them to share their experiences and express themselves. Staff from a Community Spaces project trained young people in conflict resolution to use in cases of disagreement and, through encouragement and personalised support, helped young people to take on more responsibility. Another Community Spaces project used campaigning to develop young people's skills to express themselves:

*"I think having the ability to make, create, develop and facilitate their own events has really helped them find their place in the world, but also enable them as they are developing [new skills] through the campaign work."*

#### Grant manager, Community Spaces

*Providing structured opportunities for young people to connect with their peers gave young people the space to practice expressing themselves "Very early on, the Year 6s let us know their worries and the*



*students from the high school gave solutions to those worries. so immediately, it's sort of put the Year 6 at ease, and you know that relationship, you see it start to blossom because of that support they're getting from the Year 9s."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Linking project activities to wider social issues**

Projects that linked their activities to wider social issues found this effective in engaging young people in YSA. For example, a Bereavement project focused one of their activities on political discussion and the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Project staff noticed that young people were frequently discussing the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but that they were not allowed to discuss this in school, and so tried to facilitate meaningful engagement around the topic. Grant managers felt that this engagement and discussion helped to challenge views of antisemitism, islamophobia and hatred.

#### **In the spotlight: Linking project activities to wider social issues**

A Community Spaces project linked their activity of cleaning up their local park with the wider global issues of sustainability and climate change. They painted birdboxes, trimmed bushes and tidied the space up, which the grant manager felt led to less graffiti because those young people began taking greater pride in their community.



*Young people painting birdboxes - image provided by Bath Mind*

### **Supporting young people's autonomy and decision-making**

Projects often gave young people the opportunity to design YSA activities and choose their roles in delivery. They were able to steer key elements of the project and co-design the content of workshops and any materials. For example, a School Transitions project supported young people to create a film to showcase their impact, as young people preferred this over writing a report to support their project's funding application:

*"Our youth consultants kind of helped initially steer the entire project right from the off. So, they helped us write the funding proposal and they created a short film as part of it."*

Projects also empowered young people to improve their confidence and social skills by giving them the autonomy to interact with the general public, in a safe and welcoming environment. For example, in Year 2, a Community Spaces project encouraged young people to greet visitors to an arts and crafts market that the project was hosting. This boosted their skills in social interaction and helped them feel connected to others.

Some projects allowed young people to design resources to aid delivery. This was the case for one School Transitions project in Year 2 who identified the nervousness that participants might feel in travelling to and from school. In order to reduce this anxiety, the participants designed a badge that those who were part of the project could wear, to symbolise that they were approachable and available to talk if needed.

### **Leveraging young people's knowledge, skills and experiences**

Across strands and years of delivery, projects leveraged the knowledge and experience that participating young people had to tailor the support according to local context. One bereavement project created tailored bereavement packs based on what young people knew about their schools' needs. This meant that materials were relevant as they were created by young people who understood what was appropriate for their peers. Young people also took this a step further by sharing their experiences and what they learned with other local organisations, for example children's groups.

Another example of leveraging young people's experiences included a School Transitions project utilising project alumni to deliver information sessions. This was beneficial for the project as they had participants to deliver the sessions but also to the young people as they developed their confidence in public speaking.

### **Engaging young people that are underserved and with lived experience in delivery provision**

Projects used the knowledge and experience of underserved young people to enhance their provision. For example, a School Transitions project established a panel of 12 young consultants from diverse backgrounds who had lived experience of mental health issues. These consultants were actively involved in project design and made recommendations based on their expertise and understanding. They steered key aspects of the project and co-designed the content of the workshops. This ensured that any sensitivities were appropriately accommodated, and priority areas of focus were identified.

*"We took the recommendations to them and stuff like this is what young people say are saying, would you agree with that. So, kind of literally youth proofing what our findings were and what the recommendations were."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Collaborating with partners to deliver activities**

Projects collaborated with external stakeholders to support project sustainability. This included support from schools, charities offering specialist resources, and businesses providing financial aid. In Year 2, a School Transitions project focused on maintaining relationships with partner schools for long-term benefits, this meant that initial set up and delivery ran smoothly since links with schools were well established. A Community Spaces project leveraged existing relationships by interacting regularly with teachers and students which helped with engagement and reduced dropout. A

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Bereavement project partnered with a charity to gain expertise on grief and mental health, informing their approach to supporting young people.

### **Adapting to young people's needs**

Adapting to the needs of young people and refining project delivery based on their interests was crucial for success. This was evident in Year 3 of some Bereavement projects, where young people played a significant role in shaping the project according to their interests and capabilities. For example, in one Bereavement project, the young people felt that their school offered very little in the way of bereavement support. During the project, the young people became more comfortable with talking openly about bereavement and expressed a desire to share this with their school, such as through an assembly and setting up lunch-time support groups for other bereaved pupils. As a result of delivering the in-school events, some young people then went on to train bereaved pupils in their school to become bereavement mentors which was not in the original project design. This positively impacted the school community through increased openness around bereavement. Young people's desire to shape the project and their willingness to speak about their bereavement to their peers also surprised school staff, who initially underestimated the contributions of the young people.

### **Challenges and learnings**

#### **Collaborating with partners**

There were some logistical barriers to project delivery, experienced across each year. One barrier was gaining access to physical space where rooms in schools were often changed at short notice. This was sometimes due to difficulties around having easy contact with the staff member that was their liaison for the school the project was hosted. If the contact was a teacher, they were usually teaching all day and so couldn't resolve any issues related to logistics.

*"There's been times where I turn up to a school and they're like, oh there's not a classroom for you and then it's rescheduled..."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

#### **Recruitment and retention of delivery staff**

The short-term nature of YSA funding resulted in projects facing difficulties with recruiting and retaining delivery staff. In Year 3 a School Transitions project struggled with recruitment and retention of staff, combined with staff turnover in the school they partnered with, which impacted delivery. Fortunately, another staff member in their organisation was able to step up and fulfil this role to mitigate any delays to delivery. A Community Spaces overcame this staffing challenge by using alternative funding sources to continue the project.

*"We applied for small pots around our region, but we also just used some of our reserves because it was needed, as it was something that was worthwhile."*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

Projects with high staff turnover found this impacted delivery and timescales. For example, more time was needed for young people and project partners to build relationships with new staff.

#### **Frequency and scheduling of activities**

In Year 2, determining the optimal frequency of project activities posed challenges to projects across all three strands. Initially, monthly meetings proved insufficient as participants struggled to retain information and build relationships. Transitioning to weekly sessions proved demanding on



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participants' time. Bi-weekly sessions were deemed most suitable. In Year 3, frequency-related challenges were rare as projects across strands had already established appropriate session frequencies.

Additionally, scheduling project activities was a recurring challenge for school-based projects in *all* years. Often schools timetabled events when project activities were scheduled which caused lower project attendance.

### **Maintaining engagement and momentum across projects**

Some projects found it difficult to keep up the motivation of young people towards the end of projects. A grant manager found that many would not acknowledge the commitment and work they still had to put in. To overcome this challenge, they linked the project to an external personal development award which helped to motivate and keep the young people on track. The young people saw it as something beneficial to put on their CV.

*"It's an accredited award, so it's basically a personal development award that they gain through a charity called [REDACTED] and that requires them to put 60 hours of work into the project and produce a work of portfolio."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Location of project activities**

The location of project activities was an important learning in Year 2 of the programme. A School Transitions project found that delivering sessions in the secondary school meant the primary school participants felt overwhelmed and out of their comfort zone. As a result, they changed the location to the primary school for their new cohort to ensure younger pupils felt more at ease. This learning was taken into Year 3 of the programme when location was rarely mentioned as a challenge.

### **Project partners' engagement with young people**

Key partners of projects such as teachers were vital to delivery and supporting young people to achieve outcomes over the years of the programme. At times, engaging with these partners was a challenge for some projects where staff were less available. In Year 2, a Bereavement project reported that a teacher didn't provide feedback on some materials that a young person had created as part of peer support and advocacy. This felt demoralising for the young person.

*"I took the pack into school; they took it away and they haven't engaged with that or talked to [the project lead] since. I think it was the wrong teacher I gave it to – he is the support teacher, but he isn't supportive. So, I was confused...it felt weird because I was excited to help my school with that. But they acted like they didn't want it to happen even though they agreed to."*

**Young person, Bereavement**

Some projects across strands encountered challenges when collaborating with local authorities on youth-led actions. Disagreements arose regarding proposed actions by young people to enhance local spaces, and bureaucratic processes hindered timely decision-making. Consequently, some actions were not implemented before the young people completed their project.

## **3.3 Delivering peer support or mentoring**

Peer support or mentoring is a process where two people of similar ages, experience levels, or both, work together to help each other grow. Most Bereavement and School Transitions projects included peer support or mentoring to deliver on their youth social action aims. Over time projects adapted

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their peer support and mentoring offer, in response to the changing needs and interests of participating young people. They listened to feedback from participants around topic coverage or frequency of sessions, and amended delivery accordingly. Lessons learned from peer support delivery related to ensuring mentors received appropriate training so that they could listen to and support their mentee's concerns, in a way that felt psychologically safe for both mentors and mentees. In addition, allowing sufficient time to identify and match mentors and mentees was felt to be important in minimising drop-outs.

## **Successes**

### **Adapting to young people's needs**

Young people interviewed about their experiences of peer support shared that successful delivery involved a combination of structured and ad-hoc peer support activities that met the evolving needs and availability of young people. Projects responded to the evolving needs of young people by being flexible with topic coverage in sessions. For example, a School Transitions project changed their upcoming session plan to cover bullying because a young person mentioned it to their peer mentor.

*"What we think most kids worry about when moving up to secondary school, and what like the least worry was and I think it was a little bit shocking when we did it because I assume that straight away getting lost or not having friends would be at the very top. But at the very top of it was bullying and I think it's really important that bullying and things like that get addressed more."*

#### **Young person, School Transitions**

Projects involved both young people who wanted ongoing, scheduled peer support and young people who wanted more responsive support. Mentors from a School Transitions project observed this need and introduced drop-in mentoring offer where mentors took it in turns to attend a lunchtime mentoring service, to complement the scheduled, one-to-one peer support on offer.

## **Challenges and learnings**

### **Mentor training to ensure readiness to engage in peer support**

Mentor training was essential to equipping mentors with the tools to establish relationships and best support their mentees. To safely deliver peer mentoring, project staff needed to ensure mentors were ready for the responsibility of listening to their mentees' difficulties. All projects had approaches to assess the vulnerability of mentors and mentees, to ensure both were psychologically able to offer or receive peer support. Across all peer mentoring and across all project strands, grant managers and young people interviewed raised the importance of including training on emotional resilience, emotional intelligence and techniques for mentors to support other young people's journey.

Some projects involved mentors training other young people to become mentors. One Bereavement project learned the importance of preparing those mentors for young people disclosing harm. They decided to require a staff member to be present for all peer training, so no young person would disclose without an adult present.

### **Minimising disengagement from mentors and mentees**

Most projects involving peer mentoring required the same number of each mentor and mentee, for an element of one-to-one and ongoing support. This also required both groups to complete the time commitment for peer mentoring. This was challenging where projects struggled to recruit the necessary number of young people or where drop-out was high.

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Successful approaches to minimise mentor and mentee drop-outs were those that focussed on setting expectations for young people around mentor involvement. For example, onboarding plans that included a phased introduction to the project, where staff helped to build mentees' understanding of the programme helped prepare mentors and set expectations. Additionally, some projects shared information about mentees' circumstances and interests with the mentors before they met, so that they could consider the best approach to build a relationship with their mentee.

### 3.4 Delivering advocacy and campaigning<sup>15</sup>

Advocacy is the act of supporting, defending, or arguing for a specific cause or issue. The purpose of advocacy is to bring about change, whether that's accomplished through raising public awareness, increasing support, or influencing policy for a certain issue (Green, 2016).<sup>16</sup> Campaigning involves the organisation and delivery of activities with specific objectives to create change (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2024)<sup>17</sup>, and are usually related to social, political or environmental issues. These activities can include protests, petitions, public demonstrations and media engagement and is more action-orientated than advocacy. Advocacy and campaigning as terms are closely related and often used together (Chandler, 2010)<sup>18</sup>.

Compared to peer support, fewer projects involved advocacy. It was commonly used by Community Spaces projects, and by School Transitions projects to complement peer support. Advocacy and campaigning activities involved raising awareness about a topic important to the participating young people and/or offering community support. These ranged from small to large one-off community or young people events, consultations with local councils or community groups, information or behaviour change campaigns, information or training offered to adults working with young people, like educators, social workers and youth workers, and activities to improve the design and use of community spaces in relation to environmental issues.

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<sup>15</sup> Successes, and challenges and learnings, have not been included in relation to delivering advocacy and campaigning, since there was no information from the qualitative data in this area.

<sup>16</sup> Green, D. (2016, October). *The Power of Advocacy*. Retrieved from Oxford Academic: <https://academic.oup.com/book/10072/chapter/157534767>

<sup>17</sup> The National Council for Voluntary Organisations. (2024). *Political campaigning as a charity*. Retrieved from NCVO: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/running-a-charity/political-campaigning/#what-is-campaigning>

<sup>18</sup> Chandler, I. (2010, July). *Advocacy and Campaigning*. Retrieved from: [https://globaltfokus.dk/images/Pulje/Arkiv/Fagligt\\_Fokus/BOND\\_Advocacy\\_Guide.pdf](https://globaltfokus.dk/images/Pulje/Arkiv/Fagligt_Fokus/BOND_Advocacy_Guide.pdf)



*Young people offering community support - image provided by Youth Focus North East*

### 3.5 Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis

During Years 1 and 2 of #iwill Fund delivery, the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis led to projects having to significantly adapt their original delivery plans. Changes made as a response to these challenges included:

- Delaying project set-up and delivery.
- Moving delivery of activities online, outdoors, or in large spaces that allowed for social distancing.
- Difficulties recruiting young people and having to be more proactive to overcome these barriers.
- Limited capacity of young people who were recruited to engage due to competing demands in their everyday lives (e.g. more challenging home life, difficulties managing schoolwork with lockdown)
- Adverse effects on mental health leading to a need for additional wellbeing support.
- Reducing scope of project activities due to cost (e.g. decreased length of engagement).

These pressures gradually reduced through Years 2 and 3, and most projects were able to operate as they had originally planned by Year 3. However, the increase in poor mental health and wellbeing among young people as a result of both the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living-crisis continued to impact projects, with many adapting their programmes to accommodate these needs. In many cases, this meant a shift in focus towards wellbeing where this might not originally have been a key outcome for the project, or staff having to provide more intensive emotional support.

### Covid-19 pandemic

Managing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic during Year 1 was a significant challenge, both for project setup and delivery. Projects managed to be flexible in responding to changing restrictions, for example by moving activities online or to outdoor or larger indoor venues to comply with social distancing rules. A Community Spaces project exhibited artwork outside a venue rather than inside, while a School Transitions project ran virtual 'taster sessions' for Year 6s instead of face-to-face

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activities. However, despite project innovation, there continued to be major disruptions, including long delays to delivery caused by staffing issues, changes of venue, and limited partnership capacity to engage young people. In addition, most projects were forced to use online methods of delivery, and some felt this meant young people were not very engaged due to the lack of personal contact.

Compared to the challenges faced in Year 1, projects gradually 'returned to normal' in Years 2 and 3 of delivery as restrictions relating to Covid-19 were lifted. In Year 2, some School Transitions projects returned to face-to-face delivery and reported improved engagement of young people as a result. By Year 3, most projects were able to operate as they had originally planned. Projects across all strands reported providing at least some activities face-to-face, and many projects did not mention any impact from Covid-19 in interviews in Year 3.

From Year 2 onwards, recruitment became more straightforward, as reduced social distancing restrictions allowed projects to build face-to-face rapport with young people and, as a result, engage them more effectively in their projects. In addition, some projects felt that once restrictions were lifted, young people were particularly keen to take advantage of opportunities to meet new people, as they had been denied these spaces during the pandemic. For School Transitions projects, young people returning to in-person education meant projects could use staff in schools as key facilitators in encouraging young people to take part in projects.

Although in Years 2 and 3, projects no longer had to adapt to the physical implications of social distancing, the pandemic continued to impact projects through its adverse effects on young people's mental health. Projects observed that the emotional needs of young people had become more complex following Covid-19 pandemic and adapted their project plans to provide additional wellbeing support as a result. For example, in Years 2 and 3, a Community Spaces project widened their eligibility criteria to support young people beyond their original limit of 20 years old, because the grant manager recognised these young people were in high need of support. Another Community Spaces project found they needed to build in additional time and activities to build trust, both between the young people and project staff, and among the young people. The grant manager attributed this to a surfacing of emotional difficulties resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, which only emerged once the restrictions had lifted.

*"There was a lot of work we had to do relating to Covid recovery – it has taken a lot of work to build trust [among the young people]. We're finding it harder to recruit young people...it's taking a few weeks to recruit to next round, compared to a few days previously. Young people are feeling quite apathetic and tired...they want to commit [to the #iwill Fund project] but may find it hard to do it and have the headspace for it."*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

A less common experience affecting specifically Bereavement projects was that the ongoing wellbeing impact of the pandemic led to an increase in the numbers of young people needing support for a bereavement by a friend's suicide. One Bereavement project grant manager noted this had been occurring in Year 3 and recognised the different emotions accompanying this kind of bereavement compared to others in the group. As a result, the project adapted their approach to help young people to identify their mixed emotions, such as guilt, anger, confusion and sadness, which in turn helped them process their grief.

Aside from discussions of supporting young people with their mental health, projects mostly mentioned Covid-19 in Years 2 and 3 to demonstrate the positive differences compared to Year 1. For example, one School Transitions project explained that while they had been unable to run their planned residential trip in the first year, this had been successfully held in both Year 2 and 3. The grant manager felt this trip was a key factor driving achievement of wellbeing outcomes because



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young people engaged in fun activities outdoors. Others simply described delivery as being more straightforward from Year 2 onwards and with reduced pressure on staff compared with Year 1.

*“Certainly, in the last two years, it’s been more consistent in terms of being able to deliver the project fully in the way that we wanted to.”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

## **The cost-of-living crisis**

The effects of the cost-of-living crisis was discussed with grant managers in Years 2 and 3 of delivery.

Many projects in Year 2 and 3 were able to deliver their planned programmes with limited disruption from the cost-of-living crisis. However, from Year 2, projects did notice changes to their operating costs, with increases to heating and electricity bills. Some projects covered this rise in expenses through their own organisations’ funds, or through other fundraising activities. Co-op Foundation recognised this challenge and offered projects a one-off cost-of-living unrestricted grant in April 2023.

Increased operating costs required some projects to scale back their planned activities, mostly during Year 2. For one project, this involved reducing project duration from 12 to eight weeks, removing a free buffet lunch, and limiting the number of therapists and artists available to young people during sessions.

*“This allowed the project to survive but did limit the impact it could have had.”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

The cost-of-living crisis introduced practical barriers to young people’s participation in projects, and projects that proactively responded to that were better able to reduce dropouts. For example, a School Transitions project began offering free snacks to encourage young people to attend whose families were struggling financially, while another conducted a risk assessment of planned activities and did not identify barriers. Reviewing plans and adapting as necessary in response to emerging project risks supported young people from a range of backgrounds to participate in projects.

In Year 3, many projects who had suffered negative effects from the cost-of-living-crisis in Year 2 reported improvements, with one project noting it “never came up” as an issue. However, although the impact of the cost-of-living crisis was less often reported, there were still projects who struggled with funds and had to adapt original plans. For example, one School Transitions project noted that as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, they had scaled back activities involving external staff and instead focused on using their own staff to deliver activities in their existing allotment space. However, they viewed this change positively, particularly due to observing a positive wellbeing effect from encouraging young people to be in nature:

*“Because of the crisis and Covid, bringing things back to nature is really good for the children to see too... We can make ourselves feel really good without spending anything.”*

**Grant manager, School transitions**

As with Covid-19, projects were concerned about the adverse effects the cost-of-living crisis was having on their participants’ mental health, and often chose to provide more intensive wellbeing support counselling to meet this need. For example, in Year 2, one Bereavement project saw an increase in the number of counselling sessions required for young people to be ready to move on to delivering YSA. As this was beyond the six sessions funded by the #iwill Fund, the organisation self-funded counselling for 11 young people to allow them to reach a point where they could progress to delivering YSA.

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*“Everything is far more expensive, we don’t get a lot of money from the Co-op Foundation, for example for heating and lighting, we are having to cover it through other means. We need the Co-op Foundation to know how much is being done [by us]. If we were to do the bare minimum from what we get the grant from, there will be a serious safeguarding concern. We stopped at six [counselling] sessions, but for those with high needs (11 kids) we paid for additional sessions.”*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

Projects continued to adapt their delivery to address the increased mental health issues due to the cost-of-living crisis during Year 3. A School Transitions project, for instance, changed how their programme was delivered to help with increased stress among young people caused by financial worries at home. In particular, they encouraged staff to observe and support young people, as well as providing more emotional support through mentoring than originally planned.

In Year 3, some projects chose to incorporate the cost-of-living crisis into their youth social action activities. This included running food drives and campaigns that centred around helping the community with their increased costs. For example, one Community Spaces project ran a ‘multicultural picnic’ for the community to come and share food, collect food parcels to take home, and access extra support via external services who attended.



## 4 Impact of #iwill Fund projects

This chapter discusses the impact of the #iwill Fund projects on young people and the wider communities in which the projects took place.

### 4.1 Impact of #iwill Fund projects on young people

**Projects were evaluated against seven outcomes relating to personal, social and skills development that young people could be expected to achieve from participating in the #iwill Fund projects. Table 4.1 Young people outcomes**

below shows these outcomes grouped around the themes of wellbeing, confidence, connectedness, skills and influence. In Year 3 of project delivery, an additional outcome looking at personal journeys was added for bereavement projects only, to reflect learning from Year 2. This outcome was measured through qualitative interviews only.

**Table 4.1 Young people outcomes**

Theme	Outcome
Connectedness	Young people feel part of a wider community
Connectedness	Young people feel they have good-quality relationships based on mutual trust and empathy
Wellbeing	Young people are better equipped to cope with challenging situations
Influence	Young people feel they have influenced support, services or spaces in the community or school
Confidence	Young people have the confidence in themselves to set meaningful personal goals
Skills	Young people develop teamwork and planning skills
Skills	Young people gain communication skills (including speaking, presenting and listening)

Projects reported the number of young people (both direct participants and indirect beneficiaries) who achieved each outcome to Co-op Foundation in their biannual monitoring forms. They included explanations to justify how they met the outcomes they reported young people achieving. Projects were not expected to meet all the outcomes. Outcomes data is based on 36 projects who reliably provided figures across each year of their delivery.

Outcomes were evidenced in a number of ways, and projects were not restricted in how they gathered this evidence. For example, evidence was gathered through surveys, informal group discussions or observations.

### Summary of achieved outcomes

Table 4.2 summarises the overall numbers of projects and young people (both direct participants and beneficiaries) reported to have achieved each outcome in the monitoring data. This table shows that high numbers of projects reported achieving each outcome, ranging from 33 to 36 of the 36 projects that consistently reported through to Year 3. The number of young people reported to have achieved each outcome did not correlate with the proportion of projects achieving that outcome.

The most common young people outcome reported was feeling part of a wider community: projects reported 23,259 young people achieved this. This is higher than the second-most commonly achieved outcome—young people feeling better equipped to cope with challenging situations—which projects reported 11,588 young people achieved. This compares to 7,481 young people reported to have gained communication skills (including speaking, presenting and listening), which was the least commonly achieved outcome.

**Table 4.2 Number of projects and cumulative number of young people reported to have achieved each outcome between 2019-2023**

Theme	Outcome	Number of projects reported each outcome	Cumulative number of young people reporting achieving outcome over the three years
Connectedness	Young people feel part of a wider community	36/36	23,259
Wellbeing	Young people are better equipped to cope with challenging situations	36/36	11,588
Influence	Young people feel they have influenced support, services or spaces in the community or school	35/36	10,463
Connectedness	Young people feel they have good-quality relationships based on mutual trust and empathy	35/36	9,935
Confidence	Young people have the confidence in themselves to set meaningful personal goals	33/36	9,796
Skills	Young people develop teamwork and planning skills	36/36	9,470
Skills	Young people gain communication skills (including speaking, presenting and listening)	36/36	7,481

Source: Monitoring data submitted to Co-op Foundation.

Table 4.3 shows the cumulative numbers of young people who reported each outcome, broken down by strand. The table is colour-coded to show the relative prevalence of young people achieving that outcome within each strand, with darker colours indicating that an outcome was more widely achieved than other outcomes within the strand.

For Bereavement projects, coping with challenging situations was the most commonly-achieved outcome, with 1,734 young people having achieved this. For both Community Spaces and School Transitions, the most commonly-achieved outcome was feeling part of a wider community (5,119 and 16,708, respectively). For both Bereavement and Community Spaces projects, gaining communication skills was the least commonly-reported outcome for young people within each of those strands (1,048 and 1,685, respectively). For School Transitions, the least commonly-reported outcome was influencing support, services or spaces within their community or school (4,058).

**Table 4.3 Cumulative number of young people achieving outcomes during the funding period 2020-2023) – by strand**

	Cope with challenging situations	Meaningful personal goals	Part of a wider community	Good-quality relationships	Teamwork and planning skills	Communication skills	Influenced support, services or spaces in community
Community Spaces	3634	3814	5119	3073	3789	1685	5049
School Transitions	6220	4608	16708	5460	4498	4748	4058
Bereavement	1734	1374	1432	1402	1183	1048	1356

Source: Monitoring data submitted to Co-op Foundation. Colour shading indicates highest (green) to lowest (white) numbers within each strand.

### Many outcomes were mutually reinforcing

During the interviews with grant managers and young people, they commonly reported that achieving one outcome often reinforced achieving another. Grant managers and young people described how improvements in confidence can improve wellbeing, and improving communication skills can improve the quality of relationships or confidence. For example, improving communication skills improved the relationships between young people in a School Transitions project by enabling them to talk about their feelings instead of responding with anger.

*“They used to have massive rows because they didn’t know each other before they came here... one would be in tears and the other would be angry and then it would swap. But they are so good now at talking to each other about how they feel and what would make it better, and what the other person’s done to upset them. They’re just great and I’m sure some of it has come from this training.”*

**School pastoral lead, School Transitions**

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## Personal circumstances of young people influenced the extent to which outcomes were achieved

Across all intended outcomes for young people, grant managers reported that the personal circumstances of some young people influenced the extent to which outcomes were achieved. They described how factors such as poor mental health or well-being, experiences of trauma, SEND, or family conflict could change the level of support young people needed to be able to stay engaged in a project. This sometimes meant that a greater proportion of project time had to be spent on initial engagement and building relationships with staff to prepare young people to take part. Poor pre-existing relationships between young people in the project group, for example from a school setting, could also impact how much time staff needed to invest in creating and maintaining cohesion among the group. In some cases, grant managers acknowledged that some young people required more support than a project had the capacity to provide.

Grant managers reported examples of adjusting the way the project was delivered to adapt to young people's needs. This included focusing more on progress than achieving specific outcomes, or spending more time addressing mental health issues and coping skills during the initial period of engagement. One School Transitions project changed the location of peer support for a young person who was feeling "embarrassed" by taking part and required bespoke support to stay engaged. After this change, the young person excelled, surprising the grant manager with how much progress they had made following a challenging start.

*"One in particular really struggled and I think felt quite embarrassed to be part of the project, but he did come along. He didn't connect with the mentor and he struggled with the whole thing. It took a lot of work from the mentor and [staff] but it really turned him around, his confidence – after a few months working with this boy, they just couldn't believe it. [At the start] he did anything he could not to be involved, throwing things around and not engaging at all. They found another space for him, because he was quite embarrassed and wasn't keen on all the group things. He wanted it to just be him and his mentor... It took a long time and a lot of work but we knew that we could do it. It was a voluntary thing and he turned up to sessions so he clearly wanted it, but he found it so difficult to accept the support and be in that environment."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

## Young people's overall satisfaction with the projects

The young people interviewed reported a positive experience of taking part, and had identified benefits to their personal, social and skills development. Some young people acknowledged that they had felt nervous about joining the project, but this soon eased shortly after they had joined.

*"I was also quite shy but very quickly I got to know everyone else."*

**Young person, School Transitions**

Making new friends or spending time with others was commonly described by young people as a benefit of taking part. In addition to making social connections, the opportunity to meet other young people also helped to develop their confidence. This was especially true for those who felt 'different' from many of their peers. Young people from underserved communities (e.g. LGBTQIA+ or young carers) said they liked feeling part of a wider community of other young people like them, as it gave them a sense of belonging. Similarly, young people who participated in Bereavement projects commonly described the benefits of connecting with other young people who had experienced bereavement, which offered them a level of understanding they had not necessarily experienced from their peers.

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*“It’s comforting as well. Just being around people that understand me is comforting.”*

#### **Young person, Bereavement**

Young people also described feeling a sense of pride and achievement for having taken part in the project, for example from helping others, learning a new skill or from creating something as part of a group, such as making a video or building a ‘bug hotel’.

*“I definitely felt proud after I was done because I felt like I’d helped quite a few people out... there were lots of kids that came out of it feeling a lot more confident and happy about starting school.”*

#### **Young person, School Transitions**

### **Discussion of each achieved young people outcome**

#### **Views on outcome 1: Young people feel part of a wider community**

##### **Monitoring data**

Feeling part of a wider community was the most commonly-reported outcome achieved by young people, based on the monitoring data. All projects reported achieving this outcome, which was achieved in total by 23,259 young people. Unlike all other young people outcomes, which all peaked in Year 2, achievement of this outcome increased across each year of delivery. In Year 1, 2,423 young people were reported to have achieved this outcome, followed by 5,628 young people in Year 2 and 15,208 in Year 3. Grant manager interviews reinforced the finding that increased connection to a wider community was a key outcome.

*“The kind of theme of being connected to each other and the school is... one of the strongest things that comes out of it.”*

#### **Grant manager, School Transitions**

Broken down by strand, this is the most commonly reported outcome for Community Spaces and School Transitions (5,119 and 16,708). It is the second-most common outcome for young people taking part in Bereavement projects (1,432 cumulatively achieved this across the years of funding).

##### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

The type of community young people felt connected to varies by the type of project. Although bereavement projects less commonly reported examples of young people feeling more connected to a wider community beyond their group, the sense of community they created within the group was important. Young people in Bereavement projects described the importance of feeling part of a community of other young people with similar experiences, where they felt their grief could be understood. Giving young people the opportunity to connect over their shared experience of grief helped to create relationships between young people who otherwise would not have met.

*“Young people who didn’t know each other, who are in a different year group – it was just so lovely to see them forge these relationships and what we tend to find is that the older ones would feel quite protective of the younger ones... helping build that empathy.”*

#### **Grant manager, Bereavement**

Activities supporting young people to share their views and experiences, or working towards a common goal with others they wouldn’t usually get the opportunity to mix with (e.g. a different year group) were common ways for projects to help young people feel part of a wider community. In particular, including opportunities for young people to work together one-to-one (as in peer mentoring)



or small groups was also noted as being particularly effective by grant managers, as it allowed young people to build their confidence, communication skills and wellbeing.

School Transitions projects described how young people built friendships with others who were also mentoring or being mentored, in addition to the existing mentor/mentee relationship. For young people making the transition from primary to secondary school, a feeling of community was also built through a general sense of knowing a network of young people in older year groups. This supported young people to experience a sense of belonging within the wider school community.

*“There were some kids in the project who were in primary school at the time that recognised us when they came up [to secondary school] and came up to talk with us, because we do have badges. it was quite nice to be able to talk with kids from the younger year.”*

### Young person, School Transitions

Examples of barriers to building connections to a wider community related primarily to individual young peoples’ needs and circumstances. In particular, grant managers reported that anxiety or embarrassment prevented some young people from engaging in the projects. Other projects experienced conflicting support needs, such as trying to involve young people with behaviours of concern - whilst still creating a “nurturing” environment for quieter young people taking part.



Young people take part in a group activity as part of a School Transitions project. Source: Image provided by Priority 1-54.

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## Views on outcome 2: Better equipped to cope with challenging situations

### Monitoring data

Being better equipped to cope with challenging situations was the second most commonly reported outcome achieved by young people. All projects reported young people achieving this outcome, reaching 11,588 young people. Grant manager interviews supported this being an important and widely-achieved outcome, reflecting that one of the core goals of most projects is to support young peoples' wellbeing.

Young people being better equipped to cope with challenging situations was the most commonly reported achieved outcome for Bereavement projects (1,734 young people), second most common outcome for School Transitions projects (6,220 young people) and fourth most common outcome for Community Spaces projects (3,634 young people).

### Interviews with grant managers and young people

Coping with difficult emotions (especially grief) formed a core part of the Bereavement strand and was the primary wellbeing outcome for these projects. An important part of this was finding belonging among a peer group of people with similar experiences, as young people often reported feeling different from friends who had not been bereaved. As well as sharing their emotions, learning specific emotional literacy skills was a key factor in helping young people to achieve this outcome for Bereavement projects. One project did this by teaching young people about how thoughts affect the way we feel, based on a CBT model. Some Bereavement projects reported young people going on to talk more to their families about their grief, as a result of feeling more confident in their communication skills and knowing how to talk about it through the project.

*"We did the whirlpool of grief with them, and she was able to talk about where she was in that situation and she actually took it home. I can't remember the relative that she'd lost now, but she took it to... members of her family and they were able to look at it."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

### In the spotlight: Creativity for coping with feelings

A bereavement project used creative activities to help young people cope with their feelings, including painting a bag, art classes or sketching. The young people could use the crafts they made to help remember the person they lost, but creating together also helped to start off conversations and gave them an opportunity to practise mindfulness.

Moreover, the project used fun activities to give the young people permission to be happy and laugh after experiencing bereavement. They described how parents said they felt like they had got a bit of their child back again after taking part.

*"We do different drawings and then we play board games...it's therapeutic and relaxing."* **Young person, Bereavement**

Community Spaces projects had more varied indicators for this outcome. Though some projects had less of an explicit focus on directly supporting young people to be able to cope with challenging situations, there were recurring mentions of projects being run as a 'safe space' where young people could talk openly to their peers. One project that brought young people together through working in the outdoors set up a youth club for young people to talk with their peers and access support, while also getting hot food and exercise. This allowed young people to open up about issues they felt were not tolerated well by the broader community, such as drug use, mental health, and LGBTQIA+ issues. Many of the young people involved stayed on for the third year of the project to become mentors.

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A key purpose of School Transitions projects was to reduce young people's anxiety around the transition from primary to secondary school and support them to better cope with difficult emotions around this. Again, this was achieved by a mix of learning emotional literacy skills and exercises such as breathing techniques, and sharing with other young people who were going through (or had recently gone through) the transition from primary to secondary school. The peer mentoring part that was common to many of these projects allowed young people time to build up a strong relationship with someone who understands through their shared experience.

*"Sometimes you can have a worse experience coming up to school, so talking about it kind of feels like you're reliving it a little bit. But when you see how many other kids were experiencing the same thing as what you were, it makes you feel a lot better."*

**Young person, School Transitions**

### **Views on outcome 3: Feel they have influenced support, services or spaces in their community**

#### **Monitoring data**

Feeling that young people have influenced support, services or spaces in their community is the third most common reported outcome achieved by young people, based on the monitoring data. All but one project (35) reported achieving this outcome, reaching 10,463 young people. Achievement of this outcome peaked in the second year of the projects.

Achievement of this outcome differs by project strand. While it was the second most reported outcome for young people taking part in Community Spaces projects (5,049 young people), it was the least-reported outcome for School Transitions projects (4,058 young people). It was the third least-commonly reported outcome for Bereavement projects (1,356). Grant manager interviews suggest that this may be because School Transitions projects were more likely to use a structured process to peer mentoring, with less room for young people to influence the direction of the project compared to Community Spaces projects. Interviews with grant managers and young people on Bereavement projects suggest that while some young people took part in advocacy work to influence how services or their community view young people's grief, other young people in Bereavement projects preferred not to get involved in this kind of outreach, due to a lack of confidence or not wanting to be perceived as 'different'.

#### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

In interviews, grant managers and young people reported young people having influence on projects or services to varying extents. More commonly, young people were offered some choice in what the project covered or how it was run. For example, a School Transitions project focused their group discussions on the topics Year 6 mentees said they felt most worried about. Some projects, especially those involving campaigning, offered more choice, such as young people in a School Transitions project getting to choose the topic they wanted to raise awareness about before making a video. Less commonly, projects supported young people to engage in larger-scale strategic decision-making for the project or organisation, such as taking part in a youth steering group or as a school ambassador.

*"Simple stuff like [school ambassadors] really made a difference. But also, for the kids that were doing the project, it actually showed that the school were listening to some of their ideas."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

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In Year 2, young people talked in more detail about the importance of active engagement from staff and other adults. They described how adult input could unlock access for young people to influence support, services or spaces, and connect them with influential people, such as local councillors.

#### **Views on outcome 4: Young people feel they have good-quality relationships based on mutual trust and empathy**

##### **Monitoring data**

This outcome was the fourth most commonly-reported outcome achieved by young people, as reported in the monitoring data. All projects except one (35) reported achieving this outcome, reaching 9,935 young people. This is well-supported by the findings from the grant manager and young people interviews, which show that both young people and grant managers feel this outcome was broadly achieved and achievable.

By strand, for Bereavement this is the second most-commonly reported outcome (1,402 cumulatively). For Community Spaces this is less commonly achieved, as the sixth most-commonly reported outcome of the seven (3,073). For School Transitions projects it is the third most commonly-reported outcome (5,460).

##### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

However, grant managers of projects with a peer support or mentoring element described how these open and empathetic relationships were important to achieving this outcome. There are fewer Community Spaces projects that incorporate a mentoring element, resulting in comparatively less one-to-one or small-group interaction where young people are able to build this kind of relationship.

Bereavement projects based on peer support or sharing experiences report that trusting, empathetic relationships are both a key outcome and a necessity for the success of the project. Both grant managers and young people describe the importance of being able to discuss experiences of bereavement with other people who have been through similar things and therefore understand. This was particularly important as young people described how their existing friends who hadn't experienced bereavement were less able to support them well. The act of sharing experiences with each other helped to create these trusting connections.

*“Your friends can support you but they don't know your position as they've not been through it...so it's better to talk to people who have.”*

**Young person, Bereavement**

Similarly, the trusting relationship built between mentors and mentees in peer-mentoring projects (especially School Transitions) is described as key to their success. Young people also note that this relationship benefits mentors as well as mentees, as the mentors describe feeling a sense of pride in being able to support a younger person in this way.

In Year 2, both young people and grant managers explained more about the importance of trust and reliability in the relationship between project staff and young people. Young people described how disappointing it could be when staff did not honour their commitments. They valued these relationships more when the communication felt two-way, with mutual respect.

#### **Views on outcome 5: Confidence in themselves to set meaningful personal goals**

##### **Monitoring data**

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Young people having confidence in themselves to set meaningful personal goals is the fifth most commonly-reported outcome, based on the monitoring data. This outcome was the least commonly achieved by projects (33), covering 9,796 young people.

By strand, this is the fourth most commonly-achieved outcome for Bereavement projects (1,374 young people achieving this, cumulatively), the third most common for Community Spaces (3,814) and fifth most common for School Transitions (4,608).

### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

While the outcome specified by Co-op Foundation specifically refers to confidence in relation to young people setting meaningful personal goals, young people and grant managers discussed a much broader range of aspects of confidence during the interviews. In some instances, interviewees connected improvements in communication skills to increases in confidence interacting with other young people or volunteering for tasks such as presenting. Young people described how this increase in confidence wasn't limited to the project, and how, after taking part, they felt more confident in other similar situations at home or school.

*"There are points in class where they say, 'hey, does anyone want to come up and show or present in front of the class?' That definitely made me used to feel like I do not want to go up... but once I'd done [the project] I was definitely like, 'oh, I want to go up and show people what I've done', because I felt a lot more proud of my work than I used to."*

### **Young person, School Transitions**

Confidence is also linked to improvements in wellbeing and coping with challenging situations. For example, Bereavement projects involving peer support identified improved confidence among young people as they grew more comfortable sharing their experiences with the group.

In Year 2, grant managers more specifically described how they helped to build young peoples' confidence in goal setting. This included incorporating personal goals into the start of a project and reflecting on these at the end. Some projects even discussed goal setting for the future beyond the project. Young people who took part in this goal setting said they felt more confident as a result, and that they had a greater sense of direction when approaching situations.

## **Views on outcome 6: Develop teamwork and planning skills**

### **Monitoring data**

Developing teamwork and planning skills is the second least commonly-reported outcome achieved by young people (after gaining communication skills), based on the monitoring data. All 36 projects reported achieving this outcome, covering 9,470 young people.

By strand, for Bereavement this is the second least commonly-reported outcome (1,183 cumulatively). For Community Spaces it is the third least-commonly-reported outcome (3,789). While for School Transitions this is the second least commonly-reported outcome (4,498).

### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

Projects that involved activities where young people worked together to design and deliver a project were most effective in achieving this outcome. In this context, the outcome feels widely achievable. Most commonly, this is typical of Community Spaces projects that involve advocacy or campaigning. However, other types of projects can include elements of this too, such as one School Transitions



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project involving sport, where young people built teamwork skills through activities like creating their own games.

*“There were lots of activities where we were doing it with different people. I learned to be around those people and do stuff with them.”*

### **Young person, School Transitions**

Other projects introduced this skill in a less explicit way. For example, some young people reported being able to practise their teamworking skills while mentoring younger students in School Transition projects, as they feel they had to work together to be able to communicate well.

## **Views on outcome 7: Gain communication skills**

### **Monitoring data**

Gaining communication skills was the least commonly-reported outcome achieved by young people, based on the monitoring data. All projects (36) reported achieving this outcome, reaching 7,481 young people.

By strand, for both Bereavement and Community Spaces this is the least commonly-reported outcome (respectively, 1,048 and 1,685 cumulatively). While for School Transitions this is the fourth most commonly-reported outcome (4,748).

### **Interviews with grant managers and young people**

Differences in achievement of this outcome by strand could be due to the higher number of School Transitions projects using peer mentoring, as interpersonal skills gained through this type of relationship were top of mind for young people in the qualitative interviews. Young people who participated as peer mentors described how they have improved the way they communicate, and how clear communication has been important for building a relationship with their mentee.

*“[I learnt] more communication skills. When you’re talking through it all, you have to make sure you’re getting your words out clearly and that they understand what you’re saying.”*

### **Young person, School Transitions**

During the interviews, grant managers reported a range of examples young people were offered such as training and other opportunities to practise communication skills. In particular, they mentioned young people being able to develop and practise presentation skills (e.g. for school assemblies), as this is something they do less often in other settings. Young people said that getting the chance to practise this improved their confidence to present again in the future.

*“There is a lot of public speaking and a lot of talking to people that you never met before, so at first it can seem quite scary... but once you do it once it becomes a lot better.”*

### **Young person, School Transitions**

Presentation skills were less commonly highlighted by Bereavement projects. Instead, these focused more on communicating with empathy and actively listening to others. Grant managers reported that regularly sharing sensitive experiences with peers in these projects improved young people's ability to listen and respond with empathy.

Across strands, young people also spoke about the importance of staff encouragement and positive feedback in helping them develop their communication skills and confidence talking to others.

## Views on outcome for Bereavement strand only: Personal journeys of young people

In Year 3 of delivery, grant managers for Bereavement projects were also asked in interviews about young peoples' personal journeys with grief and bereavement, as a result of taking part in the project.

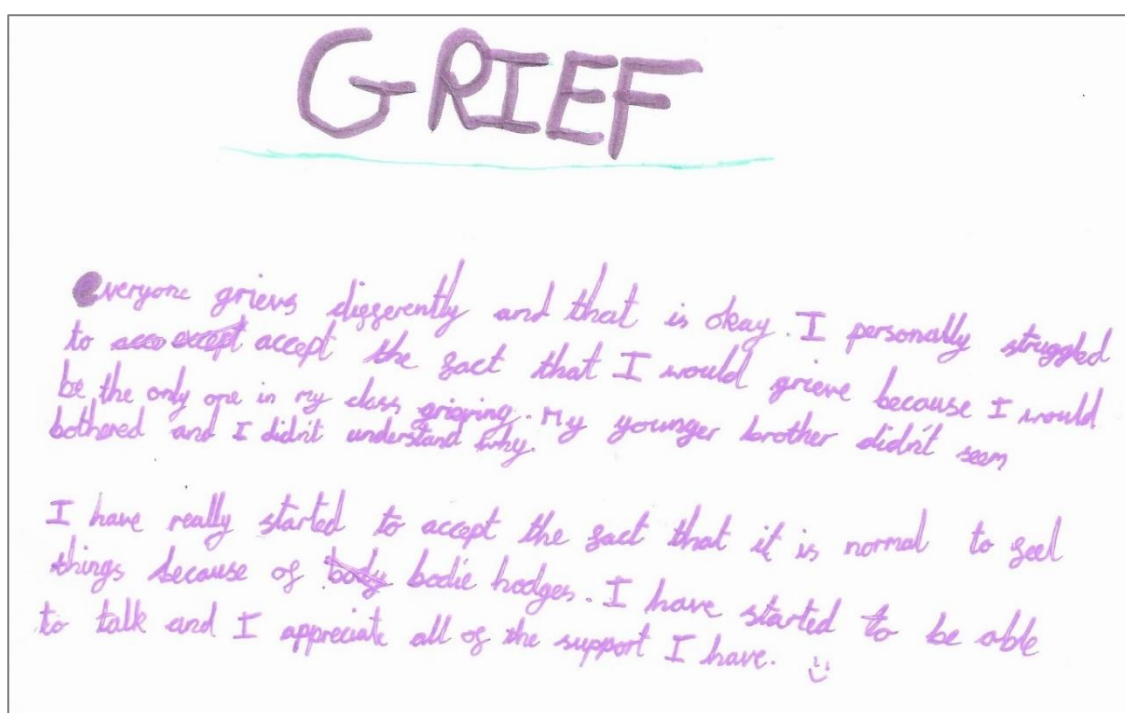
Grant managers reported a change in young people's ability to acknowledge their emotions related to grief. They described how young people would begin the project unable to name the emotions they were experiencing (for example, anger or confusion). Talking to others experiencing grief and learning more about emotions helped them to process these experiences, which made it easier to cope day-to-day.

*"What we learn in these sessions is emotional literacy and [we] create a safe space for everyone to talk about their grief, and [they learn] to hold each other through that."*

### Grant manager, Bereavement

More broadly, grant managers reported that young people's understanding of grief and loss had grown as a result of taking part in the project, and they had a stronger awareness of how grief can affect their thoughts and behaviour. For young people coming from a strongly religious background, non-judgemental and confidential discussions offered an opportunity to explore their views and feelings more openly about death and grief.

Becoming a bereavement advocate as part of a project helped young people transform their grief into something positive. By using their experiences to help other young people who had experienced a bereavement, young people were able to recognise what they have learned through their bereavement and their emotional journey since.



A young person explores how they have started to accept the process of grieving as a result of taking part in the project (see below for text). Source: Image provided by the Bodie Hodges Foundation.

*"Everyone grieves differently and that is okay. I personally struggled to accept the fact that I would grieve because I would be the only one in my class grieving. My younger brother didn't seem bothered and I didn't understand why. I have really started to accept the fact that it is normal to feel*

*things because of Bodie Hodges. I have started to be able to talk and I appreciate all of the support I have.”*

**Young person, Bereavement**

## 4.2 Impact of #iwill Fund projects on communities

In addition to outcomes focused on young people, the funding programme focused on achieving three outcomes for the wider community. In Year 3, these outcomes were refined to better reflect the changes we were expecting to achieve within each strand, rather than all strands having the same target outcomes (see Table 4.4). The original outcomes focused on the involvement of young people in wider services and spaces, changes in wider community perceptions of young people, and plans for further YSA. The new outcomes instead focus more on strengthening the types of community connections most relevant and appropriate for each strand, and allow more flexibility for projects to identify other community-focused outcomes they have achieved. Although projects reported on achievement of these outcomes as part of their regular monitoring data, this data is of limited quality (for details, see Appendix B in the [technical appendix](#)). As such, findings about community outcomes in this section are based on evidence from the qualitative interviews with grant managers only.

**Table 4.4 Community outcomes by strand**

	<b>Outcome for the community: Bereavement</b>
<b>1</b>	The wider community benefits as a result of young people receiving bereavement support
<b>2</b>	Develop relationships with businesses/community groups/schools
<b>3</b>	Any other benefits you have identified
	<b>Outcome for the community: Community Spaces</b>
<b>1</b>	Young people benefit from improvements to their communities and take pride in their local area
<b>2</b>	The wider community's perceptions of young people have changed
<b>3</b>	Any other benefits you have identified
	<b>Outcome for the community: School Transitions</b>
<b>1</b>	There is increased cohesion within the school community (for example, between pupils)
<b>2</b>	The wider community's perceptions of young people have changed
<b>3</b>	Any other benefits you have identified

### Defining community

Across outcomes, grant managers commonly reported differences in how they would define ‘the wider community’ in relation to their project. This reflected how different types of projects had more or less involvement with the general public, depending on the way the projects were conducted and the project setting. Projects working within a school placed greater emphasis on connections and community within or between schools, meaning that impacts on the broader community beyond the school(s) tended to be out of scope. Projects involving a group within a school therefore typically defined ‘wider community’ as the rest of the school beyond their project group, while Community Spaces projects considered members of the public present in the local area. This difference in definitions of the word ‘community’ made the outcome ‘wider community's perceptions of young people have changed’ particularly difficult for projects to track or evaluate.

*“It’s hard for me to see the two outcomes happening beyond the schools that I work with.”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

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These views and experiences reflect challenges faced by the wider #iwill Fund and other match funders of the Fund.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion of achieved community outcome

### Views on community outcome 1: Support, services or spaces are better informed and accessed by young people

Grant managers offered some examples of support, services and spaces taking on board young peoples' views to various extents, for example, taking forward young peoples' suggestion to have a 'worry box' in school to help other pupils to access support anonymously. However, these focused on how young people influenced their own service, organisation or school responds to young people's views, rather than the impact on other services in the community. Few examples were given of improved access. Where this was reported, it was in the context of young people being more likely to access support because it no longer felt as stigmatised, having had a positive experience taking part in an #iwill Fund project.

Some organisations involved young people in decision-making processes at both project and organisational level. This included a Bereavement project that held a youth steering group. This group helped to make decisions about the project itself and also allowed its members to attend board meetings for the wider organisation on a rotating basis, giving young people a say in how services were run. In School Transitions projects, some young people became involved in school leadership, for example, as an ambassador or member of a school parliament.

Projects based in schools reported changes to the way teachers or school staff approached support on particular issues. For School Transitions projects, this related to teachers gaining a better understanding of what young people were worried about when moving up to secondary school, and how teachers could best support them. Bereavement projects also provided examples of how they have influenced schools to be less afraid of talking about death, leading to schools allowing bereaved pupils to share their experiences with others at the school.

Projects that involved advocacy or campaigning reported influencing support or services about issues they care about. For example, a Community Spaces project successfully campaigned for Arts Council England to consider comic books and related art forms more seriously, to promote better funding for the genre.

*"They put pressure on the Arts Council and spoke to a lot of our friends and colleagues... Now the Arts Council have an internal working group to think about how they can support comics better."*

#### Grant manager, Community Spaces

A small number of projects reported that they were either expanding or were being asked to expand, due either to their success or because they identified a need that hadn't previously been recognised or filled. For example, several School Transitions grant managers described planning or receiving local authority funding for further projects, due to the positive reputation their #iwill Fund projects had received.

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<sup>19</sup> #iwill Fund Learning Hub. (2019). *Evidence Workstream: [Community Benefit and Youth Social Action](https://www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/iwill_fund_learning_hub_-_evidence_workstream_-_community_benefit_and_youth_social_action.pdf)*. Retrieved from: [https://www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/iwill\\_fund\\_learning\\_hub\\_-\\_evidence\\_workstream\\_-\\_community\\_benefit\\_and\\_youth\\_social\\_action.pdf](https://www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/iwill_fund_learning_hub_-_evidence_workstream_-_community_benefit_and_youth_social_action.pdf)

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*"[School] definitely doesn't have a transition programme and they also don't have a PTA. I'm in conversation with the head...about how we can do transition programmes. We've been asked by another school to do one."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

### **Views on community outcome 2: Wider community's perceptions of young people have changed**

Grant managers described some different ways in which young people interacted with the wider community. Some projects involving campaigning or advocacy showcased young people's work through outreach such as presentations to others in the community, which helped to promote a positive image of young people as caring, hard-working and/or knowledgeable at the same time as raising awareness of their cause. Grant managers of projects involving outdoor work reported young people being physically visible in the community when volunteering helped to change the wider community's perceptions, as evidenced by comments from passers-by.

*"It was nice to actually be able to do something that actually helps other people around the community, and I felt like the public, they seemed a lot more interested in it, especially because we were young people doing it."*

**Young person, Community Spaces**

School Transitions projects reported changing perceptions among adults in the school community, including teachers and parents. They reported that the maturity and empathy demonstrated by peer mentors while taking part helped adults to see them as capable and responsible.

*"When [the mentors] come back to the high school, [the staff] have seen them then be a positive role model, and be mature, like helping out and doing tasks with the mentees."*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

Even when projects were unable to evidence that perceptions of young people were changed, they nevertheless felt that they had promoted a positive image of young people. This occurred through a variety of methods, including presentations to others in the community and having advocacy campaigns. One Bereavement project included an advocacy element where young people managed an Instagram account and organised panels to speak about their role and actions. The grant manager described how it was challenging to measure an impact, but that the response from the community to young people's efforts had overall been positive.

*"It's hard to measure the impact on the wider community, but we could feel the resonance there."*

**Grant manager, Bereavement**

A Community Spaces project was recognised by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for the work the young people had been doing to improve spaces for LGBTQIA+ young people within their city. The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is a major independent funder of projects supporting nature, equality and communities and had invited the Community Spaces project to apply for funding, with the view of expanding the work they had been doing within their community.

In Year 2, projects gave examples of local councillors championing projects and seeking out young people's input. There were no further examples of this provided by grant managers during interviews at the end of Year 3. However, young people from one project delivering in Year 3 noticed the lack of diversity in their local council and were concerned it would not represent people like them. They perceived that the council members were all White, male, much older and only came from a more affluent background despite their town having a varied socioeconomic make-up, which meant that the



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young people did not feel confident that the councillors would understand the problems they faced. Additionally, the young people had noticed that older people in their community had expressed negative stereotypes about young people, such as associating young people with antisocial behaviour. They set up a youth discussion group to represent young people's views, then worked together to lobby the council. They aimed to get the council to better understand that young people are more than the stereotype of committing antisocial behaviour, and to change the council's overall perception of young people.

### **Views on community outcome 3: Plans to deliver more YSA as a result of project**

During the interviews, grant managers less commonly shared established plans to continue YSA as a result of delivering the project. Those who did, described either individual young people who have been inspired to do advocacy, or young people taking part in volunteering related to the original project. This included volunteering for organisations that a project has partnered with (for example, a food bank), or, in larger organisations, opportunities to keep volunteering at the same organisation after the end of the project, where there is a clear path for how to stay involved. Projects reported similar routes to further YSA during the second year of the evaluation period.

*“Action for Conservation are quite a busy young people’s organisation working across Greater Manchester, and they used the meeting place one week... One of the young people signed up to be a green leader, and she then became part of the Eco-Park Group.”*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

Grant managers of projects involving peer mentoring reported young people who took part as mentees wanting to become mentors, or indirect beneficiaries wanting to become advocates.

*“[One young person] delivered some of the #iwill programme... he’s now doing his Level 2 in Youth Work. He started volunteering when was 16 with us, and... he’s now on a full-time salary with us, which is great.”*

**Grant manager, School Transitions**

Even where grant managers did not report definite plans for young people to continue YSA in the future, occasionally they described how the young people participating in their projects seemed more likely to do other charity work alongside their current project, or to take more care of the environment outside of the project work.

*“I feel like before I used to hate having to clean and organise things, but since then I find myself cleaning classrooms in school or picking up any rubbish I see. It’s just kind of given me that push to do the things the environment needs.”*

**Young person, Community Spaces**

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An example of a project with a developed plan for future YSA, captured in the Spotlight below.

### **In the spotlight: Building the skills for advocacy**

By building skills and providing young people with an opportunity to connect with their peers, a Community Spaces project reported that 70% of young people continued to engage with the organisation beyond the end of the project.

This organisation operated peer mentoring and training programmes to support LGBTQIA+ young people to build a community of like-minded peers and become involved in social action campaigns, with a creative focus. A key part of the project involved supporting young people to learn skills in emotional resilience, communication, mentoring and campaigning. They provided training for young people to take on leadership of the organisation going forward.

*"We're taking the next year to make sure they've got all the skills and support that they need before having [the leadership] passed on."* **Grant manager, Community Spaces**

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## 5 Grant managers' experiences of grant administration

This chapter explores grant managers' experiences of Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund grant administration, including successes and suggested improvements. This topic was introduced and discussed with grant managers in Year 3 only, and the discussion reflects the views of 15 grant managers with knowledge of grant administration.

Nearly all grant managers interviewed described a positive working relationship with Co-op Foundation. Many appreciated having a direct liaison to communicate with, perceived the liaison as having a good understanding of the project's aims and operating environment, and felt it was a supportive relationship. Grant managers also appreciated Co-op Foundation's accessible and approachable 'hands-on approach'; their flexibility, for example, providing extensions to reporting deadlines and allowing projects to adapt activities and timelines throughout delivery; and the introduction of the cost-of-living grant increase. Grant managers suggested opportunities to improve grant administration, in particular considering the necessity of biannual project reporting, and further simplifying the monitoring form requirements. They also suggested revisiting handover processes to ensure that new staff quickly understand the projects' needs and goals and considering funding longer than a year at a time.

### 5.1 Successes

Grant managers found the application process straightforward, and they valued having a direct liaison in case of any queries or issues in the process. No grant managers mentioned experiencing difficulties in the application process.

Grant managers reported that channels of communication with their dedicated liaison and other Co-op Foundation staff felt open and personable. This approach supported grant managers to be transparent about challenges and to ask questions:

*"A lot more personable than a lot of other grants and trusts... I don't feel scared to go and ask them."*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

This relationship was strengthened by Co-op Foundation's flexibility which made projects feel they were "being heard". The most common examples of this flexibility were extensions to reporting deadlines, but projects also mentioned flexibility regarding projects adapting their activities to fit changing circumstances and adapting their project timelines. One Bereavement project noted that Co-op Foundation allowed them to respond flexibly to the needs of their young people by adapting the activities they were delivering over time. This led to the project evolving from providing more supportive, adult-led activities, to being led and shaped by the young people themselves.

The cost-of-living grant increase was also felt to demonstrate Co-op Foundation's flexibility to project needs. Projects who had received the additional cost of living grant felt this reflected well on Co-op Foundation, showing them to be empathetic and understanding of the pressures that projects faced. One Community Spaces project noted that the cost-of-living grant had been vital in helping them retain staff.

*"They were really nice funders to work with. They've always been really understanding and they've also, you know, they've not been scared to challenge our proposals and come back with questions – constructive and positive. And they've been empathetic during the cost-of-living crisis with that small grant they offered us."*

**Grant manager, Community Spaces**

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## 5.2 Challenges

The main challenge raised by grant managers was the frequency of reporting required. Grant managers felt biannual reporting put added pressure on project staff, and several projects had difficulties meeting reporting deadlines as a result – although these were often extended by Co-op Foundation.

Some projects also felt the template did not allow them to accurately portray their project outcomes. For example, several found it difficult to quantify numbers of beneficiaries from the project and to evidence the impact of the project:

*“When they’re asking you to say how many people have been impacted by it, that’s really tricky because you can’t, you have to just guesstimate that, you can’t say for sure...we can only go on what we see at that moment in time and the things that we put in place. We would hope that would impact years to come but we don’t know because that’s all out of our control because it’s dependent on the school following through.”*

### Grant manager, Bereavement

Others found it difficult to relate all their activities to the required outcomes, with multiple describing the reporting process as an exercise in “trying to fit a square peg into a round hole”. Liaison support as well as some template changes did make this process easier, but some still felt their submitted templates were not an accurate reflection of their project impacts. One suggested adding the option to explain why certain questions were left blank to help with this problem.

A less commonly reported experience was challenges in handover of project grant administration between Co-op Foundation staff. This experience suggests opportunities for revisiting handover processes, to ensure a smooth transition between staff and new staff quickly understand the projects’ needs and goals.

When asked to consider improvements to the #iwill Fund administration, the most common response from grant managers was that no improvements to the process were necessary. However, a few projects felt a longer funding period would have allowed them to provide more consistent staffing and delivery. This was mostly reported by smaller projects, for whom the uncertainty of the year-long grant followed by extension applications caused continuity difficulties. In particular, one grant manager mentioned having to train temporary delivery staff as they were unable to secure staff for the whole programme without the certainty that funding would cover the full three years.

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## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter explores some of the key learnings that can be drawn from this evaluation of Co-op Foundation's #iwill Fund, from the perspectives of the IFF Research evaluation team.

### 6.1 Designing YSA projects

1. Project design and scope both facilitate and limit achieving some outcomes, depending on what outcomes are the priority for projects. For example, projects using closed groups or projects with a larger reach of young people were less likely to report young people feeling they had influenced support, because the design limited the degree of influence. Bereavement projects tended to be smaller in scale and the young people participating needed more intensive personal support to be able to cope with their immediate needs. They therefore needed more time to achieve outcomes and to engage their peers. For these projects, 'distance travelled' by young people was important to understand and was believed by grant managers to be a precursor to many of the intended outcomes of that strand.

**Recommendation to organisations funding and delivering YSA:** Future YSA designs and funding plans should consider priority outcomes to achieve when deciding the types of projects to fund and deliver.

2. Few projects delivered YSA activities in less than three months, with most delivering YSA activities in three months or longer. All grant managers interviewed found recruitment took longer than planned, even for those with existing recruitment channels, and in later years of delivery projects reflected this learning by increasing these timescales in their project plans.

**Recommendation to organisations funding and delivering YSA:** Organisations should not underestimate the timescales required for recruiting young people in YSA, which also appears to be longer for young people requiring additional emotional and practical support to be ready for YSA. Organisations should consider the longer timescales for recruitment, and delivery, in funding and resourcing plans.

3. Most School Transitions and Community Spaces projects delivered activities weekly. Grant managers and young people felt this supported relationship building between young people, and staff and young people. However, frequency of activities must be driven by young people's preferences and needs. Some young people from these strands favoured less frequent meetings at certain times in the project (for example, around holidays). Bereavement projects were more likely to meet monthly to give young people the space to process their emotions between activities.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should regularly consult young people on their preferences for activity frequency and be flexible in adjusting this across a project.

4. In Year 1 some Bereavement projects found that staff lacked the specialist knowledge that was needed to approach more sensitive issues with young people.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** future projects should consider providing safeguarding training and support from specialist external organisations to delivery staff to improve their capabilities.



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## 6.2 Engaging young people in YSA

1. Language matters in promoting projects. Unfamiliar words or familiar words used in a context unfamiliar to young people can be off-putting and confusing and prevent young people from engaging with projects. Some participants told us that the word 'transitions' in 'School Transitions' brought to their mind gender transition; moreover, they did not know or understand what mentions of 'mindfulness' activities in project descriptions referred to. Also importantly, the term 'youth social action' was not widely understood. Instead of using these umbrella terms or words which could be misconstrued, projects were more effective in engaging young people when they described what the project actually did in straightforward and direct terms.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should include young people in co-creating and reviewing the communications they produce to promote their YSA activities.

2. Successful recruitment of young people in YSA was supported by using multiple strategies that combined both targeted and broader approaches. Online recruitment, using social media, was effectively used to engage young people who do not access mainstream support or services, and therefore may be underserved. For longer running projects, word of mouth promotions, from project alumni and the wider community a project has operated in, was an efficient and effective strategy.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should ensure their engagement strategy includes multiple, different approaches to recruitment. They should also consider the use of online recruitment to engage underserved young people in YSA, and alumni networks to further promote projects.

3. Grant managers interviewed felt young people's characteristics and circumstances influenced the extent to which young people benefited from the project, and the pace that they achieved outcomes. Some young people need more time and individualised support to be ready to engage in YSA but projects varied in the degree to which they formally and consistently checked young people's readiness for YSA at recruitment.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should review their recruitment process to ensure it includes steps for understanding a young person's psychological and practical readiness for YSA, and the barriers to their participation in YSA (for example, taking part with peers that they do not get along with). With this information, organisations can then put in place resources and strategies to minimise barriers to participation.

4. Relationship building between young people and project staff, and young people and project partners that connect them to projects, was essential for young people's engagement with projects. Therefore, a key risk to outcomes for young people is staff turnover.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Funded organisations should consider whether they have continuity plans in place in the event of staff turnover, to minimise young people dropping out or delaying progress to outcomes.

**Recommendation to organisations funding YSA:** Funders should consider providing longer term funding for youth social action rather than one year project funding to ensure continuity of staffing, and stability in how young people engage in YSA.

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5. Organisations delivering bereavement projects faced greater challenges than other strands with identification, recruitment and engagement of young people; their eligibility criteria is more narrow, identification is harder through commonly used channels, and some of these young people require more intensive support to start safely and meaningfully engaging in projects.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations delivering bereavement projects should ensure longer timescales and more resources to start these projects and consider a staged approach involving a short period of onboarding and warming up young people to the YSA and then inviting them to fully engage in the project.

### 6.3 Measuring outcomes

1. For some young people, small changes amount to considerable achievements.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should consider how best to monitor the steps that are the precursors to achieving the #iwill Fund's intended outcomes. Examples of how to monitor young people's steps towards achieving outcomes include creative approaches, such as using case studies to track young people's progress across the duration of their project participation. Young people's project work, such as writing, blogs, art or videos, could also be used to evidence young people's progress towards achieving outcomes.

2. Given the diversity of projects and their varying monitoring capabilities, it may not be reasonable to expect projects to change, and demonstrate changing, community views. Funded organisations also require additional skills and resources to evidence outcomes on communities. Both of these are challenges faced by other #iwill match funders.

**Recommendation to organisations funding YSA:** Funders should consider proportionate and effective ways of measuring outcomes across projects in their funding programmes. They should co-create the outcomes with their grantees, be flexible and trusting and support the grantees to track change across the outcomes that are most relevant to their projects. In terms of measuring community outcomes, funders could prioritise one primary community outcome for organisations to evidence and consider funding a barometer survey of the community in focus. For example, if multiple projects work in the same geographic community or community of identity, such as young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ the funder could commission one barometer survey to capture evidence across all these projects. Funders should also appropriately resource projects' evaluation activities with allocated budget factored in the project costs from the beginning.

### 6.4 Achieving #iwill Fund outcomes

1. The most common reported benefit to young people taking part in YSA was 'feeling part of a wider community' (23,259 young people). Projects with peer mentoring or working towards a common goal with other young people they would not usually mix with were common factors fostering this feeling. 'Young people feeling better equipped to cope with challenging situations' (11,588 young people) was the second most common reported benefit to young people. Activities that supported young people with a shared experience (such as bereavement) to express their experiences and emotions fostered this feeling.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations aiming to support young people to feel part of a wider community should review their activity plans to ensure

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they include peer mentoring or enable young participants to work towards a common goal. Examples of such activities include young people working to improve a community space or raising awareness about the experiences of bereaved young people. Organisations aiming to support young people to feel better equipped to cope with challenging situations should ensure they include support for young people's emotional literacy (such as by using a CBT model to talk about how thoughts and behaviours affect the way we feel). Other examples of support included stress-response management (such as breathing techniques), and creating welcoming and safe spaces.

## 6.5 The impact of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis

1. During the first year of #iwill Fund delivery, the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis significantly affected the extent to which projects were able to deliver in the way they had planned. These pressures gradually reduced through Years 2 and 3, and most projects were able to operate as they had originally planned by Year 3. However, the increase in poor mental health and wellbeing among young people as a result of both the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living-crisis continued to impact projects, with many adapting their programmes to accommodate these needs. In many cases, this meant a shift in focus towards wellbeing where this was not originally a key outcome for the project, and/or staff providing more intensive emotional support.

**Recommendation to organisations delivering YSA:** Organisations should review their project plans to ensure they have the capacity and activities to meet young people's needs. Examples of this include considering their eligibility criteria to make sure they can meet the needs of the young people they recruit, lengthening recruitment timescales and adding activities to build trust in the project.

## 6.6 Experiences of #iwill Fund grant administration

1. Funded organisations found the process of applying for the #iwill Fund simple and clear, and the communications with their Co-op Foundation liaison and the flexibility of grant administration both supported their project delivery. Suggestions for improvement included reporting requirements and supporting knowledge exchange.

**Recommendation to organisations funding YSA:** To ensure the grant monitoring process is proportionate to the size of the grant and the capacity of funded organisations, funders of YSA should consider the frequency of reporting deadlines and whether annually is sufficient. To accommodate project diversity and differences in outcomes they are seeking to achieve, funders of YSA should consider identifying priority outcomes and monitoring within and across projects the outcomes a project is seeking to achieve (and not achieve). To support funded organisations to learn from each other and the work of the funder, funders of YSA should consider more opportunities for knowledge sharing. For example, a learning digest newsletter that collates published information from the wider #iwill Fund and showcases a funded organisation's learning and more opportunities that bring together funded organisations.

2. Funded organisations experienced staff turnover because of their dependency on short-term contracts resulting from time-limited funding. Flexibility in funding use was important for funded organisations to support delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, and to better respond to the diverse needs of the young people they worked with.

**Recommendation to organisations funding YSA:** To support effective and sustainable

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YSA delivery, funders should consider offering unrestricted, longer-term funding to organisations delivering YSA so that they can allocated their resources effectively and timely where the need is more pressing.

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IFF Research illuminates the world for organisations businesses and individuals helping them to make better-informed decisions.”

Our Values:

### 1. Being human first:

Whether employer or employee, client or collaborator, we are all humans first and foremost. Recognising this essential humanity is central to how we conduct our business, and how we lead our lives. We respect and accommodate each individual's way of thinking, working and communicating, mindful of the fact that each has their own story and means of telling it.

### 2. Impartiality and independence:

IFF is a research-led organisation which believes in letting the evidence do the talking. We don't undertake projects with a preconception of what “the answer” is, and we don't hide from the truths that research reveals. We are independent, in the research we conduct, of political flavour or dogma. We are open-minded, imaginative and intellectually rigorous.

### 3. Making a difference:

At IFF, we want to make a difference to the clients we work with, and we work with clients who share our ambition for positive change. We expect all IFF staff to take personal responsibility for everything they do at work, which should always be the best they can deliver.



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