

YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION Engaging community organisations in social action

About this resource

The aim of this resource is to provide guidance on working with local and national organisations in youth social action by sharing best practice examples, case studies, research and links to supporting organisations. We hope you use this resource as a tool to empower students to take action and have ownership of issues that are important to them. This resource can be used by staff or students to support youth social action projects.

This resource has been created as part of the Association of Colleges Youth Social Action Programme (Phase Three) by the Regional Enrichment Coordinator. The programme was originally funded through the #iwill Pears fund in partnership with the Pears Foundation, #iwill and the National Lottery. The Pears have continued to support the programme by funding a further two phases.

Find out more about the Youth Social Action Programme (Phase 3)



Bio



Florence Smith-Drayson is AoC's Regional Enrichment Coordinator and Youth Social Action Lead for Leeds City College.

Florence has been part of the Youth Social Action Programme since Phase One (2021-2023) and has been in a role dedicated to social action since 2021.

Youth Social Action

Definition

Youth social action refers to activities that you can do to make a positive difference to others or the environment.

There are lots of ways in which you can take practical action to make a positive difference. It can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities. These include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning or supporting peers.

Principles

What does great youth social action look like? Research suggests that high quality activities will meet six principles including:

1. Be youth-led
2. Be challenging
3. Have social impact
4. Allow progression to other opportunities
5. Be embedded in a young person's life
6. Enable reflection about the value of the activity

This definition and the principles come from #iwill, who champion social action in the UK.

The aim of social action is to empower young people to take action on issues that they care about and become active members of the community, so projects should be guided by them. Young people should build skills to take into the future to continue to act and create lasting habits.

Case Study

Stoke on Trent College

Partnership with Stoke City Foundation

Stoke on Trent College applied to be part of the AoC Youth Social Action Ambassador programme in 2024. They had a longstanding relationship with Stoke City Foundation, who ran and supported other enrichment activities at the college. The Education Programme Coordinator at the Foundation was delivering youth social action projects in local primary schools and reached out to the college after a mutual colleague recognised that their work aligned in both purpose and aims.

As part of the ambassador programme, the college students worked with primary school children to do care packages for those experiencing homelessness. The partnership gave the opportunity for the learners to go into a primary school and host an assembly around the complexities of homelessness and run a care package appeal within the school for the local non-profit organisation Brighter Futures.

The college were able to sustain the partnership, as the college ran their own ambassador programme in 25/26 and have been working collaboratively with the Foundation and the Primary School on a mental health and wellbeing initiative. Together, they have developed the Healing Heart Campaign, a project supporting a local charity in the creation of a community wellness garden. Learners from both organisations have designed and decorated wooden hearts with positive affirmations, which will be displayed in the Community Garden during Mental Health Awareness Week, w/c 11th May.



Impact:

This experience greatly enhanced the ambassadors' confidence and self-esteem; many expressed that it allowed them to step into leadership roles, supporting and mentoring the primary pupils as they developed their own youth social action projects. The partnership also generated meaningful impact within the wider community. Although the initial KPI was to create 15 care packages, the strength of the collaboration resulted in the production of over 65 care packages—far exceeding the original target.

Top tips from Stoke on Trent:

Where possible, build on existing partnerships to strengthen trust and collaboration, identify aligned partners through community mapping and shared goals, offer progressive youth social action opportunities to support long-term collaboration.



Case Study

Long Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge

Partnership with Cambridge Citizens

Long Road Sixth Form were members of Cambridge Citizens, – an alliance of educational institutions, faith communities, universities and charities, representing 10s of thousands of people in the city, acting for social justice and the common good.

Cambridge Citizens were aware that the current Tiger Pass scheme, allowing under 25's to travel in Cambridge and Peterborough for £1 was under threat by the local authority. Long Road joined the campaign alongside other schools, colleges, and charities, as members of Cambridge Citizens to campaign to the Mayor and emphasise the importance of the Tiger Pass to young people, as many wouldn't be able to afford coming to college if travel cost more. Students made artworks and presentations at a citizens assembly with the local authority present. The campaign was successful and the scheme extended to March 2027.

Long Road Sixth Form will continue to be part of the campaign as the scheme is reviewed again.

Impact:

It has allowed the students at Long Road to be part of something bigger than themselves. This project has allowed 60,000 young people in Cambridge and Peterborough to keep travelling on buses for £1 compared to the £3 over 25's pay. This has also put Long Road at the forefront of the campaign and we are now seen as an innovative, engaged college willing to work with the community to make change.

Top tips from Long Road:

Find partners with a shared interest where the partnership benefits both parties. This creates a stronger bond where you are willing to work for each other for a mutual benefit. Also, finding progressive relationships is vital, partnerships should be continuous and provide a variety of opportunities for young people.



Case Study

Forget Me Not Children's Hospice

A group of students chose to work with Forget Me Not Children's Hospice through the First Give programme. They researched the charity, visited the hospice, and created a plaque for the hospice tree of remembrance, in addition to other fund and awareness raising activities.

Sarah Walton, Regional Fundraiser for the charity in Bradford spoke about how meaningful it is when young people choose to champion causes they genuinely care about.

Their fundraising and advocacy not only provide practical support, but also help charities to feel seen, valued, and connected to the wider community:

"It's important for young people to see that the hospice isn't a scary place. No one wants to experience a loss, but the support is here if they do. What makes us unique is the support we have available to children and their families – we put a real focus on memory-making and quality time, and this is really important for our families."

Discussing the work of the students, Sarah shared how the students had written a poem about the hospice, which the students read out at their First Give Final. This poem is on display at the hospice, taking pride of place as a lasting reminder of the compassion, creativity, and thoughtfulness the students brought to their First Give project.

For charities like Forget Me Not, young people's involvement provides much more than financial support. Their energy and advocacy help raise awareness, challenge misconceptions and strengthen connections with the wider community.

Top tips

- **What comes first?** - When engaging organisations and working with young people, do you contact the organisation first for project ideas or do you work with the students then contact organisations. You can do either but it is dependent on the ladder of participation and the students you are working with. If you bring a project to the students, then you it is bottom levels of participation, whereas if the students come up with the ideas then it is higher levels.

- **Communicating with organisations** - When reaching out and talking to organisations, it's important that you communicate your aim. Organisations have varying experience with working on social action projects, so it is important to be explicit about what you want from them. You might want them to come and talk to the students and help them come up with ideas for projects that could help them and their service users, or you might want them to provide a volunteering opportunity for you. Explaining how organisations can engage with you can help more organisations understand about this kind of work and, therefore, provide more opportunities.
- **Networking** - In order to make connections, attend events and find opportunities to network and speak to more organisations. Often charities hold celebration events or fundraisers and these are good opportunities to meet new people.
- **Getting connected** - Send out emails or call up organisations with your request and see who bites. This can be a really fruitful way of forging long lasting connections, because if organisations are set up to support these kinds of projects then they will take you up on it.
- **Variety of projects** - Often when engaging with charities they ask for fundraising and it can be a go-to. Fundraising can be fantastic when you consider what is challenging for students and what might engage them and help build skills, but also look at other ways to help support the community and build the skills of the students.
- **Keeping organisations engaged** - If you have any events or things you need stakeholders at – try and set the dates as early as possible. If you need to send out an informal invite so that you can secure their time, do that then students can always write their own emails or letters with more detail in them at a later date.
- **Letting connections happen** - You don't need to set up all your organisations at the start of the year or when someone new comes into the role – let connections happen organically as you work on projects and build up those connections.
- **Be prepared to fail** - Project management is a challenge and you are working with many stakeholders. Be prepared that projects might fail or not go to plan and have some back up plans. This is why we have reflection – to give the opportunity to reflect and understand why things didn't go to plan and create learning opportunities for the future.