

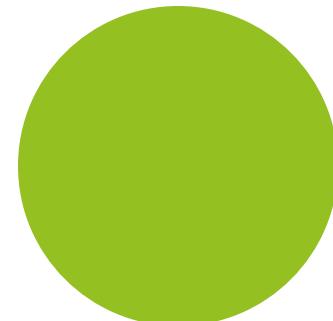


Suffolk
County Council

Public Health
& Communities



Why is Youth Social Action important?



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What is Youth Social Action (YSA)?

“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”.

[#iWillMovement](#)

Youth social action and meaningful participation improve young people’s mental health, social connectedness, skills and life chances — and they sit squarely within effective community-centred public-health practice.

In the UK, initiatives like the #iWill campaign (supported by over 1,000 organisations and 700 young ambassadors) have championed youth volunteering, campaigning and peer mentoring as ways to benefit communities *and* young people themselves.

In 2025, [Suffolk County Council signed the Power of Youth Charter](#), publicly committing to put youth voice at the heart of decision-making and to support youth-led action.

YSA and Public Health...

- Youth social action plays a vital role in public health - It builds the social assets and civic capabilities that underpin wellbeing.
- Health is shaped not only by clinical services but also by how empowered, connected, and active people feel in their communities.
- Community-centred ways of working can be more effective than 'traditional' services in improving the health and wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage or exclusion. For this reason, they are an essential way of reducing health inequalities within a local area or community.
- Enabling young people to participate in meaningful social action — such as campaigning for local change, volunteering in community projects, or designing peer education initiatives — helps them gain skills, self-efficacy, and social networks that build resilience against the risk factors for poor mental and physical health.
- This is consistent with the evidence in [A Guide to Community-Centred Approaches](#). There is strong evidence that community participation, empowerment, and volunteering all contribute to better health outcomes. Having a sense of power and the opportunity to take part actively in community life supports wellbeing — both for individuals and for communities as a whole.



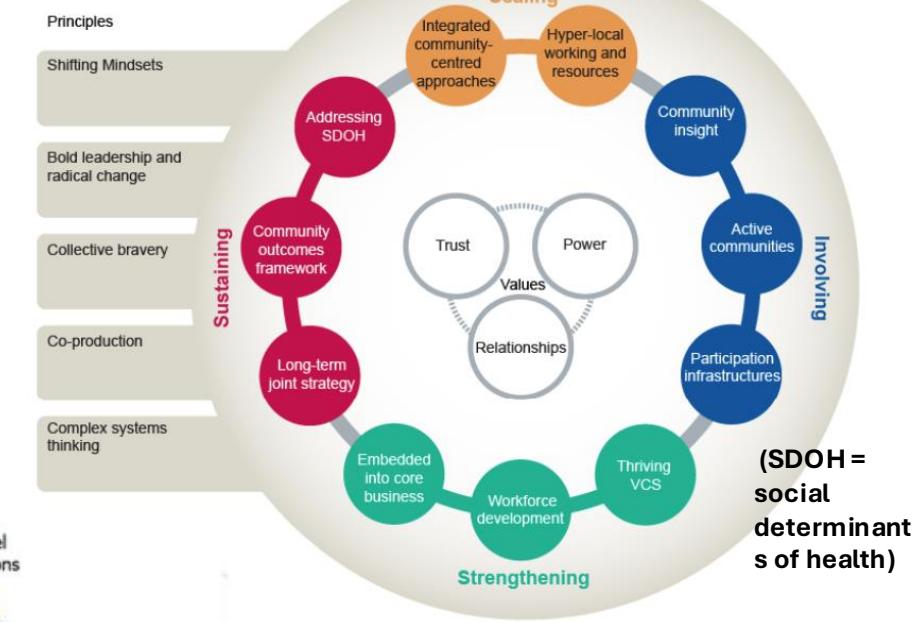
[Community-centred practice: applying All Our Health](#) (Updated 2022)

YSA and Public Health...

- Integrated approaches for community-centred public health require a range of actions, from neighbourhood work to strategic leadership. [Public Health England \(as it was in 2020\)](#) has identified 11 key elements of change. These are underpinned by core values of power, trust and relationships. These values very much align with those of YSA.
- Youth engagement also aligns with broader community-centred objectives, such as reducing social isolation, enhancing social capital, and addressing inequalities. Strategies that promote participation and co-design lead to more sustainable improvements in health behaviours and better access to prevention services, especially for [marginalised groups](#).
- Within whole-system models of public health, youth social action forms part of the "[population intervention triangle](#)"—a framework where civic engagement has effects at the *individual* level (wellbeing and life skills), *community* level (connectedness and resilience), and *system* level (co-designed services and prevention strategies).



Eleven elements of community-centred public health: a whole system approach:



Source: [Community-centred public health: Taking a whole system approach](#) (2020)



Youth Social Action should not be treated as an optional extra but as a strategic investment in *primary prevention*.

By involving young people as active partners, public health and wider systems can foster healthier, more equitable communities — strengthening not only individuals but the social and civic infrastructure that underpins population health.

Motivation for, barriers to, and impact of YSA:

Motivation for participation:

Often multidimensional. Main reasons include altruistic motives (e.g., helping the community), family and friends' influence, and developing skills that are valued by employers.

Main barriers:

These include factors such as lack of resources, time, interest, opportunities, or confidence. These barriers are stronger for certain groups including ethnic minorities, immigrants' children, and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The implication is that inclusive approaches to bridge gaps in participation are needed.

Schools and colleges are key enablers for participation.

Social media

Widespread use of social media creates new opportunities for organisations to engage with young people. Social media has encouraged participation in social action and raised awareness about social issues among young people. However, some evidence highlights that online engagement might be more effective with people already engaged in social action and marginalise young people without access to technology.

Impact

Participation is voluntary - young people that generally have better outcomes are more likely to participate. It is difficult to identify whether social action drives improvements in outcomes or simply attracts children and young people who already possess a predisposition for these outcomes. However, in many cases, the evidence suggests a positive relationship between personal characteristics and social action. Participants below the age of 16 and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds seem to benefit the most in terms of improving personal characteristics.

- Research suggests that when young people engage in volunteering and community projects, it yields **tangible benefits for their physical health, mental wellbeing, and social development.**
- Moreover, involving communities (including young people) in solutions is a core **“community-centred” approach** to reducing health inequalities.

Source: [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment](#) (2021)

What impacts can YSA have for participants?

Enhance sense of belonging

Employment and education links

Social action and political participation

Social connection, a sense of achievement, and increased self-worth

Strengthen civic engagement and active citizenship

Higher empathy, confidence, empowerment, prosocial behaviours

Life skills and civic values

Promotes wellbeing as well as reducing symptoms of poor mental health

Community Connectedness

Having a voice

What impacts can YSA have for participants?

“Social action can **enhance sense of belonging** both by affirming bonds to one’s own community and by creating a platform where volunteers can form external connections and widen their networks. This is critical for minorities and marginalised people as social action can help them integrate with wider communities and erode stereotypes”. [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment \(2021\)](#)

In 2019, 74% of young people in the UK believed they could make the world a better place and 53% were engaged in social action. [Social action: An active ingredient promoting youth mental health \(2022\)](#)

There is a strong link between **social action and political participation**. There also seems to be a positive relationship between social action and social capital. However, this association is highly linked to social privileges and may widen existing inequalities [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment \(2021\)](#)

Youth social action can strengthen civic engagement and active citizenship, though the extent and sustainability of this relationship depend on how programmes are designed and who participates. Programmes that enable young people to lead and critically explore issues, provide equal access and welcoming environments, and focus on empowerment rather than tokenism are most likely to foster lifelong active citizenship and contribute to wider community wellbeing. [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment \(2021\)](#)

In relation to mental wellbeing, research indicates that social action **promotes wellbeing as well as reducing symptoms of poor mental health**. There are short-term and long-term effects: with positive impacts to mental health while young people were involved in social action as well as after long periods of time since their participation (between 6 months and 21 years) (though some of these effects were small).

However, there can potentially be negative effects: in some cases, social action engagement can be **harmful** for example where young people feel **unsafe or under excessive pressure**. In addition, young advisors indicated that being so close to social inequities can be frustrating and emotionally taxing. Most of the negative impacts the research has found are related to systemic inequities and oppressions, rather than to social action itself. [Social action: An active ingredient promoting youth mental health \(2022\)](#)

“The relationship between social action, on the one hand, and **employment and education**, on the other, is one of the most contentious and underexplored in the literature. Evidence from previous literature reviews suggests that volunteering may improve marketable skills (e.g., confidence, teamwork, and career aspiration). These, in turn, may lead to better employment and education outcomes (Birdwell 2013; Birdwell, Birnie, and Mehan 2013). This mechanism, however, has not been accurately tested”. [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment \(2021\)](#)

Almost nine in ten volunteers say they have met new people. Young people aged 18–24 (77%) and 25–34 (76%) are the age groups most likely to say their volunteering helped them feel less isolated. Over three-quarters of volunteers (77%) reported that volunteering improved their mental health and wellbeing. This benefit was more widespread than physical health benefits (53%). [Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience \(2019\)](#)

“Existing research overwhelmingly finds a positive correlation between engaging in volunteering or community service and **higher empathy, confidence, empowerment, prosocial behaviours**, and other desirable outcomes. The literature greatest limitation is due to self-selection—those who are already predisposed for these characteristics are more willing to join volunteering programmes. Subsequently, the studies might exaggerate the causal effect of social action”. [Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment \(2021\)](#)

Young people who first get involved in service under the age of 10 were found to be more than **two times** more likely to have formed a habit of service than if they started aged 16–18 years. They are also more likely to be involved in a wider range of service activities and participate in them more frequently. [A Habit of Service \(2017\)](#)

How can we embed and sustain Youth Social Action?

1. **Treat youth social action as a public-health intervention.** Commission youth work, ambassador programmes and youth councils as preventive investments.
2. **Embed at system level through community-centered practice.** Use the All Our Health / community-centered approaches framework to connect youth participation to wider determinants (housing, education, employment).
3. **Evaluate with outcomes that matter to health.** Use wellbeing measures, social connectedness, service uptake and long-term life-chances alongside qualitative stories of empowerment.
4. **Prioritise inclusion and reduce barriers.** Recent UK work flags barriers/enablers to participation — make programmes accessible (transport, costs, safe spaces) to avoid widening inequalities.

Youth social action helps young people feel empowered, connected, and capable of shaping their communities — key ingredients for lifelong wellbeing and active citizenship.

But the benefits only last when programmes are inclusive, youth-led, and allow real reflection, not just token participation.



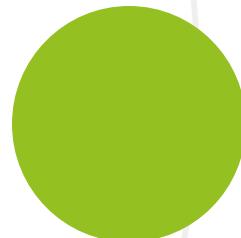
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Read the 2025 Annual Public Health Report

Youth social action and public health at

www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/jsna



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