

“The double benefit of youth social action could help to tackle some of our most pressing social problems...”

SERVICE NATION 2020

Jonathan Birdwell
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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Executive summary	11
1 The value of youth social action: evidence on double benefit	25
2 Service nation 2015: where we are now	55
3 Service nation 2020: recommendations	67
Notes	81
References	97

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Executive summary

It's my hope – and my mission – that when people look back at this five, ten-year-period from 2010, they'll say:

'In Britain they didn't just pay down the deficit, they didn't just balance the books, they didn't just get the economy moving again, they did something really exciting in their society.

Whether it is in building affordable housing, tackling youth unemployment, inviting charities to deliver public services: the people in Britain worked out the answer to the big social problems.'

David Cameron, 2010¹

The revitalisation of civil society has always been a passion of the prime minister's and, in turn, his Government. While the term 'Big Society' fell out of favour, the principle behind it has endured and is manifested in the prime minister's support for youth social action, and in particular, the Step Up To Serve's #iwill campaign and the work of the organisations that are part of Generation Change.

Step Up To Serve was established in November 2013, with the support of the major political parties and the Prince of Wales as the Royal Patron. The aim of its #iwill campaign is to get over 60 per cent of young people from all backgrounds to take part in high quality social action by 2020.

Social action is defined as practical action taken in the service of others. It includes volunteering, but *high quality* social action should involve the following six principles agreed by providers across the sector. It has to:

- be challenging
- be led by young people themselves
- have a positive and measurable impact on society
- include reflection
- be progressive towards other opportunities
- be embedded across the lifecycle of a young person

The ambitious and compelling vision that the prime minister outlined in 2010 has at its core the belief that high quality social action has a ‘double benefit’: benefits to the individuals taking part through their new skills and personal wellbeing, and to society by benefitting a cause, community or social problem, such as loneliness in old age, social care, educational underachievement, youth unemployment and social cohesion.

The evidence for this double benefit continues to expand and strengthen, highlighting the potential for a substantial return on investment. As we argue in this report, if properly harnessed, the unique contribution of young people taking part in social action could help to tackle some of our most pressing social problems: help to create collaborative and relational public services in health and social care, build more integrated communities, and enable young people to develop character capabilities, employability skills and a robust concern for civic activism and helping others in society.

The last five years has seen youth social action in the UK develop into a cohesive movement, with a common focus and ambitious aims. But there is still a significant amount of work to do over the next five years to ensure that the #iwill campaign meets its target by 2020. A renewed commitment from the Government is vital to realising the full potential of youth social action and achieving the prime minister’s ambitious vision for a flourishing service nation of civic activism.

In this report we present a series of recommendations to the Government on how it can harness and maximise the potential for youth social action.

In chapter 1, we present the most compelling evidence to date about the double benefit impact of youth social action, drawing on impact evaluations including the recent 2015 Behavioural Insights Team interim report *Evaluating Youth Social Action*,² and five years' worth of evaluations of National Citizen Service (NCS). We also draw on robust evidence from the US, including evaluations of AmeriCorps and the 2013 Columbia University report *The Economic Value of National Service*.³

In chapter 2, we describe the successes and the accomplishments of youth social action so far, as well as some of the enduring challenges facing the sector. As part of this research we conducted 20 structured interviews with a wide range of key stakeholders, including chief executives from youth social action providers, funding organisations, business leaders and education experts. We interviewed stakeholders from the following organisations: Ashoka, Association of Colleges, Big Lottery, CBI, Envision, Esmée Fairbairn, Fixers, Free the Children, Girlguiding, GwirVol (Wales), The Key, NCS Trust, Ofsted, The Scout Association, Universities UK, Volunteer Now (Northern Ireland), Volunteer Scotland and Youth United Foundation. Our recommendations for government – presented in chapter 3 – are based on the points of consensus that emerged from our interviews with these stakeholders.

Our key findings and recommendations are summarised below.

Education: character and attainment

The British economy is currently outpacing G7 countries, but 'improved education and skills are needed to secure these positive developments' and close the attainment gap.⁴ Character skills and attributes are critical to this and a key priority for the Department for Education (DfE). There is a growing evidence base that youth social action can develop the character skills and attributes that young people need to succeed in the labour market, while also potentially boosting attainment:

- Using randomised control trials with three social action providers (The Citizenship Foundation, Envision and Voluntary Action Within Kent/IMAGO Social Action Initiatives), the Behavioural Insights Team found strong positive correlations between social action and character attributes like empathy, problem solving, cooperation, grit and resilience, and sense of community.
- While the results from the full range of Cabinet Office Journey Fund projects will not be published until later this year, evaluation of Youth United's project found significant increases in the following character skills among participants compared against a control group: communication (13 per cent increase), creativity (11 per cent), empathy (10 per cent), resilience (9 per cent) and agency (8 per cent).⁵
- Additional positive findings are presented from Duke of Edinburgh's, UK Youth, vInspired, Student Hubs, City Year and many other organisations at level 2 standards of evidence.
- Research from the US, DfE, Ofsted and NCS suggests that social action can improve motivation in school and lead to higher attainment.

Employment: skills and networks

Young people face a difficult labour market that is rapidly changing. According to the latest figures, just under a million (963,000) young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET),⁶ and while youth unemployment is down from last year it is still stubbornly high at 16 per cent.⁷ Youth social action programmes can help young people develop employability skills, expand their networks and secure employment. These programmes can also motivate them to consider careers in industries that are currently suffering from skills shortages, such as health and social care.

There is compelling research on the relationship between employability and full-time ‘service year’ models of social action, particularly from the US, where the AmeriCorps programme has been running for over 20 years:

- A ten-year study by the US Corporation for National & Community Service found that volunteers in programmes like AmeriCorps had a 27 per cent higher likelihood of finding a job than those who had not participated in the programme.⁸
- Research on AmeriCorps’ impact also shows that social action can lead to higher wages and increased job satisfaction.⁹
- While full-time ‘service year’ programmes have not received anything near the same level of investment in the UK as in the US, evaluations of the programmes that do operate in the UK – such as programmes run by City Year, Volunteering Matters (formerly CSV) and vInspired – suggest they have similar positive outcomes on employability.
- Evaluations of NCS show participants develop useful skills for the future, realise they are more capable than they previously thought and become more confident about securing a job in the future.¹⁰
- Programmes like London Youth’s Build-It, among other programmes, suggest that social action can help young people who are NEET move into employment or training.¹¹

Mental health: confidence and wellbeing

The cost of poor mental health has been estimated at £105 billion per year,¹² and there is increasingly concern about there being a rise in mental health problems among young people, particularly those who have been unemployed for 12 months or longer,¹³ and those raised in care.¹⁴ Youth social action can help to combat mental health issues by giving young people a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth:

- A 2014 survey of youth social action found that people who had taken part in youth social action rated 8.6 out of 10 for life satisfaction, while those who had not rated 8 out of 10.¹⁵
- The Citizenship Foundation Programme interim evaluation found that participants in the Citizenship Foundation Programme had a more positive outlook, with levels of anxiety 22 per cent lower than those in the control group.¹⁶
- A 2014 study by Join In found that participants in sport volunteering programmes had 10 per cent higher levels of self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and resilience than non-volunteers, and were 15 per cent less likely to worry or feel anxious.¹⁷

Big Society: community responsibility

Creating a 'Big Society' of empowered and active citizens remains a priority for the prime minister and the Government. Developing the civic capabilities of young people through social action can bring lasting benefits to society through their sense of responsibility towards local communities, manifested in an increased likelihood of volunteering in the future and their career choice. For example, social action programmes can encourage more young people to consider a career in social care through programmes like Volunteering Matters' full-time young persons volunteering programme or Student Hubs projects. This is vital as the social care sector is increasingly suffering from skill shortages and there will be a huge growth in demand for skills in coming decades

The 2015 interim Behavioural Insights Team report *Evaluating Youth Social Action* found that participants in Envision's Community Apprentice programme were 20 per cent more likely to express a willingness to volunteer in the future than the control group, and their sense of community was 16 percentage points higher than that of a control group. Those participating in Voluntary Action Within Kent/IMAGO programmes had a 15 per cent higher sense of community involvement than that of the control group.¹⁸

Similar effects were seen in increased community engagement and responsibility for programmes like City Year, Join In sports volunteering, NCS, Free the Children and uniformed organisations, among others.

Student Hubs has found that 71 per cent of students who participated in their programmes and services at ten universities felt that choosing a career in the social sector was a more attractive possibility than they had thought previously, and that 49 per cent of volunteers changed career plans as a result of their engagement. This effect appears even stronger for young people who take part in full-time ‘service year’ programmes that last for longer periods of time:

- 79 per cent of people on the Community Service Volunteers Full-Time Volunteering At Home programme stated that they would volunteer again.
- A longitudinal analysis of City Year participants found that three years after completing the programme, City Year alumni were still more likely to volunteer than members of the comparison group, at 70 per cent against 57 per cent.¹⁹

The UK has a larger gap in voter turnout between younger and older voters than any other country in the OECD. There is evidence that youth social action can raise young people’s engagement in voting:

- A longitudinal analysis of City Year participants in the US found that 41 per cent voted in the state and local elections, against 33 per cent in the comparison group, and that in 2006, this gap had grown to 59 per cent of participants against 40 per cent in the comparison group.
- Similarly, City Year alumni scored five points higher than the comparison group on the Political Efficacy Index three years after completing the programme.²⁰

Communities: isolation and integration

The Social Integration Commission has calculated that segregation in the UK across a range of factors, including ethnicity, social class and age, costs the economy £6 billion a year.²¹ Integration is a vital priority for this government, not least because of its concern over extremism and promoting ‘British values’ in schools. Youth social action programmes, especially those with a specific focus on social mixing, could help to achieve the government’s aims:

- The 2014 evaluation of NCS found that 8 in 10 participants in the summer and autumn programmes (84 per cent and 81 per cent respectively) felt more positive towards people from different backgrounds than previously after taking part in NCS.²²
- The 2009 Impact of Volunteering on Social Capital and Community Cohesion report found that 45 per cent of volunteers felt that volunteering had changed opinions they previously held of other types of people, and 51 per cent said that they started to socialise with people who were somehow different to them as a result of volunteering.²³

Public services: improved and more human

Following scandals in social care and in the NHS, such as failures of Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust at Stafford Hospital, there is an increasing focus by government to make public services more relational, or more ‘human’. This sentiment is echoed by figures on the left, such as Maurice Glasman and Hilary Cottam, as well as on the right, such as David Cameron’s former adviser Steve Hilton.²⁴ Youth social action can provide an additional element of humanity that public service professionals struggle to provide in the course of performing their specialist duties:

- In healthcare, the volunteering programme of King's College Hospital in London has been held up to demonstrate best practice and leads to improved patient satisfaction, while the King's Fund estimated the return on investment of volunteers in the health service was £11 for every £1 invested.²⁵
- In education, City Year's Corps members provided 155,000 hours of school-based service and supported more than 600 pupils individually. Evaluation suggests that this leads to accelerated levels of progress for students, with an average point score progress of 5.2 for English and 4.4 for maths over the course of the year, compared with the average expected progress of 3.²⁶

Return on investment in youth social action

A range of cost-benefit analyses based on many of the double benefit impacts outlined above further underline the potential that is within reach:

- The 2014 evaluation of NCS found that per pound of expenditure on the summer programme, there were £1.70–6.10 of benefits.²⁷
- Research from Columbia University into the economic value of three AmeriCorps programmes found that benefits were likely to be four times greater than the annual cost: the total cost, including tax burdens, match-funding and federal funding, was \$1.7 billion annually while the benefit, including programme outputs and longer-term human and social capital gains, was \$6.5 billion.²⁸
- Research by Join In UK suggests that for every £36 invested in recruiting sport volunteers, the potential realised economic value per volunteer is £16,032.²⁹
- Research by McKinsey suggests that for every £1 invested in service year programmes, £2.70–4.30 of benefits are achieved.

Recommendations

There have been some notable accomplishments in youth social action in the past five years. But without further action and investment, the goals for a youth social action revolution by 2020 will not be realised. To make sure we reach this objective, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The Office for Civil Society should develop a comprehensive, cross-departmental national strategy for youth social action that builds on the success of NCS and ensures there are opportunities to take part in social action across the lifecycle: pre-NCS for young people between the ages of 10 and 14 years old, and post-NCS for young people between the ages of 16 and 25. While the Cabinet Office should lead the development of the strategy, it should be strongly linked with the policy priorities of the DfE, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Defence.

Recommendation 2

The Government should establish an independent social action coordinating body to implement this strategy. A range of existing organisations could be expanded – or could join together – to undertake this function. The role of this body would be:

- to coordinate and administer a youth social action fund that would include contributions from government, trusts and foundations, private businesses, and other donors
- to provide competitive strategic grants to social action providers to scale up social action programming across the youth lifecycle
- to coordinate with government departments to facilitate the use of youth social action to achieve policy objectives in areas like public service reform, health and social care, character education, apprenticeships and unemployment

- to coordinate with local authorities, schools and other public service providers (like hospitals and care homes) to identify opportunities for youth social action to contribute towards policy objectives

Recommendation 3

Social action should be embedded in schools:

- There should be a new social action component that students could choose to take alongside the English Baccalaureate. This ‘GiveBacc’ could be accredited by the sector and would signal to universities and employers that students had completed 50 hours of good quality social action.
- Give pupils a right to take part in high quality social action through their schools if they want to. Social action activities could be offered as supplementary to work experience placements and marketed as pre-NCS taster sessions.
- Ofsted should assess whether schools provide these opportunities and the quality of the provision as part of schools’ requirement to promote ‘British values’.³⁰
- The Government should monitor participation in social action activities through the School Census and include these data in the National Pupil Database.

Recommendation 4

Develop full-time social action service year placements as an alternative school-leaver pathway:

- For 16–18-year-olds, the Government and a social action coordinating body should develop partnerships between providers and further education colleges to scale up provision of service years as an alternative to full-time post-16 education.

- For 18–24-year-olds, the Government should introduce a discrete employment category and legal status for young people who are taking part in a full-time service year to provide clarity around issues like access to benefits. This should include exploring partnerships with social action providers in order to deliver the Government’s new ‘earn or learn’ approach.
- The social action coordinating body should work with universities and students unions to identify and promote social action opportunities across the higher education sector. In some cases, this should include social action counting towards course credits; as an example, Sheffield Hallam incorporates social action into its law degree by requiring students to volunteer in local law clinics.
- Social action providers should develop systems that encourage participants to log their activities and personal development, which will help them to articulate their experiences in interviews for employment or university.

Recommendation 5

Support a quality mark for social action provision:

- A quality mark should be developed by the youth social action sector, to be used to identify organisations that focus on measuring their impact, and help improve their services to have the best impact.
- Systems for measuring and ensuring quality in social action provision need to incorporate the views and feedback of young people using new technology and Amazon- or TripAdvisor-style feedback systems.

1 The value of youth social action: evidence on double benefit

Youth social action is already contributing positively to many of the social problems we are facing – from youth unemployment to integration to health and social care. But its full potential is not yet being realised. There is now strong and compelling evidence – which we outline in this chapter – showing the double benefit impact that youth social action could have on social problems that the Government is grappling with.

The British economy is currently outpacing G7 countries, but there remain significant economic challenges facing Britain over the next five years. One of these is the youth unemployment rate: the latest figures show that for 16–24-year-olds it was 16 per cent, 2.3 percentage points down from the previous year, but nonetheless stubbornly high.³¹ As highlighted in the most recent 2014 Confederation of British Industry (CBI) education and skills survey – *Gateway to Growth* – ‘improved education and skills are needed to secure these positive developments’ for young people in the wider economy.³² While young people were hit especially hard by the 2008 recession, the rise of youth unemployment began before the recession and is a product of long-term structural changes in the labour market. For example, research from the Resolution Foundation suggests the hollowing out of middle-skilled, ‘routine’ jobs (which are most at risk to technological development) has a particularly detrimental effect on young people.³³ Just under a million (963,000) young people are NEET.³⁴ This is a challenge for both core skills – like English and maths – and ‘soft skills’ or employability skills.

Over a third (36 per cent) of students are still not achieving at least a C grade in GCSE English and even more (42 per cent) are not achieving a C grade or higher in maths.

This is particularly true of young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In 2013/14, some two-thirds (63 per cent) of students on free school meals compared with only one-third (35 per cent) of pupils not on free school meals did not achieve five A*-C grades in their GCSEs.³⁵ While the pupil premium has attempted to address this persistent attainment gap, the National Audit Office has recently found that its impact was mitigated by spending cuts in other areas and poor decisions on how pupil premium funding was spent. In particular, schools are overspending on teaching assistants, a 'high-cost approach' that did not appear to lead to improvements in academic outcomes.³⁶ As we argue below, youth social action programmes that include mentoring models in schools could offer an alternative, lower cost approach that could help to make an impact.

Character skills and attributes – a subset of which includes employability or 'soft skills' – are also increasingly important for success in the labour market. In the past 20 years there has been a huge decrease in semi-skilled, craft-based jobs in manufacturing industries and an increase in the service and professional sector. Jobs in these sectors require transferable skills, like being able to communicate well, being able to work in a team, being able to lead when needed, and strong management skills. Employers and organisations like the CBI continually highlight the need for these skills – and the limitations of the formal education system in developing them. As we argue below, there is a growing evidence base that youth social action can develop the character skills and attributes that young people need to succeed.

Another pressing issue is that of social integration, with recent evidence published by the Social Integration Commission revealing a society that increasingly lives apart. The Commission's analysis has demonstrated that across variables such as ethnicity, social class and age, Britain is not as well integrated as we might like to think, and the cost of this to the UK economy is a total of £6 billion a year, including £700 million in social care costs

solely due to the isolation of older people.³⁷ The evidence base outlined below demonstrates that social action can be a powerful tool in knitting society together across these perceived barriers – with benefits to individuals and society at large. It can also be a powerful generator of political efficacy – encouraging individuals and communities to exercise power and effect change.

The benefit to health and social care goes beyond that generated by a closer-knit society, increasing intergenerational contact and relationships that could lead to improvements in wellbeing for both young people and the elderly people they interact with. Direct involvement in the provision of services by those undertaking youth social action can help to improve those services, rendering them ‘more human’ and resulting in higher user satisfaction. Social care is one of the most pressing social issues; many are concerned about the quality of care given by social care services, the ageing population, and increasing isolation and loneliness among elderly citizens in our society. A social action approach has been advocated by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt in a recent speech: ‘Yes, the health and social care system must do a much better job at looking after them. But so must all of us citizens as well.’³⁸

Youth social action helps to address these issues not only in the short term, by developing models where young people provide additional support, but also in the long term, by encouraging more young people to consider a career in the care sector or other parts of the public sector. Moreover, the evidence suggests that there is something unique about social action – which could be termed ‘non-formal learning’ – as it develops skills that are otherwise not always developed by formal education.

In an era of restricted public spending, strong evidence is vital to demonstrate that investment is good value for money. The Cabinet Office Youth Social Action Trials – delivered and evaluated by the Behavioural Insights Team and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) – are the most comprehensive attempt to measure the impact of youth social action. While

the results of the interim Behavioural Insights Team evaluation were published in March 2015, and are discussed below, many evaluations (including those run by EEF, as well as evaluations from the Youth Social Action and Journey Funds) will report later in the year.

While our evidence review draws on a range of sources, we present the evidence of the double benefit impact for social action below in order of the research's scale and robustness: we present findings at level 3 or higher first (including the use of control groups, or a randomised control trial) followed by evidence at level 2 (including pre- and post-intervention quantitative analysis).

Box 1

Examples of youth social action programmes run across the lifecycle: Generation Change members

- *Fixers supports vulnerable young people to create social action campaigns about issues close to their hearts across the entire UK including Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland*
- *The Challenge is the leading provider of National Citizen Service, offering the scheme right across the UK*
- *Free the Children works with schools across the UK encouraging pupils to take part in social action projects and bringing participants together at its annual 'We Day'*
- *Envision runs extra-curricular clubs in schools to support young people to design their own local community projects tackling issues from street crime to climate change in Birmingham, Bristol and London*
- *UnLtd provides young social entrepreneurs with cash grants, training and support to get their social innovations off the ground right across the UK*
- *City Year offers a full-time structured 'service year' opportunity for young people aged 18–25 to volunteer in schools in inner city areas in London, Birmingham and Manchester*

- *vInspired supports thousands of 14–15 year olds with opportunities to volunteer in their local community, right across the UK*
- *British Youth Council empowers young people through representation and campaigns to have their voices heard on important issues to them*
- *Student Hubs support university students to lead social action projects, volunteering and social enterprises in the communities in which they are studying in Bristol, Southampton, Oxford, London and Winchester*
- *The Scouts Association supports young people to deliver community action projects via the Scouts network right across the UK*
- *UpRising delivers a social action youth leadership programme for 19–25 year olds from diverse backgrounds to equip them to transform their communities in Birmingham, Manchester, London, Liverpool, Stoke-on-Trent and Bedford*
- *The Diana Award recognises young people who make an extraordinary difference to their community, and runs anti-bullying and mentoring programmes in schools across the UK*
- *Citizenship Foundation provides resources to curriculum materials on social action and citizenship in over 80 per cent of UK secondary schools, and its flagship programmes Giving Nation and Go-Givers are delivered in secondary and primary schools right across the UK*
- *Year Here is a postgraduate programme placing talented graduates in frontline services including schools, care homes and homeless centres in London*
- *Ashoka works with schools across the UK as part of its Changemaker Schools programme, to foster social entrepreneurship within schools*

Benefits to young people: building character, raising attainment and boosting employability

The next generation is facing a series of complicated and difficult challenges in an uncertain, rapidly changing and highly competitive labour market. They are being asked to demonstrate skills that schools are too often not developing. The rise of social media in this competitive environment may be driving new risks in relation to depression and mental health issues.

While many young people are passionate about having a positive impact on their society, they are increasingly losing faith in traditional politics. The UK now has the biggest gap in voter turnout between the youngest and oldest citizens (30 percentage point difference) out of all OECD countries. At the same time, young people in the next generation are extraordinarily talented, creative, energetic and passionate about social change.³⁹ Opportunities to take part in social action can help to harness and channel their energy and enthusiasm, while at the same time giving them the skills they need to be successful, confident and compassionate citizens.

There is a growing body of evidence highlighting the benefits to young people of taking part in social action, and how high quality social action can help address some of the current limitations of our education system, including its capacity to adequately prepare young people for the challenges of the 21st century labour market. High quality social action can lead to improved:

- character attributes like empathy, cooperation and grit, which leads to improved educational outcomes, employability skills and employment outcomes
- confidence, wellbeing and mental health
- civic knowledge and capabilities

Good character and good grades

The priorities of the DfE are clear: close the attainment gap and embed character education into the way schools operate. Despite the introduction of the pupil premium, there remains a substantial and worrying gap in educational attainment linked to socio-economic background. In 2013/14, 35 per cent of pupils from middle and upper socio-economic brackets failed to achieve five A*-C grades at GCSE, compared with a shocking 63 per cent of students from lower socio-economic brackets (as measured by eligibility for free school meals).⁴⁰

The Government has recently drawn attention to what could be described as the long tail of underachievement in schools in England. According to Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, ‘excellence in the system is all too often confined to urban areas. Pockets of under-performance persist in coastal and rural areas, and even in some of our leafy suburbs schools who have the capability to be really excellent are coasting along at “just good enough”’.⁴¹

While the Government is continuing with the pupil premium, and is now introducing further legislation to turn underperforming schools into academies, a focus on character development is also a key priority. In the words of the education secretary: ‘just as important to the next generation’s future as getting a sound academic grounding, is ensuring they have the resilience and grit to deal with the challenges that life will throw at them’.

The focus on character education comes in response to employers and organisations like the CBI continually telling schools and policy makers that job applicants lack the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century labour market. But while the importance of character skills is often framed as an additional component to academic attainment (in the form of ‘soft skills’ or employability skills), research suggests that the two are strongly correlated.

Defining character

The term ‘character’ is defined as ‘a set of personal traits that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct’. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues outlines four categories of character virtues:

- *moral virtues* such as courage, honesty, humility and gratitude
- *civic virtues* such as service and volunteering – the moral virtues acting in society at large
- *intellectual virtues* such as curiosity and critical thinking
- *performance virtues* such as resilience, application and self-regulation⁴²

The DfE has outlined the following character traits:

- perseverance, resilience and grit
- confidence and optimism
- motivation, drive and ambition
- neighbourliness and community spirit
- tolerance and respect
- honesty, integrity and dignity
- conscientiousness, curiosity and focus⁴³

Other organisations refer to these attributes as social and emotional skills or ‘non-cognitive skills’.

The attributes in the list above are personal characteristics that we as a society believe are inherently good. But they are also vital to building cohesive and empowered communities, to success in life and work, and to individual wellbeing. The Positive Psychology Movement, led by American psychologist Martin Seligman, is increasingly highlighting the importance of character attributes to wellbeing and human flourishing.⁴⁴ Research by the Noble Prize-winning US economist James Heckman and Tim Kautz suggests that attributes like ‘openness to experience’ (related to concepts like curiosity and creativity), ‘conscientiousness’ (related to things like grit, self-control and perseverance) and ‘agreeableness’ (related to things like empathy, modesty

and trust) are just as important as IQ to educational attainment and labour market success.⁴⁵

Moreover, they found that service learning programmes in the US – where meaningful community service and reflection are integrated into teaching and learning strategies for students in order to enrich the learning experience and teach civic responsibility – can boost academic attainment and the development of character attributes like social skills, self-perceptions and motivation.⁴⁶

In other words, character attributes are not fixed or inherited, but instead can be developed through the right interventions. There is an increasingly strong body of research – including in the UK – that shows that taking part in youth social action programmes can help to develop good character skills and attributes.

Evidence on the relationship between social action and character development

The most recent and compelling study comes from the 2015 interim evaluation of the Behavioural Insights Team, *Evaluating Youth Social Action*, which used randomised control trials with three social action providers: the Citizenship Foundation, Envision and Voluntary Action Within Kent/IMAGO Social Action Initiatives.⁴⁷

Across all three programmes, the Behavioural Insights Team found positive correlations between social action and character attributes like empathy, problem solving, cooperation, grit and resilience, and sense of community:

- The Citizenship Foundation’s Go-Givers Make a Difference Challenge, an active citizenship project where primary school students identify social problems and campaigns to tackle them, was found to be very effective in increasing empathy (6 per cent higher for participants after taking part compared with a control group), problem solving (8.4 per cent against 8.1 per cent in the control group) and showing grit and resilience (7 per cent against 6.4 per cent in the control group).

- Envision's social action projects, which deliver and support ten-month-long programmes created by young people to address local concerns, demonstrated statistically significant improvement on every attribute. It was found to lead to higher levels of empathy and cooperation among participants (each 11 per cent higher than those in the control group), and participants benefited from between 6 and 11 per cent higher levels of grit and problem solving ability.
- The social action projects of Voluntary Action Within Kent/ IMAGO Social Action Initiatives, which use social action to support young people, people with disabilities and the elderly in Kent, were found to lead to higher levels of empathy and cooperation (8 per cent and 9 per cent more than the control group respectively).

The evaluation of Youth United's Journey Fund project, which will be published in July 2015, engaged 1,200 young people in high quality social action provided by their members (including The Scout Association, Girlguiding and St John Ambulance), and found significant increases among participants across many attributes considered to be important for good character, including communication (13 per cent increase), creativity (11 per cent), empathy (10 per cent), resilience (9 per cent) and agency (8 per cent).⁴⁸

There is also evidence from 'non-formal learning' social action programmes that suggests they lead to positive character development. Research from over 1,800 participants in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award found 84 per cent of young people and 92 per cent of leaders said the award increased resilience and led to participants becoming more responsible.⁴⁹ Research with young girls who had taken part in Girl Guides found that 82–83 per cent said their confidence and leadership skills had increased as a result of taking part.⁵⁰

Similarly, an evaluation of London Youth's work in 2013/14 found that of the young people who took part in the sports development programme Get Ready, 63 per cent reported an average of 19 per cent positive change on

determination and resilience, 70 per cent reported an average of 18 per cent positive change across all social and emotional capabilities, and 58 per cent reported an average 25 per cent increase in self-confidence.⁵¹

Moreover, these positive findings are not only relevant to young people at school age. As highlighted above, employers often cite a lack of character skills among graduates. Social action organisations that work with university students – for example, Student Hubs – are also vital, and evidence suggests they can help to develop character attributes. The vInspired report *Bursting the Bubble* found that 68 per cent of volunteers in higher education felt greater motivation and self-discipline as a result of volunteering.⁵²

Many social action programmes – such as City Year – use mentoring, which can facilitate character development. The EEF’s report *The Impact of Non-Cognitive Skills on Outcomes for Young People* found that school-based mentoring programmes where the mentor receives good training and supervision, and where the mentoring relationship is long lasting, could ‘promote non-cognitive skills among young people’.⁵³ Similarly, a study of 200 school-based programmes in the US found that students, teachers and mentors developing positive relationships that they would not have otherwise had a strong impact on positive outcomes and the development of character skills among students.⁵⁴

Research also suggests that – unlike in many schools – social action providers specifically focus on developing character skills and attributes. A large majority (87 per cent) of youth social action providers interviewed for the Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues report *Building Character Through Youth Social Action* said that young people’s character is fundamental to their organisation’s work, and over half said it is their top priority.⁵⁵

While character development is vital for young people to ‘to deal with the challenges that life will throw at them’, as the education secretary says, it is also vital to getting a strong academic grounding and better educational outcomes, which are just as important for success.

Evidence on social action improving educational outcomes

The EEF, the Cabinet Office and a team of academics from Durham University are currently undertaking an effectiveness trial into whether youth social action activities have an impact on engagement and attainment of pupils in year 9.⁵⁶ The evaluation is structured as a randomised control trial involving over 80 schools, and is due to be published in 2016. The findings from this research will significantly improve our understanding about the link between youth social action and educational outcomes.

In lieu of these findings, past research from the Department of Education and Ofsted – as well as robust research from the US – suggests that youth social action can help to narrow the attainment gap by improving young people’s attitudes towards school, and motivating them to study and attain better grades.

A 2012 DfE study found that better emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing was associated with higher levels of educational engagement and academic achievement.⁵⁷ A 2011 Ofsted study into voluntary projects in colleges and secondary schools found that well-managed programmes have the potential to enhance young people’s learning experience significantly.⁵⁸

In the US, Durlack et al’s 2011 analysis of 213 US primary schools found that good social and emotional skills, attitudes and behaviour – developed through mentoring schemes – were associated with an 11 per cent increase in academic achievement.⁵⁹ Moreover, the 2014 evaluation of NCS found increases in participants’ plans for undertaking further education (5 and 6 percentage point increases, respectively, compared against a control group) for both summer and autumn programme participants.⁶⁰

The link between youth social action and positive outcomes in education is thus becoming increasingly clear and understood, and while many schools are delivering social action and working with social action providers, there is still a strong need to ensure that all schools are doing this. This is particularly true of the schools that the Government has

identified as consistently underachieving. For these schools, youth social action is vital not only in delivering the employability skills that employers want, but also in helping them boost attainment.

Developing skills critical to workplace success

Young people face an incredibly difficult labour market that is rapidly changing. According to some experts, almost half (47 per cent) of all employment will be ‘potentially automatable’ and thus in a high risk category for likelihood of disappearing, with impacts felt strongest in low and middle skilled and waged jobs.⁶¹ These future trends are already building on shifts over the past 20 years, where there has been growth in the top and bottom end of the skills and wage distribution, and a squeeze in the middle. Craft-based manufacturing jobs have been replaced by service sector, professional jobs such as consulting, media, advertising and office management. Jobs in these sectors require a different skill set from that needed 30 years ago, including strong communication skills, and the ability to work in a team, solve problems and manage projects. But as continually highlighted by the CBI and others, schools and universities are failing to deliver sufficient levels of these skills. In a survey of approximately 3,000 businesses, the British Chamber of Commerce’s 2014 Workforce Survey found that 88 per cent of respondents felt that school leavers and 54 per cent felt that graduates were not sufficiently prepared for work. Of these businesses, 57 per cent felt that a lack of soft skills, such as communication, team-working and resilience, was a key reason for this lack of preparedness.⁶²

There is a growing evidence base showing that high quality youth social action can help young people to develop the skills that employers need and give them a leg up in navigating the labour market. There is also evidence that – while more work is needed to raise the profile of social action in the eyes of employers – many employers already value participation in ‘non-formal education’ activities. For example, in a survey of 800 employers around 6 out of 10 thought that

people they recruited who participated in the Scouts ‘showed confidence and leadership ability’ and ‘had strong team-working skills’, and 41 per cent reported that participation in non-formal learning programmes like the Scouts ‘would be a positive influence on their decision to hire new employees’.⁶³

Evidence on the link between social action and employment outcomes

The most compelling research on the relationship between employability and social action comes from the US, and is based on a full-time ‘service year’ model of social action.

One of the longest studies to date is a ten-year study by the US Corporation for National & Community Service, which found that volunteers in programmes like AmeriCorps had a 27 per cent higher likelihood of finding a job after being out of work than non-volunteers, and the effect was nearly twice as strong for those without school qualifications or from rural communities.⁶⁴

Research on AmeriCorps’ impact also shows that social action can lead to higher wages and increased job satisfaction, particularly for young people. Academics from Columbia University who analysed the economic value of AmeriCorps programmes found that the incomes of people aged 16–24 are approximately 12 per cent higher for volunteers than non-volunteers, an effect comparable to having an additional year of post-secondary education.⁶⁵ A study of former AmeriCorps participants by Rand Corporation, based on 700 semi-structured interviews, showed that AmeriCorps volunteers went on to have a greater than average job satisfaction.⁶⁶

Similar findings can be seen in the ‘service year’ programmes that exist in the UK. A 2013 evaluation of vInspired’s Talent Programme, which is a full-time six month volunteering programme, found that 13 per cent of programme participants were still employed by their original host organisation 30 months after the completion of the programme, and 94 per cent reported securing a job or education course of their choice on completion of the programme. The evaluation also

found that the percentage of participants who felt that they ‘have the skills I need to do the job I want to do’ rose from 33 per cent to 88 per cent during their placement.⁶⁷ Similarly, Community Service Volunteers runs a full-time volunteering programme for young people involving placements on social care projects; a 2013 evaluation found that 93 per cent of young volunteers went on to education, employment, training or further volunteering.⁶⁸

Similar outcomes were reported from students in higher education, according to vInspired’s report *Bursting the Bubble*:

- 62 per cent of participants reported greater readiness for employment.
- 57 per cent felt that volunteering had increased their chances of gaining employment.
- 78 per cent reported talking about volunteering in an interview.
- 48 per cent of volunteers felt that volunteering gave them greater clarity around future career options.⁶⁹

It is just as vital that social action that takes place in school, or as young people are leaving school – for example, by taking part in NCS – can have a critical impact on motivation and skills development at this crucial point in young people’s lives. For example, according to the 2013 evaluation of NCS:

- 92 per cent of participants in the summer programme and 91 per cent of participants in the autumn programme felt that NCS had helped them develop useful skills for the future.
- 83 per cent of participants felt that they were more capable than they had realised before completing the programme.
- Three-quarters (76 per cent of those on the summer programme and 72 per cent of those on the autumn programme) felt that they were more confident about getting a job in the future.⁷⁰

Social action and young people not in education, employment or training

One of the most intractable problems facing this government and local authorities up and down the country is the high number of young people who are NEET. The Government is committed to getting all of these young people into some type of positive activity through their introduction of requirements to take part in paid employment or community projects if young people are NEET for six months or more. There is already a wide range of youth social action programmes that work with young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET, and evaluations of these programmes shows potential for youth social action to deliver the Government's objectives.

For example, vInspired's Talent Programme is a structured volunteering and social action programme aimed at young people not in education or employment. Evaluation of the Talent Programme found that 90 per cent of the participants who completed their placement progressed into sustained employment, education or training after completing the programme.⁷¹

The London Youth report *Good Youth Work Works?* demonstrates the power of social action to help young people who are furthest from the labour market and most at risk of being NEET. The Build-It programme gives young people in Lambeth the chance to get work experience and personal development through undertaking social action, with a particular focus on the construction industry. According to an evaluation of the programme, 28 per cent of participants reported getting jobs after taking part in the programme, and 31 per cent went on to further education or training. Among young black men taking part in the programme (Lambeth has the highest levels of unemployment among young black men of all London boroughs), 29 per cent reported getting a job and 38 per cent reported going on to further education or training.⁷²

Social action and expanding networks

Some of the positive impact that social action opportunities can have on employability is related to expanding social and professional networks, which is particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

vInspired's report on students in higher education, *Bursting the Bubble*, found that through taking part in social action and volunteering, 74 per cent of participants felt that they had built a wider variety of friendships, and 51 per cent reported forming contacts and networks that proved useful in later years.⁷³

Similarly, the 2009 Re:action and De Montfort University report *The Impact of Volunteering on Social Capital and Community Cohesion* surveyed 920 young volunteers within the Youth Action Network's member organisations. The report found that 66 per cent of young people with experience of volunteering in national or international settings, and 44 per cent of young people volunteering in neighbourhood projects, felt that their education and employability had benefited through meeting new people as part of their volunteering.⁷⁴

Drawing on the evidence, we suggest that the Government consider youth social action as part of its toolbox for tackling issues related to youth unemployment and young people who are NEET. In chapter 3 we suggest ways in which this effect can be magnified.

Improving wellbeing and mental health

As highlighted by organisations like the Prince's Trust, unemployment can have a serious and long-term effect on young people's mental health.⁷⁵ Thus, in helping give young people new skills, new contacts and networks, and new job opportunities, youth social action can help alleviate mental health issues. But the evidence also suggests that youth social action can help to improve young people's mental health independently of its link with employment, by giving young people a sense of achievement, empowerment and worth.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the importance of wellbeing when analysing the impact of policy measures (rather than just economic measures) and in countering the rise of mental health problems. High levels of wellbeing are associated with several factors such as higher life expectancy and better mental health, and the Office of National Statistics now produces regular statistical reviews of national wellbeing.⁷⁶

David Cameron has argued that national wellbeing should be more of a focus in policy making and tasked the independent chief statistician, Jil Matheson, with developing a wellbeing measure to rival GDP.⁷⁷ This sentiment was echoed recently in a report by Lord O'Donnell, the former head of the Civil Service, Richard Layard and others.⁷⁸ Evidence suggests that youth social action can contribute positively to this agenda by having a measurable impact on young people's self-confidence and wellbeing. This is extremely important given recent research suggesting that young people are increasingly concerned about mental health matters.⁷⁹

Evidence on link between youth social action and mental health

In the 2013 Demos report *Service Nation* we found that the vast majority (consistently around 80 per cent) of participants in social action programmes reported that they gained in self-confidence, sense of direction and sense of confidence from their activities.⁸⁰

Findings from the large-scale, government-run Citizenship Survey underscore the positive impact of volunteering. For example, the 2008/09 UK Citizenship Survey found that 35 per cent of young people involved in regular, formal volunteering said it gave them a sense of personal achievement, 30 per cent said it broadened their life experience and 22 per cent said it gave them more confidence.⁸¹ More recently, the 2014 survey *Youth Social Action in the UK* found that people who had taken part in youth social action rated 8.6 out of 10 for life satisfaction, while those who had not rated at 8 out of 10.⁸²

There have also been some key findings from highly rigorous studies into the impact of youth social action on mental health. The Behavioural Insights Team interim evaluation found that participants in the Citizenship Foundation Programme had a more positive outlook, with levels of anxiety 22 per cent lower than those in the control group.⁸³

Similarly, a study in 2014 by Join In, based on surveys of the public and volunteers (with a combined sample size of 2,700) and using measures of emotional wellbeing based on New Philanthropy Capital's Emotional Wellbeing Framework, found that participants in sport volunteering programmes had 10 per cent higher levels of self-esteem, emotional wellbeing and resilience than non-volunteers, and were 15 per cent less likely to worry or feel anxious.⁸⁴

These findings cannot be ignored given the worrying rise of mental health issues in young people. The Government has pledged to give mental health the same priority as physical health. Youth social action presents an opportunity outside the NHS to have a measurable impact on mental health issues, potentially saving the Government huge amounts of money in the long run by reducing the various costs of issues associated with poor mental health.

Big society of positive civic actors

Creating a 'Big Society' of empowered and active citizens remains a priority for the prime minister and the Government. But ensuring that the next generation is up to the challenge requires lighting a passion for civic activism early on. This includes a desire for young people to engage in traditional politics. Demos research in the report *Introducing Generation Citizen* shows that while young people are not apathetic and are increasingly seeking to have a positive impact on social issues through new methods (eg social media, social action and career choice), they are still highly disillusioned with the current political system.⁸⁵ Voter turnout among older and younger voters in the UK was the same proportion in the 1960s, but now there is a 30-percentage-point gap in voter

turnout between younger voters (between 18 and 24 years) and older voters (over the age of 55), the largest gap of all OECD countries. Many argue that this is because politics is not taught in schools, and the citizenship curriculum has been downgraded. These areas are vitally important, and research suggests that taking part in social action can be a highly effective aspect of delivering a strong citizenship curriculum that helps young people develop the knowledge and civic capabilities they need to be effective citizens.

Evidence of a link between social action and desire for civic activism

Of course, when citizens are encouraged to volunteer then the whole of society benefits. But as we highlight above, so do the individual volunteers through their enhanced wellbeing and skills development. And there is a growing body of evidence showing that youth social action helps to spark a desire for these benefits and create a habit of volunteering, while also giving citizens the ability to feel empowered and defend their rights.

The 2015 interim Behavioural Insights Team report *Evaluating Youth Social Action* found that participants in the Envision programme were 20 per cent more likely to express a willingness to volunteer in the future than the control group.⁸⁶ vInspired's report *Bursting the Bubble* found that 67 per cent of participants felt that volunteering at university had increased their willingness to volunteer in the future. A 2014 evaluation of the youth social action programme Think Big by Durham University found that 39 per cent of participants felt that it had a substantive impact on their likelihood of future volunteering.⁸⁷ The 2015 evaluation of Youth United's Journey Fund project also found significant impacts on volunteering attitudes and behaviour: volunteering in the previous 12 months increased significantly from 51 per cent at the pre-participation stage to 66 per cent following the project; 81 per cent of participants also reported being more likely to volunteer or become involved in a similar project in future.⁸⁸

This effect appears even stronger for young people who take part in full-time ‘service year’ programmes. For example, 79 per cent of people on the Community Service Volunteers full-time programme Volunteering At Home stated that they would volunteer again. A 2007 Policy Studies Associates report undertook a longitudinal study following a random sample of 107 young people who participated in the 2002/03 City Year programme, and examined their civic engagement, leadership and social capital over a period of four years, compared with a group of 85 young people who applied for the same City Year cohort, were accepted on the programme, but ultimately did not take up the offer. Conducting interviews in 2004 and 2006, the report found the following:

- In 2004, 41 per cent of City Year participants voted in the state and local elections, against 33 per cent in the comparison group; in 2006, this gap had grown to 59 per cent of participants against 40 per cent in the comparison group.
- In 2006, City Year alumni were still more likely (70 per cent) to volunteer than members of the comparison group (57 per cent).
- In 2006, despite a slight closing of the gap from 2004, City Year alumni still scored five points higher than the comparison group on the Political Efficacy Index.⁸⁹

In highlighting the benefits to young people from youth social action, it is clear that providing opportunities can help to transform people’s lives by giving them more confidence, more optimism, more power to effect change, more skills and better networks, and a greater sense of self-worth. Every organisation mentioned above – and a large number of social action providers and organisations working with young people – have thousands of moving and compelling stories of personal transformation. And at the same time these benefits to individuals – in aggregate – have a huge positive impact on society overall, underlining the ‘double benefit’ that youth

social action can deliver. Boosting educational attainment and employability not only helps one young person get a job, but also reduces unemployment and the negative impacts that entails. In the next section we outline in more detail the other side of the double benefit calculation – the benefit of social action to communities and society as a whole.

Benefits to society of youth social action: community responsibility, social integration and improved public services

The benefit of youth social action to young people themselves is only half of the story; youth social action also has significant positive social and economic impacts on wider society. As outlined above, participation in youth social action makes a person much more likely to be an active citizen in later life, developing individual and community political efficacy. Furthermore, there is evidence that youth social action increases social mixing and social cohesion, as well as increasing young people's feelings of belonging in their local community. Much of the evidence for this is based on pre and post surveys, often complemented by the use of a control group.

There is also evidence from the US and the UK that investment in youth social action can improve public services while reducing the overall burden on them. When this happens, there is the potential for long-term savings in social spending and increased levels of participation in the labour market. This results from both the individual benefits laid out above (wellbeing and employability), and broader societal benefits (improved public services and a more cohesive society). Most of this evidence is based on survey data and economic modelling.

Efficacy, communal feeling and service-based careers

As noted above, research suggests that youth social action can help young people develop the capabilities of good citizens and effective civic actors. In developing these capabilities, there are also benefits for society as young people become more motivated

to undertake volunteering and feel a sense of responsibility towards their local communities. This even extends as far as career choice, with social action participants often being motivated to choose career paths which include an element of service. In this way, the principles behind the ‘Big Society’ of bolstering a sense of community responsibility and activism are still a key priority. The evidence suggests that investment in youth social action can help to develop these attitudes and behaviours.

Social action increases community feeling among participants. The 2015 interim Behavioural Insights Team report found that participants in youth social action through Envision programmes had a sense of community that was 16 per cent higher than that of their counterparts in the control group, and those participating in Voluntary Action Within Kent/IMAGO programmes had a 15 per cent higher sense of community involvement than the control group. Youth United’s 2015 evaluation of the Journey Fund project found that a significant majority (81 per cent) of participants wanted to make a difference in their community, while 70 per cent felt they were more involved in their community and a similar proportion (71 per cent) felt that they had given something back to their community as a result of participating.⁹⁰

A 2014 report from Join In found that those who had volunteered were three times more likely than people who had never volunteered in sport to agree that ‘it’s important to be part of my community’, five times more likely to say they put a lot of time and effort into being part of their community, and eight times more likely to agree that they have an influence over what their community is like.⁹¹ The 2014 evaluation of the vInspired Talent Programme found that the percentage of participants who agreed that they were ‘part of my local community’ rose from 53 per cent to 87 per cent during their placement,⁹² while the 2013 evaluation of NCS found that 61 per cent and 64 per cent respectively felt a greater responsibility for their local community.⁹³ Finally, *The Impact of Volunteering on Social Capital and Community Cohesion* found that 60 per cent of volunteers felt that volunteering had helped bring people together within their community.⁹⁴

Participation in social action also increases feelings of efficacy, making young people more likely to take action in their communities. The 2013 NCS evaluation found that 72 per cent of summer and 76 per cent of autumn programme participants felt that they were more likely to help out locally,⁹⁵ while the Youth Social Action Survey in 2014 found that 71 per cent of young people who took part in meaningful social action reported that they enjoyed helping others through their activities.⁹⁶ A 2011 survey and focus-group-based assessment of Free the Children's US programmes found that 90 per cent of respondents believed that they were responsible for addressing social issues, 73 per cent of respondents felt that their involvement with Free the Children resulted in increased community engagement, and 79 per cent of respondents who were of voting age reported voting in the most recent national election, which was double the rate of peers in their age category.⁹⁷

There is also evidence to suggest that increased sense of communal responsibility through social action can increase aspirations to choose a career in the social sector and based on service, as well as a desire to work for organisations that have a strong sense of corporate social responsibility. While organisations like Teach First and Frontline may not qualify as social action providers, they are helping to increase desire and access to careers in the social sector, such as teaching and social work.

Social action providers also aim to do this by giving young people access to and developing skills that can help them set up social enterprises or work in careers based around service of others, such as social care, healthcare and teaching; these are areas of the labour market where there are expected to be increasing demands for skilled labour, but which are currently experiencing shortages. Student Hubs has measured that 71 per cent of students who participated in their programmes and services at ten universities felt that choosing a career in the social sector was a more attractive possibility than they had thought previously, and that 49 per cent of volunteers changed career plans as a result of their

engagement. Evaluation of City Year participants, undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research, found that 83 per cent said it was likely that their choice of career or work would involve service to others and that they were likely to volunteer or be involved in social action in the next few years.⁹⁸

Social integration and feelings of belonging

Integration and social mixing among people from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds is a key priority for this government. Recent research by the Social Integration Commission has highlighted the extent of social segregation in the UK across a range of factors including ethnicity, social class and age. This has a number of economic impacts, including £1.5 billion lost to the national economy as a result of long-term unemployment and £700 million lost through blocked opportunities in the labour market and underemployment.⁹⁹

The evidence suggests that social action can have a significant impact on integration. Social mixing is one of the key objectives of NCS, and research from its evaluation suggests that it can help to achieve cohesion and feelings of belonging. The 2014 evaluation of NCS found that 8 in 10 participants in the summer and autumn programmes, (84 per cent and 81 per cent respectively), felt more positive towards people from different backgrounds after taking part in NCS. Other studies have made similar findings: *The Impact of Volunteering on Social Capital and Community Cohesion* found that 45 per cent of volunteers felt that volunteering had changed opinions they previously held of other types of people, and 51 per cent said that they started to socialise with people who were somehow different to them as a result of volunteering.¹⁰⁰ Research by the National Coordination Centre for Public Engagement on volunteering among university students found that 77 per cent felt their understanding of others had improved as a result of volunteering.¹⁰¹

Improved public services

There is an increasing concern about the need for public services to become more relational or more ‘human’. This found its apotheosis in the report into practices at Stafford Hospital, which described ‘a lack of care, compassion and humanity’ and a ‘system which put corporate self-interest ahead of patient safety’.¹⁰² As David Robinson of Community Links has described it: ‘Public services are being reduced to a set of transactions when the real need is for a more personal relationship, for common sense and human kindness.’¹⁰³

This idea has its proponents across the political spectrum: on the left, it has been articulated by Maurice Glasman, Hilary Cottam and Jon Wilson among others, while on the right, David Cameron’s former adviser, Steve Hilton, recently published *More Human*, in which he described how distant public institutions feel:

*The schools we send our children to; the hospitals that care for us when we’re sick; the very food we eat – we’ve allowed these intimate things, that matter so much, to be provided by anonymous, distant, industrialised machines.*¹⁰⁴

Participants in social action, when working in partnership with public services, not only have a direct impact in addressing social issues but also provide an additional element of humanity that public service professionals struggle to provide in the course of performing their many duties. Young people can also bring high levels of enthusiasm and energy to social action, which can act as a strong complement to the experience and wisdom of professionals.

In 2013 the King’s Fund described the impact of volunteers on the health service through a survey of acute NHS trusts. The report estimated that there are more than 78,000 volunteers across all acute trusts in England, contributing more than 13 million hours per year – and the trusts suggested that volunteers had a significant positive impact on patient experience. Approximately 9 out of 10 trusts anticipated that the number of volunteers would increase over

the next three years, while the return on investment was estimated to be £11 for every £1 invested in volunteers.¹⁰⁵ King's College Hospital provides a case study of how this works, beginning the programme of volunteering by asking staff what they would do if they had more time. This often takes the form of volunteers undertaking everyday acts of compassion that do not require professional training, like performing small errands or talking to patients who are isolated.¹⁰⁶

The contribution that youth social action can have towards public services can also apply to the education system, with City Year's work in schools being a good example. During the 2012/13 academic year, City Year's Corps members provided 155,000 hours of school-based service and supported more than 600 pupils on a one-to-one basis. Through their service, they supplement the learning and support that pupils receive from teachers, and in doing so contribute to a more supportive school environment and accelerated levels of progress, with an average point score progress of 5.2 for English and 4.4 for maths over the course of the year, compared with the average expected progress of 3.¹⁰⁷

However, this is only the tip of the iceberg: there is huge potential for participants in social action to improve public services and tackle social issues in so doing. Youth social action can address social isolation and other public health challenges, the attainment gap and other barriers to social mobility, and local and global environmental issues.

Social action's return on investment

The Conservative Government has pledged further cuts to public services and austerity measures in order to reduce Britain's deficit and ensure a strong economy. Research suggests that investment in youth social action can generate significant returns on investment in the medium to long term, potentially representing an 'invest-to-save' approach.

The most compelling research on return on investment comes from the Government's NCS programme. The 2014 evaluation of NCS found that per pound of expenditure on

the summer programme, there were £1.70–6.10 of benefits, and £1.27–6.09 of benefits for the autumn programme. These cost benefits are derived from many outcomes, including increased participation in further education and a knock-on effect on lifetime income, the cost of the volunteering activities valued at the minimum wage for young people, the increased likelihood of future volunteering, the impact of leadership development, and the health impact of NCS, including reduction in smoking and drinking levels. While the report cautioned that the method used was imperfect and data were short term, it also stated that ‘even under the most pessimistic scenarios, the scheme is estimated to have delivered greater social benefit than the costs involved’, and that it had not included monetary measures of wellbeing impact, leading to potentially understated returns on investment.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, the 2014 report *People Helping People* by Tooley Street Research estimated that the value of regular social action in and alongside public services in England was around £34 billion, the equivalent of 5 per cent of total government expenditure or 2.2 per cent of GDP, measured solely as economic output of social action and not tax-payer savings; £22 billion was gained through formal volunteering, £10 billion resulted from informal volunteering, and £2 billion came through community action.¹⁰⁹ A 2014 report from Join In entitled ‘Hidden diamonds’ found that it cost £36 to recruit a volunteer, but every volunteer has the ability to deliver a return on investment worth £16,032, estimated by calculating the value of their time, the wellbeing and mental health benefits to the volunteer, and the participation of others in sport that each volunteer enables.¹¹⁰

In the US, where investment in social action is substantial, research from Columbia University into the economic value of three AmeriCorps programmes found that the total cost of the youth national service, including tax burdens, match-funding and federal funding, was \$1.7 billion annually, while the benefit, including programme outputs and longer-term human and social capital gains, was \$6.5 billion: almost four times greater than the annual cost. Additionally,

the research estimated that the tax-payer in the longer term recoups \$2.5 billion in lower social welfare spending and higher productivity, leading to a net saving for the tax-payer of two dollars for every one invested.¹¹¹

This evidence, collected in one place, makes a compelling case for the 'double benefit' of youth social action across diverse policy areas. It also demonstrates how this double benefit can in particular circumstances produce value for money for government, through the logic of invest-to-save.

Having reviewed the evidence base, we now go on to summarise the successes and lessons of the last five years of youth social action policy.

2 Service nation 2015: where we are now

Volunteering is an established and essential part of British society and has been a policy priority for at least a decade. The publication of the Russell Commission in 2005 and the subsequent establishment of vInspire to coordinate youth volunteering highlight the priority that youth volunteering had before 2010.

In the last five years the scale of ambition around youth social action has escalated. The creation of the Generation Change coalition and the launch of the Step Up To Serve #iwill campaign have led to a common strategy for youth social action with cross-party support. There is consensus around a definition of youth social action and widespread use of the term in the voluntary sector and beyond. The creation and extraordinary growth of National Citizen Service (NCS) has lent profile to youth social action, and its evaluations have helped to demonstrate the impact that youth social action can have. The evidence base on youth social action continues to grow and strengthen the case for its importance, as outlined in the previous chapter. The figures below underline achievements over the past few years:

- Approximately 3 million young people – 40 per cent of 10–20-year-olds in the UK – took part in meaningful social action between September 2013 and September 2014.¹¹²
- 220,000 adult volunteers supported youth social action between November 2013 and October 2014.¹¹³
- Just over £20 million has been invested in youth social action opportunities in the last 12 months.¹¹⁴
- Sustained social action took place in over 20,000 locations across the UK.¹¹⁵

But work on youth social action has only just begun if the vision set out by the Step Up To Serve's #iwill campaign is to be achieved. Meeting the campaign's 2020 objectives will require a significant amount of work over the next five years. It is vital that the Government redoubles its commitment to youth social action and addresses some of the challenges that are currently affecting many in the sector.

The previous government, and the Cabinet Office, which took the lead on social action, should be commended for their work and these successes should be celebrated. But the Government has to continue to harness and support youth social action in a comprehensive, strategic manner if we are to realise the potential impact that youth social action can have on challenges like youth unemployment, social integration, isolation and loneliness among the elderly, and social mobility.

Priorities for the next five years

The Government must maintain its focus on driving participation in youth social action in this parliament. Having laid solid foundations for the youth social action sector in the previous government, the new Conservative majority Government should continue to develop opportunities for youth social action, with particular regard for the following priorities:

- *service across the lifecycle*: maintain a plurality of providers of youth social action and ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for social action across the lifecycle for young people, both pre-NCS and post-NCS
- *maximise value*: recognise the benefits and unique contribution that youth social action can have on assorted social problems through better coordination across government departments
- *quality*: emphasise the importance of high quality social action provision and its recognition by schools, colleges, universities, employers and young people themselves

Maintain a plurality of providers across the lifecycle

Maintaining a plurality of youth social action provision at multiple ages during a young person's life is fundamental to reaping the full benefits of the NCS programme and maintaining the health of the sector.

Opportunities across the life course will prepare participants to get the most out of the NCS experience and ensure that society benefits from the investment at 16. The investment in NCS has been a strong expression of the Government's commitment to social action. But it is important that its full impact is harnessed before and after participation. NCS's continued growth and success requires feeder programmes that encourage young people aged 10–15 to take part in social action. There is also a need to ensure that there are opportunities for young people who take part in NCS to move on to other social action opportunities, so they can continue on their journey of personal development and community service and maximise the benefits outlined above.

One person we spoke to in our research emphasised the need to have several providers:

Are we putting all our eggs in an NCS basket? My view would be that we need a plurality of providers, because we are dealing with a heterogeneous group who will access youth social action in different ways... The more we can generate a diversity of provision, well sign-posted and well explained to young people, the more we are going to be successful.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

Other stakeholders highlighted that youth social action provision cannot be approached with a 'one size fits all' attitude, and that smaller organisations with specialist expertise need to be preserved. A vibrant and varied sector also encourages innovation and new approaches that could provide impact. As one stakeholder put it:

There are immense funding challenges ahead, particularly for the smaller organisations in youth social action, and making sure their expertise, skills and knowledge in working with particular groups of young people is not lost is very important.

Grants manager, foundation that funds youth social action

There are some excellent programmes operating pre-NCS and post-NCS. Bolstering these programmes was precisely the aim of the Cabinet Office's Journey Fund, which came to an end in April 2015. But while the Journey Fund was an important contribution, its short timeframe – one year – potentially limits its impact. Those in the sector who participated in the Journey Fund are now waiting for the Cabinet Office to report on the findings (expected later in 2015). But it is vital that the Government does more in this area to ensure adequate investment in social action opportunities across the lifecycle.

These are some of the comments by participants in our research:

I think that too many charities and youth social action programmes are targeting secondary education and students in secondary education. There are not enough schemes targeting primary schools, and we know that that is so important for young people. At the same time, there are some amazing projects being undertaken in primary schools that could do with more support.

Programme manager, youth social action provider

I think a lot of people do quite often say that youth social action in the 16–18 range is over-subscribed. I disagree; we mainly work with people who have finished NCS, and at that point, there is a gap.

Chief executive, young social action provider

Having progression routes for people coming out of youth social action initiatives to go on to more social action is something we are interested in. There is some work that has been done there but there could definitely be more.

Grants manager, foundation that funds youth social action

Cross-departmental coordination

Greater coordination is an important next step for the Government's youth social action efforts – to make best use of the existing evidence base, to embed youth social action across government departments, and to ensure that national policy is joined up with that pursued in devolved areas of the UK. The potential for youth social action to have significant impact on the work of numerous government departments has long been recognised. The Russell Commission identified this as an opportunity, suggesting that young volunteers could 'give additional help within the public sector, for example in hospitals, schools, parks and sports, leisure and arts centres, to gain valuable experience and deliver tangible community benefit'.¹¹⁶

This point was also emphasised by our stakeholders in interviews:

Youth social action crosses a number of different agendas, so it would make sense to have a cross-department strategy. It's worth thinking about how significantly youth social action could impact on a range of areas, like crime, health and education.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

Youth social action can contribute across areas of government. Some of our best projects are peer education, particularly related to mental health. At the same time, I see a lot of discussions about youth social action and health, but what is actually being discussed is volunteering in health areas; there is not enough thought about how youth social action can contribute.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

In the Coalition Government, the Cabinet Office took the lead on youth social action through the Youth Social Action Fund and the Journey Fund as highlighted above. It has built up an expertise and evidence base that is extremely valuable to continued efforts over the term of the next parliament. But there is scope for greater involvement from other departments. For example, the DfE's new focus on character education and the £3.5 million grant scheme for character

education projects has – given the evidence of the relationship between social action and character outlined in the previous chapter – significant overlap with youth social action. However, many stakeholders we spoke to felt that there was a lack of coordination between the DfE and the Cabinet Office in relation to these initiatives. Greater strategic coordination between these departments – and others that have policy priorities relevant to youth social action – is therefore needed. Several stakeholders felt that this could only happen if youth social action funding and strategy was dispersed across those departments and not concentrated in the Cabinet Office alone. One told us:

I would like to see social action embedded across every area of policy – we're doing youth social action related to mental health, and we've got funding coming in from the NHS. We do things with almost every department.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

Cross-government policy integration is also required in order to reinforce the benefits of youth social action. All departments should look through their policies to see how they might reinforce youth social action. Equality considerations are now part of almost all government policies; determining how to reinforce youth social action in the same consistent way would be very beneficial.

Stakeholder, Association of Colleges

Improving quality provision and recognition

Unlike with apprenticeships or academic qualifications such as GCSEs, A-levels or degrees, there is no formal qualification associated with social action. Thus, new ways need to be found to measure and ensure the quality of programme provision, and make sure the positive benefits of taking part in social action are communicated to young people, schools and employers. Social action providers need to continue to focus on gathering evidence and improving the quality of their provision so that schools and employers are able to identify programmes that are of a sufficiently high quality. This can

help make youth social action sustainable, by convincing schools and employers of the need to invest in social action programmes. This is emphasised by some of the comments from stakeholders:

My particular organisation works solely in schools, we hear from head teachers all the time, that it is very difficult for them to distinguish between which external providers are of a high quality and which are not. We need a quality measure.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

I think a quality mark or something for those organisations might be a good idea. I've been worried before, asking about an organisation teaching citizenship, asking teachers or heads 'who are they?' and they've not had a clear idea.

Programme lead, Ofsted

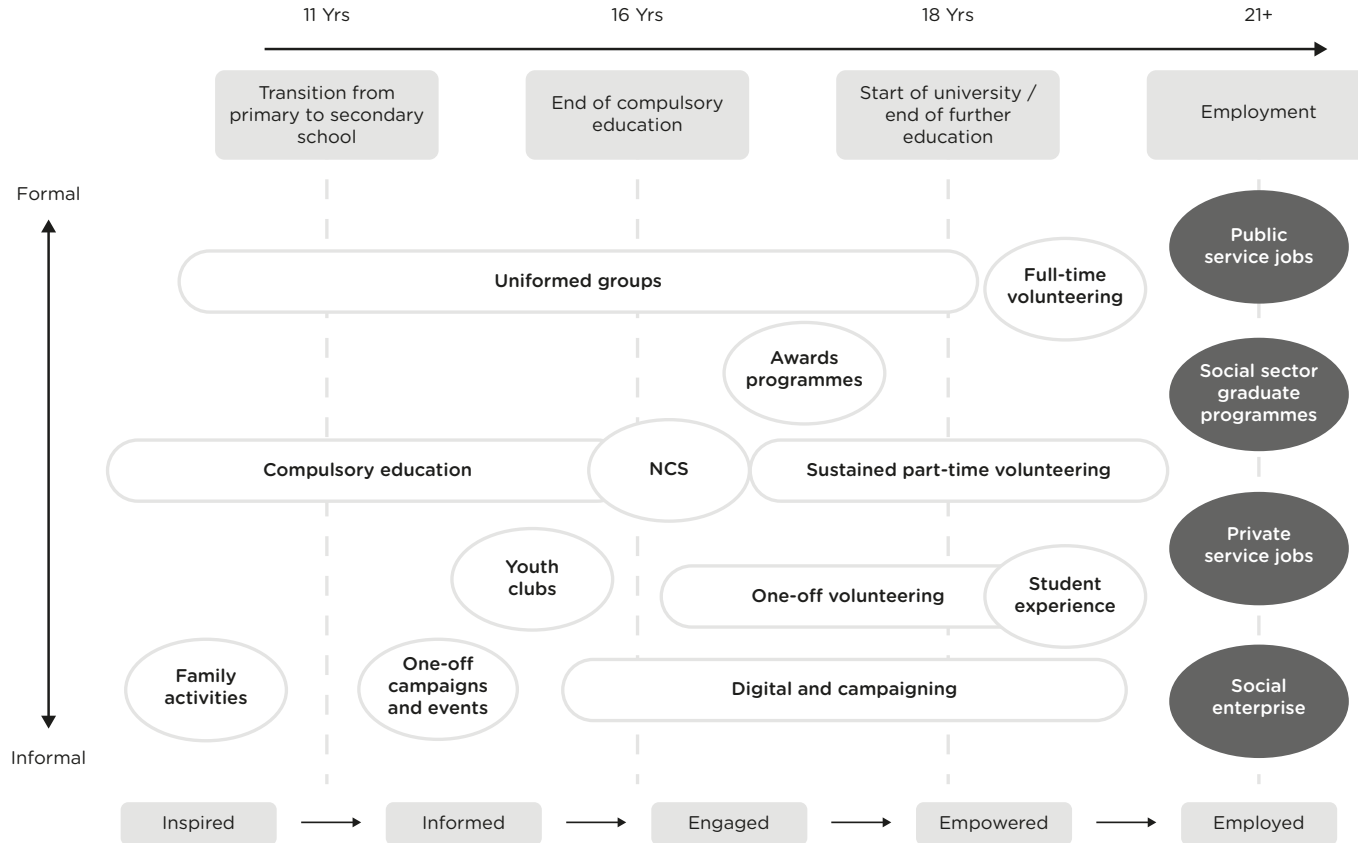
I would urge that the primary focus of any quality framework is based first and foremost on what information we need to continue to improve the work we're doing, not what we need to collect to demonstrate impact.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

While historically the most robust evidence into the impact of social action came from the US, the UK evidence base has become stronger in recent years and continues to grow. The importance of having a 'theory of change' is becoming more widely understood across the sector, and independent evaluations are becoming the norm. Almost all of the most high profile providers of youth social action now have developed theories of change, logic models and independent evaluations (including some with control groups).

There is still scope for improvement and ensuring that evidence gathering is an ongoing process. The second strand report of the Early Intervention Foundation's 2015 review of the importance of social and emotional skills, *What works in enhancing social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence?*, by the University of Galway, found

Figure 1 The youth social action lifecycle



that the quality of evidence related to impact in the youth sector is ‘emerging, albeit limited’, and that evidence related to youth social action in particular ‘needs to be strengthened using more robust evaluation designs with standardised outcome measures’.¹¹⁷

Standards of evidence frameworks – such as the level-based Nesta standards of evidence, the Early Intervention Foundation Standards of Evidence rating system or Project Oracle’s validation system – provide useful structures with which to sift and organise the existing evidence in the sector.¹¹⁸

Figure 1 shows the youth social action lifecycle and some examples of the types of youth social action activities available at different ages.

Box 2 **Examples of organisations or programmes delivering the activities cited in Figure 1**

- *Family activities: Church groups, Woodcraft Folk, local fundraising*
- *Uniformed groups: The Scout Association, Girlguiding, Army Cadets, Sea Cadets, Fire Cadets, Boys’ Brigade, Girls’ Brigade*
- *School-based social action: Go Givers, Giving Nation, Free the Children, Envision, First Give*
- *One-off campaigns and events: We Day, Comic Relief, Make Poverty History, Disasters Emergency Committee campaigns*
- *Youth Clubs: Ambition, UK Youth, London Youth, Youth Scotland Awards, Duke of Edinburgh Award, The Diana Award, vInspired awards, JLGB awards*
- *Sustained part-time programmes: UpRising, Fixers, The Key, Team V, British Youth Council, Catch 22*

- *One-off volunteering: Do Something, Do-It, vInspired portal, GwirVol*
- *Full-time volunteering: City Year, Year Here, vTalent, Volunteering Matters, Wildlife Trusts*
- *Student experience: Student Hubs, student charity societies (eg Amnesty International), RAG, Student Volunteering Week*
- *Digital campaigning: 38 Degrees, Youth Net, Bite the Ballot, The 99% Campaign*

3 Service nation 2020: recommendations

Youth social action in the UK has already accomplished a great deal, providing benefits for millions of young people and thousands of communities. The Government now has a historic opportunity to leverage good will in the voluntary and private sectors to harness the energy and skills of young people through social action to help to tackle social issues as they relate to the policy areas of health, education, crime, social care and unemployment.

The creation of NCS was a remarkable achievement of the last Government, and one of the prime minister's legacies. But in order to maximise the benefit of NCS under this parliament – and ensure that it continues to grow and thrive – there must be sufficient opportunities to take part in social action before and after NCS. Some of this will require structural reform and changes to how the Government currently funds and delivers social action – with countries like the US and France offering good models for how these changes should be made in the UK.

Much more can be accomplished over the next five years if the Government adopts a long-term, strategic approach to funding and embedding social action across British society. Achieving the full 'double benefit' – including more rounded and employable young people, more integrated and empowered communities, and public services with a more human touch – will require a number of changes to policy. Therefore, we make a series of recommendations below about how the successes of the past five years can be built on and magnified across the next five years.

Recommendation 1

Create a national strategy for youth social action

The UK currently lacks a coordinating national strategy to ensure quality, sustained youth social action opportunities that address the most pressing social issues and therefore reap the greatest double benefit. In our research, many stakeholders passionately argued that a short-term, piecemeal approach was failing to get the most out of social action, and possibly undermining the likelihood of achieving Step Up To Serve's #iwill campaign's 2020 goal.

Therefore the Office for Civil Society should lead on developing a comprehensive five-year strategy for funding and coordinating youth social action, in consultation with social action providers, charitable funders like the Big Lottery Fund, and private companies. This strategy should be cross-departmental, and therefore designed with wider social problems – and government priorities – in mind, and not exclusively geared to provide benefits to young people. At present, some departments are more aware than others of these potential benefits; therefore, there is a need to raise the awareness of all relevant departments and make the case for this comprehensive strategy strongly.

The strategy should also take account of the difficult funding climate, and the risk of organisations with strong evidence of impact facing the prospect of scaling back, not scaling up. While the creation and expansion of NCS is an excellent achievement, other organisations working at different stages in the lifecycle are facing an uncertain future. The strategy should detail the role of each governmental department that stands to benefit – for example health and social care, work and pensions, education – and have a five-year outlook on government investment in the lifecycle to allow organisations to plan sustainably.

A consolidated government investment fund should encourage funding models that do not squeeze out smaller and middle-tier social action organisations in favour of larger organisations, while also ensuring that a portion

of the fund is set aside for seeding and testing new approaches and models of social action provision, for example, in developing different ‘service year’ models.

Moreover, it is vital that this strategy addresses the entire lifecycle of British young people and ensures that there are sufficient opportunities to take part in social action at various ages: programmes for pupils in primary school and ‘non-formal learning’ activities for 10–14-year-olds, up through secondary school and college age groups, and on into employment or higher education.

Recommendation 2

Develop an independent social action coordinating body to implement this strategy

Ensuring this strategy is delivered effectively and engages all key stakeholders will require expertise and convening power. A coordinating body outside government can work more closely with providers to focus on delivery, and enable match-funding of statutory investment with funding from the voluntary and private sectors. Our stakeholders suggested that there are currently many organisations in the youth sector that could take on this role, and no organisations whose current remit would encompass all of the required functions. We consider these essential functions to be:

- coordinating and administering a youth social action fund that would include contributions from government, trusts and foundations, private businesses and other donors
- giving competitive strategic grants to social action providers to scale up social action programming across the youth lifecycle
- coordinating with government departments to facilitate the use of youth social action to achieve policy objectives in areas like public service reform, health and social care, character education, apprenticeships and unemployment
- coordinating with local authorities, schools and other public service providers (like hospitals and care homes) to identify opportunities for youth social action to contribute towards policy objectives

Therefore, we suggest the Government should initiate an arms-length body with responsibility for coordinating and implementing the social action strategy. This need not be an entirely new organisation: there are already youth organisations filling these functions in different limited capacities that could be expanded or consolidated to fill the role; for example the NCS Trust, Youth United, Generation Change and vInspired, among other organisations, could be considered.

There are a number of benefits to enshrining these functions at arm's length from the Cabinet Office. First, an independent organisation may help to embed youth social action across British society, and take it out of the realm of partisan politics. It could also act as a separate body to fundraise for social action, unlocking match-funding from trusts and foundations, private companies and individual donors – a role that was identified as vital by our stakeholders and that a government department might struggle to play.

In this, the Government can learn from best practice in other countries – particularly the US and France. There is a precedent in the partnership between the US's Peace Corps and the UK's Voluntary Service Overseas, through which knowledge, resources and training are shared.¹²⁰ The US Government's Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS) manages a variety of large-scale volunteering programmes in the US, including AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America and many other initiatives.¹²¹ It undertakes different roles in direct administration of these social action schemes, including the competitive allocation of funding, and the generation and dissemination of evidence supporting the impact of volunteering and social action efforts. Similarly, in France, the Civic Service Agency, established in 2010, undertakes related roles. The agency directly administers a number of voluntary programmes, manages state financial assistance for volunteering and social action programmes, coordinates networks of volunteers, and monitors and evaluates volunteering schemes and the commissioning process.¹²²

The CNCS in the US also operates the Social Innovation Fund, which seeks to ‘mobilise public and private resources to grow the impact of promising, innovative community-based solutions that have evidence of compelling results in three areas of priority need: economic opportunity, healthy futures and youth development’.¹²³ This fund identifies promising programmes and scales them up, providing significant funding to organisations and grant makers: between 2010 and 2013, for example, the Social Innovation Fund distributed \$137 million to 20 grant makers, which made sub-grants to nearly 200 organisations across America; through its public–private partnership structure, the fund has generated commitments of \$360 million in non-federal resources, while the total annual budget of the CNCS is approaching \$1 billion.¹²⁴

Recommendation 3 Embed social action into schools

The resurgence of interest in character education has coincided with demands from employers for schools to do more to prepare young people for the world of work. As the evidence summarised in this report demonstrates, quality social action can help with the development of good character traits as well as work readiness. Schools are an important venue for social action providers, as their universality makes them suitable for all social groups.

Many stakeholders thought it was important to embed social action in schools and argued that social action should become part of the education system more formally. Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence* was often cited as a good model to learn from; one of its key strengths is the way in which it encourages schools to consider the alignment of formal and non-formal learning (for example, activities delivered by youth social action providers) into a comprehensive education offer.¹²⁵ Therefore, we suggest that social action should not be made compulsory for all students, but all students should have the opportunity to take part in social action activities.

Embedding social action in schools should start from the success of the NCS programme, and work to maximise its benefits. The Government should therefore create the right conditions for a more comprehensive offer of social action programmes for young people to take part in between the ages of 10 and 15, in the run up to taking part in NCS at ages 16 and 17. It can do this by encouraging schools and social action providers to work together, rather than encouraging schools and teachers to think that they are required to deliver social action on their own. This would ensure a quality experience of social action but not increase teachers' already heavy workload. In our recent report *Learning by Doing* we found that the biggest barrier to teachers providing character building activities outside the classroom was limits on their time.¹²⁶ Greater interaction between schools and social action providers should be encouraged and facilitated by policy.

We recommend the following:

- The DfE should lead the development of a new social action component that students could choose to take alongside the English Baccalaureate, which is due to become compulsory for those entering secondary education in September 2015. This 'GiveBacc' could be accredited by the sector and would signal to universities and employers that students had completed 50 hours of good quality social action in their community. This could build on existing schemes such as vInspired's v50 and v100 awards for volunteering 50 and 100 hours, respectively.
- In the same way that the Government wants every pupil to be able to take part in NCS, pupils should have a right to take part in high quality social action through their schools if they want to. This could be offered as supplementary to work experience placements and marketed as pre-NCS taster sessions, and schools should be assessed by Ofsted on whether they provide these opportunities and on the quality of the provision. Given the evidence of the link between social action and feelings of Britishness – that those who volunteer are more

likely to feel proud of Britain and vice versa – the provision of high quality social action opportunities should also be used to assess the commitment of schools to promote ‘British values’.¹²⁷

- The Government should monitor participation in social action activities through the School Census and include these data in the National Pupil Database, providing an accurate national picture of how participation correlates with various demographics.

Schools need to be recognised for doing this great stuff – we need something like an award, for everyone who does 50 hours with a social action provider for schools.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

Recommendation 4

Develop full-time, social action, ‘service year’ placements as an alternative school-leaver pathway

Despite the economic recovery, youth unemployment remains a pressing issue in the UK. In the first quarter of 2015, 943,000 people aged 16–24 were NEET – 13 per cent of the cohort – a higher proportion of young people than in other countries in the OECD. Those at greater risk of becoming NEET in the UK include ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities, those with caring responsibilities, those who have below average academic attainment and those eligible for free school meals.¹²⁸ Research shows that being NEET not only affects a young person’s employability on leaving school, but also has a long-term ‘scarring’ effect, reducing their employability and earning potential over the life course.¹²⁹

The Government has undertaken several measures to address this issue. The Youth Contract, launched in 2012, incentivised employers to take on young people as employees or apprentices, as well as providing more opportunities for work experience and training through jobcentres.¹³⁰ Early in this parliament, the Government announced an intention to ensure

young people ‘earn or learn’. The proposed Full Employment and Welfare Benefits Bill enshrines a target to create 3 million apprenticeships, while at the same time creating a Youth Allowance for 18–21-year-olds with stronger conditionality and a requirement to undertake an apprenticeship, training or community work placement after six months of being unemployed.¹³¹

A further contextual point is the raising of the participation age, which from summer 2014 requires young people to participate in education or training until their 18th birthday. However, this need not be full-time formal education; training can consist of an apprenticeship, a traineeship or part-time education and training in addition to volunteering for 20 hours or more a week.¹³² Combined with the passion that this generation’s young people have for their work to have wider societal benefits, and the employability benefits of social action, there is thus a strong case for an alternative post-16 pathway.

In *Service Nation*, we suggested that young people should have opportunities to take part in youth social action as they progress through school, into college, university and employment. Moreover, these activities should be designed to scale up levels of commitment and responsibility as young people get older.¹³³ Therefore, we recommend that the culmination of the youth social action lifecycle should be the opportunity to take part in a whole year, full-time ‘service year’ programme. This would maximise the Government’s investment in NCS by providing an opportunity for young people to use the skills and understanding gained in service of society.

While a ‘service year’ should not be subsumed under the formal status of ‘apprenticeship’, it could be articulated by government as a valuable form of training for the modern workplace that focuses on the development of transferable skills – given its link with the development of character attributes and employability mentioned above. This could include looking at the potential to bring together social action and the apprenticeships system, particularly where young people are involved in developing the skills associated with particular occupations.

Service year participants can and do have a substantial impact on public service quality and delivery. For example, City Year mentors work to help vulnerable children succeed in school by building positive relationships and supporting their learning. The same could apply in health and social care settings, for example building positive relationships with vulnerable patients in hospital and the elderly in care homes. In the long term, taking part in service year programmes could help to inspire young people to consider careers in sectors like social care, which will grow in the future, but have difficulty recruiting talented workers.

Service year programmes have already reached significant scale in the US, through the AmeriCorps programme, and in Germany, through programmes run by three federal organisations: the BFD, Bundesfreiwilligendienst (German voluntary service); the FSJ, Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (voluntary social year); and FÖJ, the Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr (voluntary ecological year). The concept has also been proven in the UK, through programmes like City Year, vInspired, CSV and Student Hubs. They also demonstrate significant returns on investment; recent work by McKinsey, which will be launched publicly this year, estimates that service years could deliver impact of three to four times the estimated cost: for every £1 invested, service years deliver between £2.70 and £4.30 of impact, based on calculating the double benefit impact for individuals taking part and the communities in which service year programmes operate.

There is also a great deal of potential for more social action to be undertaken by those who pursue the university route – even if this does not take the form of a full-time service year. Student Hubs, first established at Oxford University but now operating in ten universities across the country, works to coordinate student volunteers by making them aware of causes they can help through social action. It has had 30,000 participants, with 73 per cent of participants feeling inspired to take further action on a social issue and 49 per cent having changed their life or career plans as a result. The organisation also operates Worthwhile, which helps connect social action

participants to careers that have a social impact.¹³⁴ The ‘Lloyds Scholar’ programme, which is offered at eight universities, is a bursary given to students from low income households (earning under £25,000 per annum) that covers their whole degree and guarantees two paid internship opportunities with Lloyds Bank. However, in order to qualify for the programme, after having completed interviews, students must commit to 100 hours of volunteering each year.¹³⁵

In order to create a vibrant ‘service year’ sector and to increase recognition among universities and employers about the value of social action, we recommend the following:

- Full-time ‘service year’ opportunities should be developed and expanded as the pinnacle of the youth social action lifecycle, and a valuable complementary pathway to higher education or employment that young people can take after school, as a transition to the workplace or higher education, or after university.
- For 16–18-year-olds, the Government and social action coordinating body should explore the potential for partnerships between providers and FE colleges to scale up provision of service years as an alternative to full-time post-16 education. This should include assessing the potential for linking up with the apprenticeships system.
- For 18–24-year-olds, the Government should introduce a discrete employment category for young people who are taking part in a full-time ‘service year’, and explore partnerships with social action providers as part of its new ‘earn or learn’ approach.
- The social action coordinating body should work with universities and students unions to identify and promote social action opportunities across the higher education sector. In some cases, this should include social action counting towards course credit; as an example, Sheffield Hallam incorporates social action into its law degree by requiring students to volunteer in local law clinics.

- Social action providers should develop systems that encourage participants to log their activities and personal development, which will enable them to draw on these experiences in interviews for employment or university.

Schools are critical to fostering the mindset of volunteering, but it is also important to change the national mindset when it comes to volunteering, to making volunteering part of everyday life, part of every workplace, to facilitate the development of that mindset. If a full-time volunteering option can further develop this life-long volunteering habit, then it would be a very good thing.

Programme manager, youth social action provider

We've interviewed a lot of people – if they've done social action, that's great. They are talking about it, getting excited; if they don't shut up about it you know it was worthwhile. If you just have a bit of paper that says that you did social action, and that's it, it's tired, and it won't move employers.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

I've always liked the idea of us all, as lead brand name organisations, signing up to a central way of young people being able to record what they have achieved outside of the classroom through social action, in a way that is exciting and engaging, where you can upload videos of what you have done, where you can pick up peer endorsements, a kind of LinkedIn-style platform, where you might pick up the equivalent of Klout points for your non-formal education.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

Recommendation 5

Support a quality mark for social action provision

There is a growing consensus in the social action sector around the importance of gathering good data on what works and what does not. Our research also revealed strong opinions about how evidence is used to demonstrate impact and how to ensure that social action opportunities are of a sufficiently high quality. We often heard concerns from organisations about

‘over-evidencing’ impact, with organisations being encouraged to devote time and money to randomised control trials or similarly robust evaluations before operating at an appropriate scale, diverting these resources from good quality delivery.

As noted in the previous chapter, unlike apprenticeships or academic qualifications, there is no formal qualification associated with social action – and thus new ways need to be considered for how high quality programmes can be measured and assessed, and how their benefits can be communicated to schools, employers and young people themselves. Doing this could also help to create sustainable funding models – for example, with schools investing in high quality social action provision.

To achieve this, many stakeholders expressed support for a quality framework and mark that was designed and led by the sector and developed in conjunction with people who would be using it. There were some concerns from stakeholders – reflected in the quotations below – about how a quality mark would operate, and these must be considered in its design and use. For example, it was strongly argued that a quality mark should be used to highlight organisations that were committed to gathering evidence and improving their programme, rather than simply be applied to those organisations with randomised controlled trials or level 3 standards of evidence.

In order to ensure that youth social action programmes are of a sufficiently high quality, we recommend the following:

- A quality mark should be developed by the youth social action sector, used to identify organisations that are focused on measuring their impact, and to help improve their services to have the best impact.
- Systems for measuring and ensuring quality in social action provision need to incorporate the views and feedback of young people using new technology and Amazon- or TripAdvisor-style feedback systems.

There is something about the ink not being dry on a quality framework, something about it being a process, so if you are going to produce something to put on the shelf, make it simple, make it usable; there is a tendency in youth work to develop quite detailed frameworks that assume that as a teacher that's all you've got in your life to do... it has to be useful and usable, and you might have to compromise about what the content might be.

Programme lead, Ofsted

I can see potential benefit of a national quality framework, but two things need to be guarded against: undue bureaucracy being associated with it, and it being used as something that people are flogged with.

Stakeholder, Association of Colleges

A kitemark could risk alienation in the sector by saying what you do counts, and what you do doesn't count. Instead you could allow young people themselves to use tech to talk about the importance of what they did for themselves. This could help drive up value and would reduce the risk of alienation within the sector.

Chief executive, youth social action provider

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The revitalisation of civil society has always been a passion of the prime minister and has found form in his support for youth social action. Over the last five years, with the launch of NCS and the #iwill campaign, the youth social action sector has developed into a cohesive movement, with a common focus and ambitious aims. But we are still very far from achieving the target of 60 per cent of young people taking part in social action and the next five years will be critical. Only by realising the full potential of youth social action can the prime minister's ambitious vision for a flourishing big society of civic activism be achieved.

This report examines how, with the right investment, the unique contribution of young people taking part in social action could help to tackle some of the most pressing social problems: helping to create collaborative and relational public services in health and social care, building more integrated communities, and enabling young people to develop character capabilities, employability skills and a robust concern for civic activism and helping others in society.

Service Nation 2020 concludes with a series of recommendations to policymakers. We argue that a five-year, cross-department strategy for youth social action is needed, and that, following models from the US, Germany and France, a new, independent coordinating body should be tasked with implementing this strategy. We also present recommendations for how social action can be embedded into schools, how 'service year' programmes can be developed as a complementary path into higher education and employment, and how high quality provision can be secured.

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