

## Social Action Review 2017 Call for evidence

### Submission from the British Council

#### 1. Introduction

As the UK's international organisation for cultural relations, the British Council creates opportunities, builds connections and engenders trust – between people in the UK and in countries worldwide. This enriches UK culture and society, while contributing to our long term prosperity, security and influence in the world. The British Council's work includes creating opportunities for young people to make a difference on the issues that matter to them in their lives. This submission draws on experience in supporting young people, through voluntary social action, to improve their economic and social participation<sup>1</sup>. It identifies success factors, barriers to participation and priorities for change. The most important finding from the British Council's work in this area is that the benefits of voluntary social action are maximised where there is an intercultural or international dimension.

#### 2. Experience – as provider (sample programmes)

**2.1 European Voluntary Service (EVS)** is the youth volunteering strand of the EU's education and training programmes (from 1996). Key features<sup>2</sup>:-

- Placements are full-time, typically over 12 months<sup>3</sup>, with community-based projects in arts and media, environment and social care.
- No cost to the individual volunteer. EU grant funds are awarded to the organisation, covering around 90% of direct costs.
- There are currently 243 organisations in the UK accredited to run EVS projects<sup>4</sup>. Since 2014, the Erasmus+ programme have supported around 1,000 volunteering placements.

**2.2 Active Citizens** is the British Council's social leadership programme (from 2009); participants develop the knowledge, skills and experience they need to lead positive social change.

- Active Citizens delivery partners in 46 participating countries recruit facilitators – individuals who have shown aptitude to inspire social action at local level. Facilitators take part in Active Citizens training and then train wider groups, empowering individuals to pursue issues of shared concern through social action projects<sup>5</sup>.
- No cost to the individual volunteer. Active Citizens partners receive grant funding to cover around 80% of direct costs<sup>6</sup>.
- Active Citizens communities are supported to share good practice and develop capacity (including in monitoring and evaluation) via both face-to-face and online<sup>7</sup> interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> The wider range of British Council programmes across the spectrum of social action – including girls' and women's empowerment, social enterprise and sport – is described at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/society>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/factsheets/evs-20-years\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/factsheets/evs-20-years_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Short-term EVS placements, from two weeks to two months, can be organised for young people facing significant levels of disadvantage and vulnerability (Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2017: [http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/erasmus-plus-programme-guide\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en.pdf), page 80).

<sup>4</sup> Accreditation commits organisations to complying with the Europe-wide EVS Charter. This covers guidance and support for the individual volunteer, including access to appropriate training (at the beginning and mid-point of their placement), plus assessment and accreditation of their learning (using the EC's Youthpass tool): [http://www.euf.is/wp-content/uploads/evs-charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.euf.is/wp-content/uploads/evs-charter_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> To date, there have been 200,000 individual participants, each spending up to 120 volunteer hours on their projects.

<sup>6</sup> Partners are responsible for providing training for participants; this covers: Identity and Culture, Intercultural Dialogue, Local and Global Communities and Social Action Planning.

**2.3 Global Xchange:** From 2007 to 2010, the British Council's partnership with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) supported over 1,000 volunteers from the UK and partner countries in the Middle East, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa during six months of voluntary social action.

- Each placement brought together young people from two different countries, in support of a community development project over three months. The same group of young people then carried out an equivalent placement in the other country.
- Placements focussed on providing practical experience of relevance to paid employment<sup>8</sup>, with volunteers from the UK and partner countries benefiting equally.
- Benefits to youth and community workers included improved access to learning and development, leading to exchange of best practice and innovation – and, in turn, to better opportunities for all young people in the host communities.

### 3. Impact

3.1 Each of the programmes outlined above responds to the one of the most pressing policy challenges in the UK and globally: how to enable young people to gain the knowledge, skills and experience they need to prosper in a global economy – and to participate fully in the life of their communities. The British Council's experience is that benefits are most clearly shown in the attitudes, skills and behaviours often referred to as young people's emotional and social capabilities<sup>9</sup>. More detailed findings also point to significant benefits in terms of access to work or further learning<sup>10</sup>. For many young people facing disadvantage and exclusion, participation in voluntary social action has been a turning-point, renewing their sense of purpose and confidence in their ability to make a positive difference in their own and other people's lives.

3.2 It should be noted that voluntary social action is often initiated as a response to the situation of young people who are disadvantaged and vulnerable – including young people in care, young migrants and refugees, young people experiencing mental health difficulties and others who find themselves excluded from employment or mainstream learning. In this way, young people may experience benefits from voluntary social action, even when not directly involved as volunteers.

3.3 Central to the British Council's approach in planning and managing voluntary social action is the role of intercultural and international experience. This is an area seen as increasingly important by private, public and voluntary-sector employers worldwide<sup>11</sup> - and is clearly central to the Government's vision of the UK as outward-looking, inclusive and globally connected. As young people develop their skills and experience, through access to relevant peer networks globally, they become all the more effective as agents of positive social change in their own communities<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The most recent Active Citizens Annual Report gives more details on programme reach and sustainability: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/ac\\_annual\\_report\\_-\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/ac_annual_report_-_web_version.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Participants also noted benefits to their skills development in leadership, cross-cultural dialogue and community participation (see Global Xchange case-study, Nepal/UK: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/np/global-xchange-2007-2010>).

<sup>9</sup> Positive for Youth (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/positive-for-youth>) confirmed the 'fundamental importance of social and emotional capabilities for achievement of all other outcomes for young people.' These are the basis for effective decision-making; enabling young people to directly shape their present and their future. Assessment of impact therefore focuses on changes recorded in the following areas: communication, confidence and agency, planning and problem-solving, relationships and leadership, creativity, resilience and leadership, and managing feelings.

<sup>10</sup> For example, from surveys of participants in EVS: <http://www.researchyouth.eu/results-erasmus-youth-in-action> (Trans-national analysis, 2015-16, Executive Summary) Results point to impact on the specific attributes often identified (<http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/cbi-education-and-skills-survey2016.pdf>) as critical for new entrants to employment – including communication and team-working skills, and the ability to initiate and follow through new ideas.

<sup>11</sup> *Culture at Work* is a research study commissioned by the British Council through IPSOS, covering HR managers from over 350 companies in nine different countries: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/publications/culture-work-intercultural-skills-workplace>. A further study found that young people engaging in international experience (study, volunteering, work or travel) demonstrated considerably improved skills for innovation: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/\\_a\\_world\\_of\\_experience.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/_a_world_of_experience.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> On this basis, programmes such as Active Citizens have made a recognised contribution in restoring stability and security in countries affected by conflict – for example, in the Middle East and North Africa.

## 4. Barriers

4.1 Obstacles repeatedly highlighted by British Council experience include: relatively low levels of capacity among UK organisations working with young people, lack of flexibility in regulations around UK social welfare benefits for young people and inconsistency in the recognition given to the learning from voluntary social action.

4.2 In some cases, specific constraints can be addressed by continuous review and improvement of voluntary social action programmes – for example, through targeted promotion (using multiplier organisations to raise awareness of the opportunities available), guidance and support for organisations (ensuring that their involvement is based on a planned approach to developing capacity – including professional development opportunities for staff) and liaison with national stakeholders to improve recognition of the benefits – to individuals, to organisations and to wider communities.

4.3 The British Council has also encountered obstacles relating to the current policy context in the UK. This means that for many young people, an interest in adding to their skills and experience through voluntary social action is outweighed by uncertainty about how their eligibility for welfare benefits will be affected – or how their learning as volunteers will be recognised by potential employers. The severe pressure on the capacity of youth organisations, following the reductions in public funding over recent years, continues to be a significant constraint.

## 5. Needs, opportunities and recommendations

5.1 In order for participation in full-time volunteering or other forms of voluntary social action to be expanded successfully, there needs to be a change in the way young people are considered. Where young people are seen as co-creators – rather than in some way deficient, vulnerable or a source of risk – this releases the potential for young people to develop their understanding of the world around them and to use their skills (including critical thinking skills) in partnership with adults to bring about social change<sup>13</sup>.

5.2 Voluntary social action programmes should better reflect their role in meeting social challenges. They should clearly respond to the diversity of contemporary UK society and include positive measures to encourage participation by under-represented groups of young people. In some cases, this will require new approaches to project funding, so that youth organisations are not deterred by the significant additional costs of positive action in support of social inclusion<sup>14</sup>.

5.3 Co-ordinated advocacy in recent years – for example, through the #iwill campaign – has boosted the profile of voluntary social action, and acceptance of its benefits across the private, public and voluntary sectors. Further action is needed to champion voluntary social action, in national and international contexts equally, as a source of opportunity for young people, their families, employers and wider communities. This must include a supportive approach from statutory authorities – in criminal justice, health and social welfare, as well as education and employment – ensuring that young people's learning and development is recognised and rewarded.

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<sup>13</sup> This is the asset-based approach referred to in guidance published by DCMS, Enabling Social Action, with input from the New Economics Foundation: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/enabling-social-action-guidance>. Its importance in the context of supporting young people's resilience is discussed in more detail in the British Council's resource pack, produced under the Erasmus+ programme, Young people and extremism: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/cultural-diversity/publications/youngpeopleandextremismpack/>.

<sup>14</sup> Former EVS volunteer, Calum Barron, gives a striking personal testimony at: <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/stories/erasmus-volunteer-calum-barron>. Calum's involvement in EVS came about as a result of the Step by Step programme, run by UNA Exchange, with funding support from the Welsh Government. Step by Step offers short-term placements with experienced partners in Europe, enabling young people with fewer opportunities to take part in life-changing social action projects: <http://www.unaexchange.org/sbs/>.