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#iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream

Revisiting Place in Youth Social Action
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Introduction

Why revisit place?

'Place' is the theme of one of three topics in the #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems workstream – the other two being Education, and integration with 'all-ages' social action. Place was initially explored through two Match Funder workshops in 2018 and a report published in March 2019. This report laid out three approaches to place-based working which funders could pursue in order to consider place in their work.¹ However, this work took place at an early stage in many Match Funders' activities. A LabStorm session on place in February 2020 revealed ongoing interest in the topic, and new relevant practice, suggesting it would now be worth revisiting the theme. Match Funders have also requested more research and shared findings as helpful to their ongoing thinking and practice in this area. Therefore, Renaisi was asked to complete a light touch piece of research to explore the relevance of place to the practice of #iwill Fund Match Funders and delivery organisations.

In contrast to previous conversations around place within the #iwill Fund, this research prioritised depth over breadth, and involved conducting interviews with five targeted organisations who are known to use place in their youth social action work in some way. Further information on our methodology and the organisations included in this research can be found in the Appendix.

This paper takes stock of the progress specific organisations have made on this issue and provides a view to the future. This effort to revisit place in the #iwill Fund is also timely as the Covid-19 pandemic has cast new light on the concepts of 'place' and 'place-based working' for funders and delivery organisations alike. The final section of the paper explores current perspectives around the importance of place in the youth social action sector's response to the crisis.

The role of place for youth social action

Renaisi's previous report on place in March 2019 used *ecological systems theory* to argue that the place, whether it be the neighbourhood or the town, that a young person grows up in will be highly relevant for thinking about whether and how they take up youth social action.² The theory suggests that place is important in the development of children and young people, and those who want to support young people should start by thinking about three immediate influences on them - the home, the school and the local community (or the 'microsystem') – as well as how those influences interact (known as the 'mesosystem'). When it comes to participation in youth social action, the importance of these systems of influence is highlighted by the most recent National Youth Social Action Survey,

¹ Those approaches were 1) Youth-focussed local leadership; 2) Networked institution building; 3) Youth social action led change. For more information see: #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, 'Increasing Youth Social Action in Place', Renaisi, March 2019

² #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, 'Increasing Youth Social Action in Place', Renaisi, March 2019

which suggested that key motivations for involvement in youth social action include participating with family and friends, and accessing opportunities through school, college or work.³

The #iwill Fund's long-term emphasis on engaging disadvantaged young people and the more recent focus on engaging younger children heightens the importance of considering place when funding and delivering youth social action opportunities, as these groups are less likely to travel out of their locality to take part in social action, so their action is more likely to be rooted in and influenced by the place where they live.

Place-based vs place informed

The recent LabStorm session on place highlighted some confusion that exists around the terminology relating to place – particularly regarding the distinction between 'place-based' and 'place-informed' ways of working.⁴ For Renaisi, place-based means that an organisation or community is of a place, and a part of it, whereas place-informed is for those who are not of that place, and may work in multiple places, but are trying to work positively in the place and with the context of the place.⁵ We would argue that the organisations included in this research are all closer to being place-informed than place-based, primarily because they approach their work in local communities from the perspective of being city-wide, national or even international organisations, rather than being of the specific localities they are working in. It is important to make this distinction at the outset as it shapes what those we spoke to had to say about place and how they make use of it within their organisations.

Understanding and using place in youth social action funding

A key driver for revisiting place was the desire to further understand how #iwill Fund organisations understand place and put the concept to use when funding and delivering youth social action. As a result, a significant portion of the interviews was spent interrogating organisations' relationships with place and what it meant for them in practical terms. We have grouped the ways that interviewees spoke about place and its relevance for their work under five main themes:

- 1. Listening to the community**
- 2. Harnessing local skills and expertise**
- 3. Empowering local actors and institutions**
- 4. Convening local organisations**
- 5. Solving place-specific issues**

³ National Youth Social Action Survey, Ipsos Mori, 2018

⁴ 'Report on the second #iwill Fund Learning Hub Labstorms', Centre for Youth Impact, March 2020

⁵ See 'Place-informed vs place-based' for more information: <https://renaisi.com/2019/12/04/place-informed/>

These themes are by no means exclusive or exhaustive – they serve simply to demonstrate the variety of ways organisations under the #iwill Fund umbrella approach place as a concept. Although some organisations have a closer association with one theme than others, most fell across multiple categories in the ways they commented on the subject.

It should be noted that interviewees generally struggled to pin down definitions for key concepts relating to place-based youth social action funding - this echoed conversations in the March 2020 LabStorm, where participants felt that one of the core barriers to practical action around place-based approaches is that conversations rarely get beyond conceptual debates about what ‘place’ means.⁶

The end of this section explores the frameworks (or lack thereof) discussed by interviewees for embedding the concept of place in youth social action, as well as the challenges inherent to prioritising place in funding practice.

1. Listening to the community

Almost all the organisations we spoke to thought that a key responsibility for funders working in place was listening and responding to the views of local people. In practice for the #iwill Fund, this generally means ensuring young people themselves are listened to, rather than relying on youth organisations to speak on their behalf.

Interviewees discussed a variety of different ways to gather these views – Virgin Money Foundation (VMF) encouraged a focus on the end users of services being built in from the start of a programme or project, while Team London mentioned the importance of responding to live data and intelligence about target communities. At a delivery level, WE Charity also spoke of allowing young people from a certain area to “identify issues they are passionate about”.

2. Harnessing local skills and expertise

The second way that interviewees spoke about place is similar to the first but goes a step further than simply listening and responding, to actively engaging local people in the design and delivery of youth social action programmes. WE Charity reflected on the importance of harnessing “local expertise”, and at an organisational level they stressed the importance of hiring staff from a particular area, thus embedding local experts in the commissioning and delivery processes. From a youth-led perspective, this could look like offering volunteering or work experience opportunities within organisations to young people from a certain place, or engaging them at a governance level (VMF cited the latter as a crucial factor in using place to determine which organisations to award funding to).

⁶ ‘Report on the second #iwill Fund Learning Hub Labstorms’, Centre for Youth Impact, March 2020

3. Empowering local actors and institutions

The third way in which organisations spoke about place went a step further than the previous theme again – rather than embedding local expertise in pre-conceived programmes, this understanding of place requires funders to relinquish power to local people entirely. This comes closer to an understanding of place-based change being about devolution, and the transfer of power from a centralised body to those closer to the ground.⁷ Although none of the interviewees appeared to work in a completely devolved way, VMF described the importance of working alongside local authorities and devolved mayors when funding youth social action opportunities, as opposed to policies or strategies being “parachuted in”.

These first three themes can be seen as varying levels of commitment to the first approach suggested for considering place in our previous report: ‘Youth-focussed local leadership and change’.⁸ This approach is based on the premise that one way to build the sustainable infrastructure needed to support youth social action programmes is to encourage and engender local leadership with a youth element. Listening to local people, harnessing local skills and expertise, and empowering local actors all feed into the development of this local leadership.

4. Convening local organisations and modelling collaboration

In Renaisi’s 2019 paper, ‘networked institution building’ was highlighted as a potential way for funders to start to build a strategic approach to developing youth social action in place, and this approach seemed to resonate with interviewees.⁹ This phrase relates to building the network between local organisations that can provide opportunities and incentives for young people in the longer term.

VMF described place-based funding as necessitating an active role, rather than just “giving the grant and stepping back” – it is the role of the funder to “convene organisations, understand networks and how they are growing, join young people together and ultimately enable cross sector working”. These themes are touched upon in a recent report by Young Manchester as well, who say that their “place-based approach means that [they] also build capacity, convene and drive networks, provide training and share information across the city”. Meanwhile, WE Charity felt they had been on both sides of the table, as both a delivery organisation and a funder: “sometimes we have played a role in bringing people together. Sometimes we have tapped into existing networks, or asked to join different groups and clusters”.

⁷ For more information about devolution and the four other ways Renaisi categorises place-based social change, see ‘What do people mean when they talk about place based change?’: <https://renaisi.com/2020/02/03/what-do-people-mean-when-they-talk-about-place-based-change/>

⁸ #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, ‘Increasing Youth Social Action in Place’, Renaisi, March 2019

⁹ #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, ‘Increasing Youth Social Action in Place’, Renaisi, March 2019

As well as funders using their influence to leverage resource and convene networks, Clarion also highlighted the importance of modelling a collaborative approach for the sector. In particular, they highlighted language as being key in creating a sense of equality between organisations – for example, Clarion refers to their staff as “relationship managers” as opposed to “funding managers” to diminish a sense of hierarchy.

5. Solving place-specific issues

As the only housing association interviewed, Clarion took a stance on place based social change aligned more closely with regeneration.¹⁰ This view of place based change focuses on place-specific issues and values interventions based on the extent to which they solve them. According to Clarion, place-based youth social action funding is about “looking at the specific needs or challenges in a specific place”, and funders should attempt to understand the “authentic needs of young people” from a particular area – “the closer you can get to them the better” – in order to solve these issues more effectively.

Interviewees also noted the influence of place-specific issues upon the content and structure of youth social action activities, and the motivations of the young people leading them. WE Charity’s position as an international organisation means they are able to have a more strategic oversight and make comparisons between different regions: “young people’s campaigns and volunteering is often environment-focused in Wales, whereas in Scotland they do things in relation to foodbanks and poverty”. Similarly, Clarion noted that Wisbech, an economically disadvantaged town in Cambridgeshire, has an isolated and ageing population which had inspired young people to exchange letters with older residents, while in London young people had more of a focus around gangs and youth violence.

This understanding of place most closely aligns with the ‘Youth social action led change’ approach discussed in our earlier paper, which described the importance of selecting an “important local issue” to support the process of youth social action becoming embedded in a place.¹¹

Frameworks for embedding place in practice

The organisations that participated in these interviews did not tend to have formalised frameworks, principles or models for embedding the concept of place in their decision-making processes or general practice. Clarion are “strategically committed to listening to residents’ voices... in particular younger residents”, but this does not translate into a particular framework for their practice. WE Charity cited their WE School Learning Framework, which forms the basis of everything they do. This document

¹⁰ Again, see ‘What do people mean when they talk about place based change?’: <https://renaisi.com/2020/02/03/what-do-people-mean-when-they-talk-about-place-based-change/> for further information.

¹¹ #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, ‘Increasing Youth Social Action in Place’, Renaisi, March 2019

does make reference to the fact that “youth social action can be local or global”, but it does not discuss place as a specific lens through which funding decisions can be made.

For Team London, place appeared to guide decisions in a more implicit way, due to the nature of the GLA as an organisation: “we are a local authority focusing on a particular geographic area, so as a funder by nature we focus on issues that are about London”. Where place-based working became more intentional as opposed to inherent in their approach was in partnering with WE Charity, an international organisation, to deliver their programme. “As a place-based funder we have supported [WE Charity] to provide resources that specifically affect London... it’s about putting a twist on issues such as food poverty or insecurity, to make the messaging relevant locally”.

Meanwhile, although VMF described their approach to place-based working as “very relational or conversational” as opposed to following a particular framework, they did note that an organisation’s proximity to and understanding of a place is used as a criteria for decision making in their programmes outside the North East: in Glasgow or Norwich. They suggest that factors such as “being able to evidence that they have listened to local people” or that “lived experience of a place feeds into your organisation at a board level” should be used in assessments of grant applications if a funder wants to be informed by place. VMF also suggested that if a funder is sufficiently embedded in a place themselves, they will be in a better position to establish whether a potential grantee truly understands the needs of that area and the communities that live there.

Challenges of using place as funders

Team London described the tensions experienced by funders who have a hyperlocal community-oriented conception of place based social change, but function on a national (or in their case, a city-wide) level. The more funders empower local communities to drive change, the more challenging it is to maintain a consistent framework or programme of funding: “perfect place based funding looks like empowering local communities... but we cover lots of different areas with different challenges, so with one programme the outputs or outcomes will be really variable”.

Although funders may strive to respond to the place-specific agendas of local people, because of the resources at their disposal they also have a strong influence in setting the vision for sectors and places. Some funders were more comfortable with this tension than others, with comfort increasing in line with the extent to which a funder was embedded in place (for example, VMF felt more comfortable setting the vision than WE Charity). As the administrative arm of a democratically elected body, Team London also felt they had more of a mandate to execute a vision for youth social action for a place than some other funders might: “we are in a relatively privileged position as a democratically structured funder, as we do feel we have the authority to respond to those issues”.

Interestingly, VMF also saw a responsibility for funders to understand their limits when it comes to place-based youth social action funding, and know when is the right time to cease involvement: “we

actually took the decision to stop funding in the North East at the same scale, now lots of other funders are funding youth social action in the region”.

The value of a place-based approach

Renaissi’s first paper on place for the Learning Hub in 2019 hypothesised that for place to be an ambitious and useful concept, that might change both funder practice and local delivery, then it must focus on either interventions or approaches which:

- 1. maximise an outcome/impact of youth social action that is not currently being fully achieved, or**
- 2. ensure a greater likelihood of sustaining youth social action into the future¹²**

When interviewees were probed on the value of using place as a conceptual framework to fund and deliver youth social action activities, the first point went unmentioned, but the second point appeared to resonate strongly, particularly when it came to the benefits of individual young people of participating in local opportunities.

Several interviewees suggested that youth social action activities happening on a local scale could be a powerful factor in sustaining the engagement of young people and increasing their participation into the future. VMF claimed that the change young people affect on a local scale is more tangible, which can motivate young people to continue: “they can see the impact they have on local issues... they have helped to improve facilities in an area or local schools. There is less control over national issues where you are just a drop in the ocean”. Team London echoed this point, suggesting that the ultimate value of place based youth social action is “more active citizens down the line” as a result of affording young people “power and the ability to change the world around them”.

These insights build on *ecological systems theory*, cited in the Introduction of this paper. While our previous use of the theory suggests that the place a young person grows up in will be highly relevant for thinking about whether and how they take up youth social action in the first place, this round of interviews has highlighted the importance of young people’s ongoing interaction with their place once they are already participating in youth social action. Just as place can initially drive young people to participate in social action, so can the impact young people have on place through action continue to fuel their desire to participate.

The #iwill Fund has also long been interested in habit development around social action, and comments from the Jubilee Centre suggest that place in its own way can support this process: “From a character perspective we might say that doing things within one’s own familiar settings is a good

¹² #iwill Fund Learning Hub Systems Workstream, ‘Increasing Youth Social Action in Place’, Renaissi, March 2019

way to continue doing them outside of any programme and make a habit of them naturally or instinctively.”

The impact of the pandemic

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been shaped by conceptions of place, and the crisis is likely to impact how place is used in future when making decisions around commissioning and delivering youth social action opportunities.

How place shaped responses to the pandemic

For VMF, a place-based response to Covid-19 meant directing resource towards community anchor organisations, although this reportedly happened organically for them in the North East as a result of the funder “knowing their patch”, rather than being an explicit strategic approach.¹³ The importance of supporting local community hubs was also echoed in Young Manchester’s recent report, which claimed that “the role of infrastructure is key – local CVS and community ‘anchor’ organisations have shown tremendous leadership and commitment and are playing a major role in local emergency planning”.¹⁴

Several interviewees stressed the need to be sensitive to local contexts and specificities in the wake of the crisis: “[in the North East] we are in a region that has been impacted heavily [by Covid-19]... the communities are less healthy, schools aren’t open, rates are high. That has to be taken into consideration with emergency funding” (VMF). On a separate note, Clarion felt that a positive outcome of the pandemic was that youth social action delivery organisations were working more collaboratively, as the crisis served to break down barriers or siloes within places.

In terms of delivering youth social action activities, interviewees tended to see the pandemic as having made place at once both more and less important.

Place becoming more important

On the one hand, government lockdown measures have limited travel and meant that people’s conceptions of their local area have shrunk considerably. When it comes to youth volunteering and social action opportunities, these too have shifted to the hyperlocal in some cases. WE Charity noted that the cancellation of the summer National Citizen Service programme has meant that young people have sought opportunities closer to home, with small local organisations or mutual aid groups. They think that this shift will impact young people’s interests in the long term: “it will be less about carrying

¹³ First developed in the US, the term 'anchor organisations' refers to large, typically non-profit organisations like hospitals, local councils, and universities whose long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the populations they serve.

¹⁴ ‘The State of the Youth and Play Sector in Manchester: Risks and Challenges During Covid-19’, Young Manchester, 2020

out youth social action to raise funds for an international charity... the local will become more important than the global" (WE Charity). Team London echoed these sentiments, stating that post-Covid young people would be much more likely to come up with place-based youth social action projects themselves: "they won't be focusing on the large global issues as much... it will be about stuff happening down their street".

Place becoming less important

However on the other hand, Covid-19 has catalysed a shift to digital provision and programming, which interviewees felt deprioritized place as a connecting factor, due to the ability of technology to break down geographical barriers. Clarion described the relationship between place and the Covid-19 pandemic as being good for some smaller organisations, many of whom "have taken their delivery online, and now have been able to widen the number and variety of young people they reach". That said, WE Charity noted that although geography is no longer a barrier for young people accessing opportunities online, a different form of inaccessibility emerges in this context: digital exclusion. Interestingly, the Jubilee Centre also felt there had been a shift in focus after the initial sense of community that developed in lockdown: "more recently there has been a retreat from community togetherness to a more individual focus as things have gone on. Families and households are being more inward looking".

Overall interviewees felt that it is too early to tell what the long term impacts of the pandemic will be on the behaviour of delivery organisations or young people in relation to their communities, but these themes should be further explored and considered by those commissioning and delivering youth social action opportunities.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- **There were five main ways that organisations articulated what working in place means in practical terms:** listening to the community; harnessing local skills and expertise; empowering local actors and institutions; convening local organisations and modelling collaboration; and solving place-specific issues. These themes demonstrate the variety of ways organisations under the #iwill Fund umbrella approach working in places, and complement the three strategies for place-based working suggested in our previous report in 2019. The first three themes represent varying levels of commitment to 'Youth-focused local leadership and change', while the latter two themes are relevant to 'Networked institution building' and 'Youth social action led change' respectively. Our intention in this paper is not to supersede the three strategic ways that funders of youth social action could engage with place to enhance their offer that were previously put forward; instead, the themes describe ways

that youth social action funders already engaging in questions of place think about what this looks like in practice.

- **Organisations do not tend to use formalised frameworks or principles relating to place to guide their work**, although there are steps that can be taken at the application stage of grants programmes to ensure funded organisations subscribe to a similar understanding of place-based or place-informed working to the funder.
- **Tensions exist between funders and the communities they seek to support.** Completely empowering local decision makers can make life difficult for funders that seek to impose a coherent set of outputs and outcomes measures upon programmes. Some Match Funders felt more comfortable with imposing a vision upon places and communities than others, and this tended to be related to how embedded they were in a specific place, or the mandate they felt they had been granted by local people.
- Interviewees hypothesized that **place-based social action has important value for young people as localised impacts of their work are more tangible.** This could be significant in terms of forming a longer-term habit of social action, and should be explored further.
- Although it is too early to understand the long term impacts, **the Covid-19 pandemic appears to be having a twofold impact on the relationship between youth social action delivery and place.** For some organisations and young people the growth of online provision has diminished the importance of geographical location, while for others the lockdown measures have focused attention around their immediate locality.

Recommendations

Interviewees provided the following advice for Match Funders, delivery organisations and other stakeholders looking to make more use of place in their work:

- There are some situations where place is not as relevant, or where it needs to be balanced with national or international contexts. The Black Lives Matter movement is a recent example where an international movement has been balanced with local contexts, or interviewees also mentioned youth mental health, self-esteem and self-harm as requiring a broader lens than place permits.
- Doing high-quality place-based work is a long-term project. In particular it takes a long time to build trust with local people, who often have to see benefits of a place-based approach to youth social action before they commit entirely. That is not to say a funder cannot do high-quality place-informed work in the short term though, but it may be less led, or co-owned, by local young people.

- It is important to assess when things are not working, or when the work of a funder is no longer needed in a place. Match Funders had varied ideas about the extent to which youth social action opportunities in their areas would survive without their input, but the general sense was that eventually you want the system to be able to function without your support, and this requires decisions to be made about an effective time to pull-out of an area, and what might need to be in place for sustainability before you do. An appropriate timeline for involvement should also be considered at the outset of starting to work in place.

Appendix: Methodology

This paper draws together findings gathered via five in-depth interviews with a range of place-informed Match Funders and delivery organisations within the #iwill Fund. These findings were analysed using a thematic approach via qualitative analysis software Nvivo. Participating organisations included:

- Clarion Futures, the charitable subsidiary of Clarion Housing Group
- Team London, Greater London Authority
- WE Charity
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham
- Virgin Money Foundation

These findings were triangulated with desk-based research into organisational documents including independently commissioned evaluation reports, existing #iwill Fund Learning Hub outputs and wider literature around place-based funding and social change.

Renaisi is very grateful to all the organisations and individuals who were interviewed for this report.