

## Revisiting Place in Youth Social Action

### Why revisit place?

This paper summarises findings gathered via five in-depth interviews exploring the relevance of 'place' to the practice of #iwill Fund Match Funders and delivery organisations. It builds on previous work by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub to explore place within the #iwill Fund between 2018 and 2020, including two Match Funder workshops and a LabStorm, which revealed an appetite for further research on the issue.

Overall, the full paper aims to take 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 full paper can be found on the #iwill Fund Learning Hub website.

### How is place used and understood?

The ways that interviewees described their relationship to place and how it influenced their practice can be summarised under five main themes:

1. **Listening to the community**, by responding to live data and intelligence about target communities and seeking the views of local young people as opposed to relying on organisations to speak on their behalf.
2. **Harnessing local skills and expertise**, through hiring local staff or offering volunteering or work experience opportunities to local young people, thus embedding local experts in the commissioning and delivery processes.
3. **Empowering local actors and institutions**, by working alongside local authorities and devolved mayors when funding youth social action opportunities, as opposed to policies or strategies being "parachuted in".
4. **Convening local organisations**, using organisational influence to leverage resource and model a collaborative approach for the sector.
5. **Solving place-specific issues**, by attempting to understand the authentic needs of young people from a particular area.

### What is the value of working in place?

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. 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.

### What are some of the challenges?

Interviewees generally struggled to pin down definitions for key concepts relating to place-based youth social action funding, and most did not use formalised frameworks for embedding place-based thinking into their practice.

Some also reflected on the tensions that can 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.

## 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.

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. 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. 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.

## 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. Racial equity, youth mental health, self-esteem and self-harm were mentioned 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.
- 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 reflected that the system should ideally be able to function without your support, and this requires decisions to be made about an effective time to, and conditions, to pull-out of an area.