

The Current Funding Landscape: Resourcing and sustaining Place- Based Systems Change



Acknowledgements

This inquiry has been supported by a group of partners that collectively supported us to access their networks, advice, expertise, funding and evidence.

The principal partners in this inquiry are:

Esmée Fairbairn, Turn2Us, The Royal Foundation, the Ubele Initiative and the Pathway Fund.

Alongside this we have worked with our Place-based Systems Change Community of Practice, a shifting group of funders and place-based practitioners that we convene quarterly, who we have leant on to test and develop findings throughout the inquiry.



homeshards



turn
2us



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With thanks to our Community of Practice and all survey participants. Additional thanks to our interviewees →

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Introduction



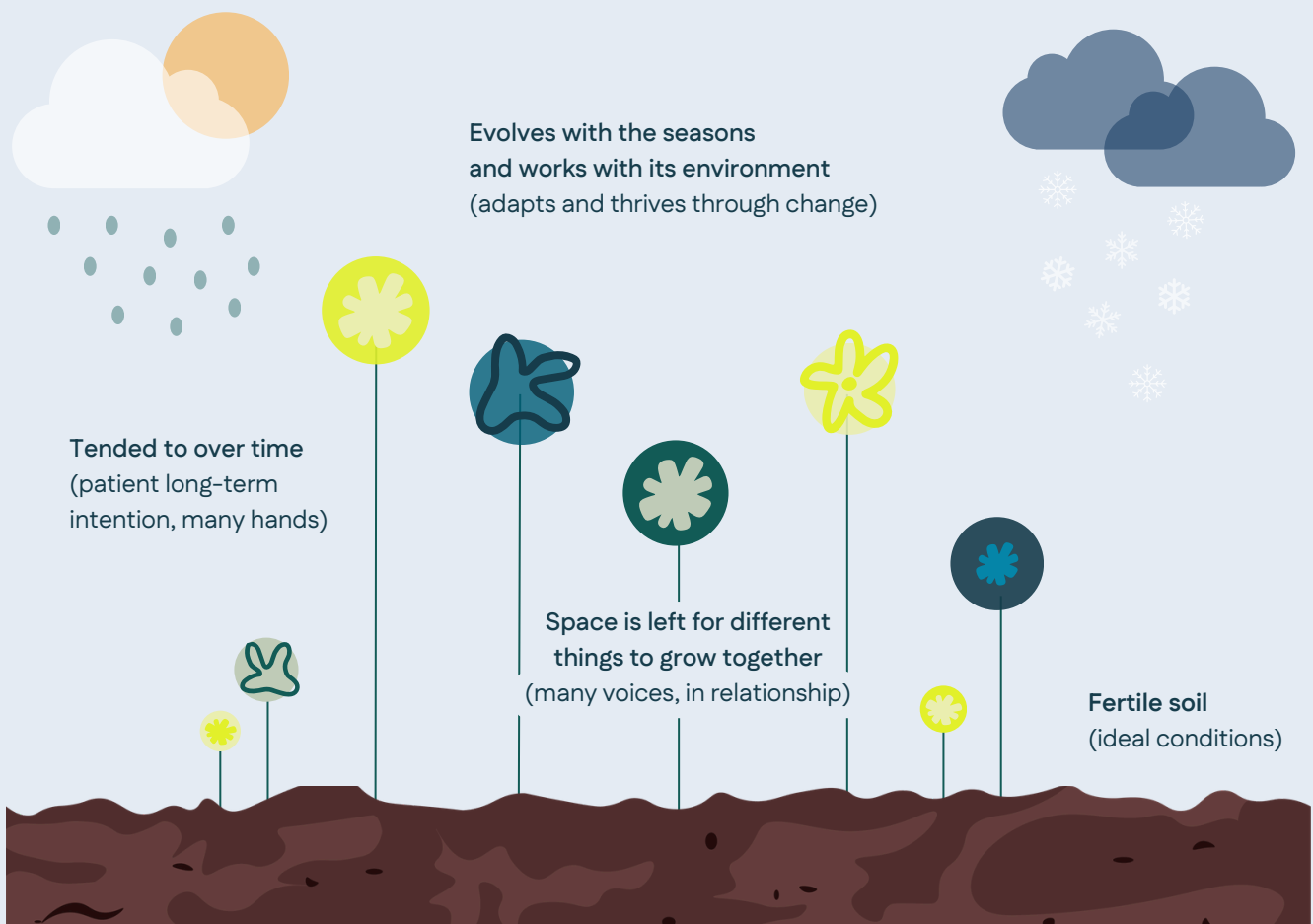
This paper shares what we have learned through an in-depth look at the current system for funding place-based systems change work. The resourcing that makes up this system, which includes philanthropic funding, public sector grants and commissioning, social investment and community-based fundraising – is often siloed, hierarchical, short-term, and oriented towards programmes rather than change that is structural or supportive of the long-term fabric of a place. In this paper, we aim to shine a light on how place based organisations and partnerships are currently navigating these funding and investment systems – both to make them more visible and therefore accessible to those who need to develop different approaches to resourcing their work, but also to highlight where these systems are failing to support us to imagine something better.

In our first paper we provided a working definition for “sustainable” to help frame the findings in this research. That working definition uses a garden as a metaphor and is offered as follows:

What does sustainable mean in this work?

A sustainable garden is supported by fertile soil (ideal conditions), tended to over time (patient long-term intention, many hands), space is left for different things to grow together (many voices, in relationship), evolves with the seasons and works with its environment (adapts and thrives through change).

Sustainability for the garden therefore means meeting today’s needs without exhausting the conditions that make future growth possible. It is about balance, regeneration, and patience. A gardener who strips the soil for a quick harvest may get short-term results, but over time the garden weakens. A gardener who composts, protects biodiversity, and plans for different seasons builds a garden that can endure over time with the right weeding, watering and responsive care. So, using the metaphor: **becoming sustainable is not just keeping the garden alive today. A sustainable garden is not one that you can plant then abandon forever. A sustainable garden will be cared for in a way that means it can continue to flourish tomorrow, next year, and for many seasons after that.**

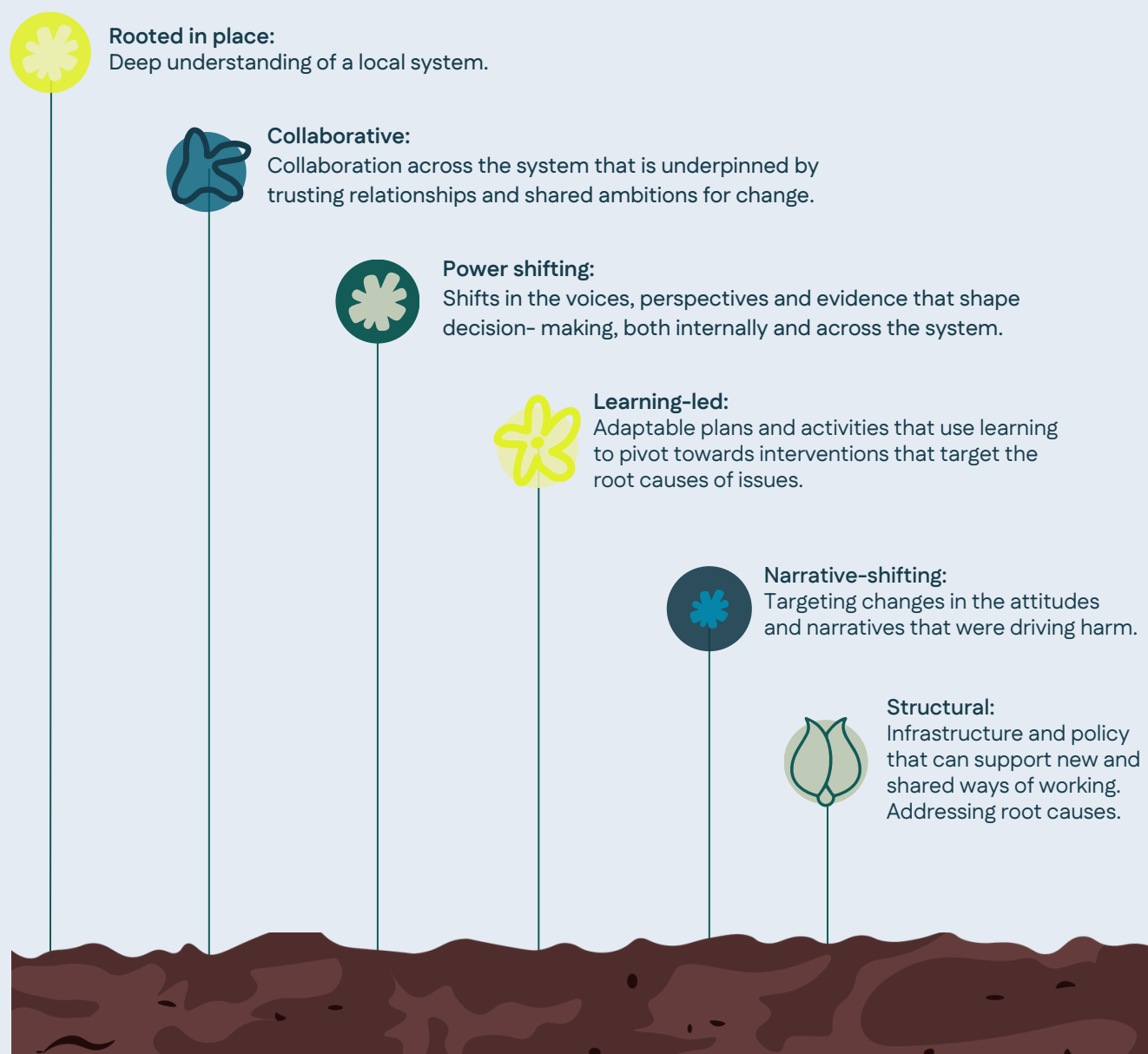


Why a garden?

We have used the garden metaphor rather than a meadow or a forest, to denote the fact that it is still essentially a system designed and maintained in part by human intervention, contained within a larger environment. It is not wholly wild, but tended to, pruned, and nurtured into shape with intention working together with the ebb and flow of natural cycles. Finally, even the most skilled gardener cannot create a garden that continues to grow without input; this is work that takes ongoing cultivation and attention to support its flourishing.

In the same way our inquiry has shown that sustaining place-based systems change requires ongoing work and strong foundations. It cannot be achieved through designing an initiative that will have unchanging impact after funding comes to an end but through building long-term resourcing streams that enable organisations and individuals to do work that is rooted in connection to place, trusting relationships and an intention to shift power, narratives and structures locally.

Our indicators: practices that enable place-based systems change



How are different organisations and places currently approaching resourcing and sustaining place-based systems change?

This section sets out the most common forms of resourcing that organisations and places draw on to progress place-based systems change work, based on the findings of our inquiry. Leveraging our indicators for place-based systems change practice, we have examined how these different resourcing approaches can create the conditions for place-based systems change, and whether they are well-placed to support long-term sustainability of change in place. We also set out examples of organisations who have used these approaches, in the hope that others interested in following this resourcing path can see examples of this work in practice.

In reality, and from necessity, any organisation working in place-based systems change will likely utilise many different funding and income streams to support their work. On one hand, this can support near term financial stability through not relying on a single funding stream. However, as we will explore in the coming sections, it can mean that organisations spend much of their time chasing funding.

Our research also revealed that the complexity of the patchwork funding models that many feel forced to build, creates undue administrative burden, incoherence in delivery, precarity in staffing and at times fragility in the work. While we spoke to organisations who are driving place-based systems through a patchwork funding approach, they shared that they are constantly having to bend, squeeze and battle with their funding model to ensure there is resource for the work they know is needed. While this approach can be used to support place-based systems change, ultimately we believe we must look towards a system that nurtures sustainable place-based systems change, rather than a system that we must fight our way through.



“ I think it’s idealistic to think that you can have a whole group of unpaid people totally confident to start, deliver and maintain and sustain. A project that is totally inclusive, supportive, equitable, professionally delivered and sustained and thriving without funding. I just don’t believe it. ”

**– Lauren Tobias,
Volunteer Centre Hackney**

The Current Funding Landscape: Resourcing and Sustaining Place-Based Systems Change

Types of income that resource place-based systems change



Type of income: **Community resourcing**

Including community action, fundraising, in-kind contributions, and volunteering

Evidence in practice:

Community Savers is a network of self-organising groups of women in neighbourhoods across Greater Manchester, Sheffield and Middlesbrough. Women come together via weekly savings groups, which provides a platform for them to organise around shared ambitions for place-based change. Through this approach women in Miles Platting and Wythenshawe have led wider organising across the local community to influence development and regeneration plans.¹

“Community groups and projects very often start up and fizzle out... it doesn't work like that with the savings groups because everyone has a stake... it's their money.”

– Sophie King, Community Savers/CLASS

How it enables change to be sustained:

Change can be rooted in community leadership and sustained participation, which is a critical for place-based systems change to grow and deepen. However, there is a risk that the degree of input from the community fluctuates over time as individuals move, face displacement as is the case in many urban contexts, or navigate other pressures in their personal life, which can put the sustainability of work at risk.

How it supports systems change:

Many place-based community organisations begin by relying on voluntary contributions of time, expertise, money, spaces and materials from the local community. These forms of community resourcing can be very effective in supporting the early stages of place-based systems change work through disrupting entrenched narratives around the assets that are available within a community often framed in terms of neediness and deficit.

Leveraging community resourcing can often lead to the development of community led organisations where staff members have shared lived experience of the issues faced by those accessing services. This in itself allows for a shift away from the voices and forms of evidence that usually shape decision-making.

Stage and maturity

From set-up of place based systems change; for emerging and mature organisations

¹ For more detail on the work of Community Savers in Miles Platting check out their website [here](#), and in Wythenshawe [here](#)

Type of income: Grant funding explicitly for place-based systems change

Evidence in practice:

Organisations such as [BBC Children in Need](#), [Youth Futures Foundation](#) and [Save the Children](#) have developed programmes of funding explicitly aimed at place-based systems change, each intentionally designed to help grow and nurture the conditions for systems change in place.

Some programmes have also adopted a longer-term approach to this type of funding, such as the [Communities for Children programme](#)², collaboratively funded by BBC Children in Need, [The National Lottery Community Fund](#), the [Pears Foundation](#), the [Hunter Foundation](#) and [City Bridge Foundation](#). A similar approach can be seen in the LocalMotion initiative.

[Right to Succeed](#) is an example of an organisation providing a backbone function for local collaboration.

How it enables change to be sustained:

While this source of funding helps create the conditions for place-based change practice, there are two critical risks – one to the conditions for change, and one to sustainability.

Firstly, resourcing is required within the funding period to develop longer term plans. These should explore how practice can be continued, and how to ensure capacity doesn't leave the system at the same time as initial funding (i.e. through staff exiting, or through organisations needing to focus time and energy elsewhere to secure income).

There is also a risk presented by the funding timeline, which can be just 2-5 years – posing a risk to the ability to deeply build up a presence while also embedding the work in place.

How it supports systems change:

It has become quite common to see philanthropy-led or government-led programmes which explicitly aim to fund place-based change, or place-based systems change. These can be delivered by national charities who may work in places to implement a place-based systems change programme or through local organisations or partnerships collectively delivering this work. It often includes a lead “backbone” partner who may provide on-granting to local organisations or bring together a partnership that funding is split between.

Designed intentionally to support place based systems change practice, these programmes can be very effective in creating the conditions for place-based systems change practice. They often provide dedicated resource to develop an understanding of local issues, root causes and assets, to work collaboratively, and to embed learning and reflection into activity.

Stage and maturity

From set-up of place-based systems change initiatives; predominantly for mature organisations.



Type of income: Grant funding explicitly for place-based partnerships

Evidence in practice:

Smallwood Trust initially began funding the Coventry Women's Partnership in 2018 to deliver a model for joined-up, women-centred services for vulnerable women.³ Ongoing collaboration has enabled the five delivery partners to develop trusting relationships, collaborative processes and a deeper understanding of how to influence change. This laid the foundations for Coventry Women's Partnership to pivot towards an intentional focus on systemic change in the local housing system.

“ We funded the development of partnership working... once we step away, can they continue? ... “People will drop off and say ‘I’m not funded anymore’ even though they saw the value. ”

– Action for Race Equality

How it enables change to be sustained:

This type of funding can create space for the development of trusting relationships and collaborative processes across the system. However, where this is solely focused on joint delivery of a short-term project, collaboration may remain transactional and short-term. Many place-based organisations stressed the need for ongoing resource for local coordination and partnership working to sustain this practice.

How it supports systems change:

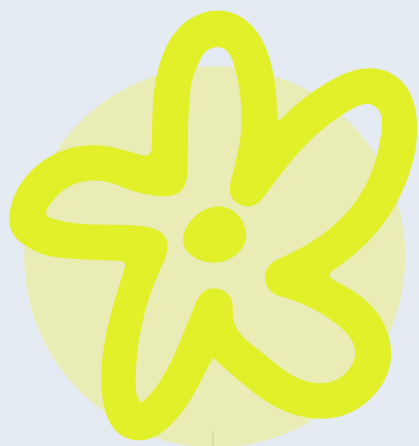
While it may not explicitly aim at place-based systems change, organisations shared that grant funding has enabled them to develop place-based partnerships. This approach to funding has become increasingly common in recent years, with philanthropic and public sector grants seeking partnership applications as a way to support more joined-up, holistic working in place. Where local organisations are often pitted against each other for funding, this approach can counter this dynamic and begin building the trusting relationships needed for place based systems change. This type of funding is most effective at supporting relationship development where it provides development funding to support partnerships to come together, and explicitly covers partnership coordination, collaboration space and time, and potentially shared delivery.

Stage and maturity

From set-up of place-based systems change; predominantly for mature organisations.

³ More detail on the Coventry Women's Partnership is available online [here](#).

Type of income: **Unlocking resources from local public and private sector anchors**



Evidence in practice:

Thrive at Five have built a model that brings additional investment to a place, on the proviso of local authorities also ringfencing funds to contribute. This builds buy-in to local change and demonstrates that local funds can be unlocked with the right support. Right to Succeed have seen success emerge through a similar approach, with local authority staff providing time to resource local initiatives.

“ People feeling as though they’ve been left behind...then the last thing they wanted to do was to let the local authority manage their money. ”

– Angie Wright, B Inspired

How it enables change to be sustained:

This can be useful resource where it is targeted at building long-termism. In addition to harnessing long-term presence in place and greater access to resource, it can also help facilitate joined up local strategy and policy, especially where there is local authority involvement.

However, as set out further below, we have seen that due to political cycles and funding cuts that have shaped the work of local authorities, it can be difficult for local authorities to commit long-term funding, and when it does happen, there can be scepticism within local community organisations as to whether a long-term commitment is really viable.

How it supports systems change:

Unlocking resources from local public and private sector anchor institutions can be a critical avenue for resourcing, embedding and sustaining place-based systems change. This includes engaging with local businesses to attract regular financial donations to place-based systems change work or in kind expertise, particularly around data, legal support, financial advice and media engagement. It also can involve working with public sector bodies including the NHS, police, schools and local authorities to engage commitments of funding, staff capacity and strategic input on place-based systems change work.

For example, engaging local authority staff to commit to reviewing and updating local policies and processes which structurally marginalise parts of the community is a critical element of both resourcing place based systems change and ensuring it is embedded.

Stage and maturity

At later stages of place based systems change; predominantly for mature organisations.

Type of income: Multi-year flexible grant funding

Evidence in practice:

The ten-year [Big Local programme](#) is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of multi-year funding in this arena. Evidence from Big Local demonstrates that it supported residents to build relationships, understand their place and develop plans for long-term change. While not all Big Local partnerships aimed at place-based systems change, those that did were able to use their 10 years to invest in assets and income models that could sustain their work.

For example, [Ambition Lawrence Weston](#), were able to use their Big Local funding to cover staff costs, which in turn allowed them to draw in and create additional income sources, which over time has included co-ownership of a solar farm and purchase of a wind turbine.

“A lot of the practitioners... were like a stick of rock — if you chop them in half, they’d have Grimsby written in the middle of them. That is your best resource... they bring the networks, the understanding.”

– Stephanie Talbut, NSPCC

How it enables change to be sustained:

Multi-year flexible funding enables local organisations to devote resource to building place-based systems change practice and plan for longer-term ambitions. It also frees up staff capacity to explore longer-term income models.

How it supports systems change:

Multi-year flexible funding can be a critical foundation for place based systems change. Long-term funding allows organisations to think and act in multi year horizons. This is foundation to all of place-based systems change practice, as the work of shifting power, relationships, structure and narratives cannot materialise within year-long funding cycles.

Multi-year core funding allows organisations to employ staff on a permanent basis, which allows them to begin building the trusting local relationships that are essential to place-based systems change. Long-term staff are able to build trusting relationships with the local community, other VCSE organisations and local government, who all need to be brought into place based systems change. These long-term staff also build a deep understanding of the local context, enabling organisations to develop plans that respond to the root causes of systemic issues.

Multi-year flexible funding can also help minimise time that local organisations spend seeking new income, allowing them to focus on long-term work, learning, and reflective practice. The flexibility of this funding also allows it to be spent on a range of functions that can support place-based systems change. This could include a ‘system coordinator’ role to drive collaborative change, or payment for community members to bring their expertise to the work via governance functions or listening exercises.

Stage and maturity

From set-up of place based systems change; predominantly for mature organisations.

Type of income: **Revenue generation**

Including rental income, consulting, community business and other forms of income.

Evidence in practice:

B Inspired is a neighbourhood-based charity in Braunstone, Leicester that is actively developing place based systems change as a community anchor that provides a range of local services, supported by income from its management of properties in the area.

Chopwell Regeneration Group, a resident-led charity, describes its community businesses (Café- bank, room rentals and repair shop) as essential to reducing reliance on project funding, while acknowledge that trading income does not fully replace grants.

Plymouth Octopus, Onion Collective and CLASS all highlighted that they are exploring how providing consultancy services can provide an income stream for their work while recognising the value of the deep expertise they have developed in delivering place-based change.

“Owning assets and being able to earn continue to earn an income from those assets and being self-determined locally of how that money is therefore then spent and we do that through obviously through consultation, ongoing consultation then.”

– Angie Wright, B Inspired

How it enables change to be sustained:

Income generation can allow place-based organisations further autonomy over how resources are spent, shifting power to those in the place. However, it is important not to overlook the market-dependent and often precarious nature of income generating approaches including rent, consultancy, and community business. With increasing business costs, particularly those relating to asset management, and the cost of living crisis squeezing individuals disposable income it can be challenging to earn sufficient income through these approaches to resource place-based systems change work. This is accentuated in places and communities where historic economic marginalisation has limited local spending ability.

How it supports systems change:

Developing revenue streams that allow an organisation to generate income can provide place-based organisations with discretionary funds that they can use to resource place based systems change practice. For some, revenue generation has been possible through managing assets, including housing, that bring in rental income, while others have also achieved this through developing a profit-making community business such as a café or shop. We have also seen organisations increasingly earn income through providing consultancy or training services for other social sector organisations, which can be a particularly effective approach to covering the costs of senior staff time.

Commissioned service delivery is also a form of income generation. While it can enable organisations to provide services and to continue to service the community, the fixed nature of this resource doesn't lend itself well to place-based systems change – something we explore in greater detail further on.

Stage and maturity

From set-up of place based systems change; predominantly for mature organisations.

Type of income: **Social Investment**

Including repayable finance – loans, equity, blended finance.

Evidence in practice:

Organisations focused on taking over land, buildings and housing often explore social investment as a vehicle to attract capital needed for asset development. Alongside this, there are currently a number of initiatives exploring a place-based approach to social investment which could increase its accessibility for organisations perusing place-based systems change. This includes [Kindred](#) in Liverpool City Region, the [Local Access Programme](#) and [BD Giving's Grow Fund](#).

“ They want more pre-investment, enterprise development support over 4 years to get organisations ‘ready’ for repayable finance ...some of the work that needs to be done needs to be done upstream, which is around awareness and confidence building. Social investment currently has: eligibility criteria that exclude – 10+ year leases, high technical complexity, inaccessible language, limited trust, poorly designed products for fragile organisations. ”

– Phil Tulba, Ubele

How it enables change to be sustained:

Social investment helps enable an organisation to develop an income earning model, which in turn supports its long-term ability to have discretionary funding to devote to activities which sustain place based systems change.

How it supports systems change:

Social investment can provide longer-term funding and finance which can support sustained change in place. However, across our interviews we found most organisations delivering place-based systems change currently struggled to access social investment. Much reflection on this from experts in the field and investors alike demonstrated challenges around investment readiness and awareness and knowledge of social investment routes. This is something we explore further below.

Stage and maturity

At later stages of place-based systems change; predominantly for mature organisations.

In the section above, we have aimed to set out at a headline level, an overview of the current funding levers and mechanisms being utilised to resource place-based systems change. However, there are nuances of the current system that warrant further exploration.



Access to resource

Our research highlighted that places will have a different experience of accessing different types of grant funding, income, and investment, depending on their location, level of local wealth and industry, and presence of other funding. One interviewee highlighted that ‘funding attracts funding’. It is therefore essential to consider that not all places have access to the same opportunities for resourcing or sustaining change. There are also many other barriers that organisations faced in accessing resource, including systemic exclusion from prior access to funding for racialised groups.

Social investment

Social investment has been an interesting area of exploration as part of this inquiry. While it is increasingly something we see as an essential component of the place-based funding landscape, most place-based organisations we interviewed shared that it was not something they had accessed, or that they felt was accessible to them. There are a number of reasons for this, many of which were highlighted by social investors themselves. Some organisations we spoke to felt opportunities for social investment were not really accessible for different parts of the country. Interviewees shared that areas with greater local wealth, or cities such as London where social investors are often headquartered, may find it easier to make an approach. Others highlighted the specific and systemic barriers that organisations led by racially minoritised and excluded groups face in both being considered investment-ready and in accessing knowledge, culturally competent support and networks to build investment readiness. Others highlighted a greater ease of accessing high street lenders than social investors, who required a financial return but not the same monitoring commitments. Additionally, there was recognition that for place based systems change initiatives to have social investment as part of their funding, they would need to have a level of readiness that may only come after an initial development grant by the investor, or after a sustained period of work in a place. All of this is not to say social finance does not make up a potentially essential part of the funding ecosystem. It is to say that our inquiry indicates that it is not yet sufficiently accessible to make it a readily used part of the funding picture.

“ Many need investment readiness... up to 25–30k can go into getting them ready... [There is a] huge need for more enterprise development grants. ”

– Asher Craig, Pathway Fund

“ You look at social enterprises, it’s highly unlikely that in a community that is not as affluent as other communities, that there’s going to be loads of trading income made from setting up a café...more likely you lead back to sort of government procurement for outcomes. And, you know, that comes down to procurement, effective procurement policy. Some of that will be centralized, some of that will be localized. And their innovative procurement methods which then can benefit charities and social enterprises. So if you’ve got those two things: if you’ve got the supportive ecosystem, which helps people with the networks and the skills and all the rest of it, and you’ve got some revenue streams, either via some traded income or some commissioned income, then I think social investment has a part to play. ”

– Ed Rowberry, BBRC

Commissioned public service delivery

Local systems are made up of services and the relationships between them, and the community. It is often through these services that community organisations build an understanding of people's lives, and the needs, strengths, and challenges within the community. We believe that a line is too often artificially drawn between services and systems work, when in fact it is both the dominant **funding and delivery assumptions** that underpin procurement practice for public sector service delivery that puts it in opposition to systemic work. In practice, the public service procurement and commissioning approaches behind service delivery drive competition for contracts, often enhance siloes in a place, necessitate short-term employment of staff on low salaries due to the need to compete and meet value for money criteria, and often incentivise hitting targets above building meaningful relationships with "service users" and delivery partners, or achieving sustained outcomes for people through more holistic and joined up delivery and support models. These dynamics not only impact delivery organisations themselves, but they also fundamentally shape and solidify local conditions, economic and social outcomes for residents.

These shifting dynamics were highlighted in recent [research](#) by the [Community Foundation North East](#) on income, assets and financial wellbeing trends across the third sector organisations in England and Wales, which stated that micro to medium-sized organisations (annual income from £50,000 to £249,000) given their purpose, practice preferences and capacity have 'neither awareness of nor interest' in such work. Larger third sector organisations are aware of such opportunities (90%), but many are now 'disinterested' (29%) or are at best 'ambivalent' (17%) about getting involved¹. Over 60% of large third sector organisations (annual income between £500,000 and £1m) were involved in the delivery of public services under contract in 2016; that collapsed to 33% in 2022 and now stands at 30%.

However, our research indicated a mix of views on engaging in commissioned service delivery. While many social investors that we interviewed regarded commissioned service delivery as a valuable mechanism for income generation, there were a range of views across place-based organisations. Some reflected that commissioned contracts were labour intensive but reliable income streams which had a valuable role within a portfolio of work, while others believed that a reliance on commissioning compromised their ability to represent the communities concerns with local public service delivery and a few had developed generative relationships with their local authority that led to them being directly commissioned for community engagement and participatory democracy work.

We also know anecdotally that on the whole small and medium sized organisations experience commissioned service delivery as **loss-making**, highly **resource intensive** and **minimally impactful** in terms of addressing deep challenges for local people they aim to support. Therefore, it is unlikely to be an effective route to sustaining place-based systems change or organisational stability. We think it is important to highlight the nuance here; that services are an essential part of local systems, but that due to challenging and outdated procurement approaches, commissioning services appears to be becoming increasingly untenable as a lever for funding and sustaining place-based systems change.

¹ <https://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Third-Sector-Trends-in-England-and-Wales-2025-income-sources-assets-and-financial-wellbeing-January-2026.pdf>

Short-term grants and discretionary funding pots

Many organisations we spoke to also relied on short term grants (1-2 years) to fund specific pieces of work that support systemic change, such as listening exercises, capacity building, and resourcing community expertise to input within governance roles or as part of community research. However, many of the issues highlighted above with income from commissioning exist in relation to short-term grant funding. We therefore didn't highlight this as a route to funding place-based systems change but recognise that it remains very much a part of the current funding system.

One element of funding that is less a route in itself but is an important mechanism to capture, are discretionary funding pots. Discretionary funding is usually used as a catch-all for an amount of funding provided in addition to a wider allocation of funding, to be used as need emerges. While it is likely to be attached to shorter-term, project funding which from a resourcing perspective do not best support change to be sustained, the emergent nature of this funding does create the conditions for the iterative practice necessary for place-based systems change. As place-based systems change is by nature flexible, the needs of the community will change over time, and organisations will need to continually shift and adapt based on these needs and also how the system itself is changing over time. Discretionary funding enables new work and changes in direction in response to learning and reflective practice.

Trust in local institutions

For many projects, seeking to gain local authority buy-in to the work was essential for supporting its longevity and ability to create local change in policies, practices and resource flows. However, it is essential to highlight that this sits against a backdrop of distrust in local authorities and the pace at which they can pivot their priorities. It seems that while they do have a critical role to play in sustaining place-based systems change, there is an essential re-building of trust that must happen to enable them to play that role with any effectiveness. The realities of the economic challenges places face are further highlighted here.

Interviewees referred to councils selling assets as one way in which local people have felt let down. Funding pressures remain severe, leading the last government to allow Local Authorities to sell assets like libraries and youth centres to meet in-year funding pressures, and this has continued under this current Labour government. Local Authorities have sold up to £1.3bn worth of assets, almost three times the annual funding from the PiPP programme, and local authority spending power is set to be 15% below 2010 levels according to [Institute for Government projections](#). Not only does this fragmentation of community spaces dissipate local relations and connection, it also signals to local people that the councils priorities feel at odds with their needs.

Rebuilding trust between these actors takes time, skill, resource, and patience. Alongside this, enabling local people and community organisation to acquire assets similarly requires a transfer of knowledge, access to networks, finance and time.



“ Councils [have been] selling assets... communities have lost those assets. ”

– Anonymous

Trust in local institutions

When we carried out our first inquiry into funding place-based systems change in 2020, large charity or funder-led initiatives to fund systems change in multiple places were landing in the sector, with some having been running for a few years already. In the six years since then, we have seen many of these initiatives come to an end, without routes to sustaining the changes they catalysed or the work. In some places, we have found this to have contributed to an existing sense of distrust that comes with places feeling ‘over-researched’ or funded for short time periods, which has often emerged from the cyclical nature of central government funding and the ways philanthropy has at times mirrored this approach. Similarly to local authorities, any large charity, and perhaps any new central government initiative, seeking to fund systems change in a place in way that supports sustainability, is likely to need to re-build trust.

To support this, they should also expect to evidence how they will help create a route to sustainability during the time of their support.

Overall, what we find is that the current landscape for funding place-based systems change is fragmented, challenging to navigate, and often not accessible depending on your locality, lived experience, or duration of operating. In the final product, we seek to outline what a move toward a more generative funding system might look like.



“ Stuff that just we took for granted as provision in your local area is now badged as being something you should be grateful for receiving and you’ve been chosen because your area is going to get this money. ”

– Anonymous

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April 2026

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