



**THE
YOUNG
FOUNDATION**



A SHARED ENDEAVOUR

**RESPONDING TO THE UK GOVERNMENT'S CIVIL
SOCIETY STRATEGY CONSULTATION**

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Responding to the UK Government's Civil Society Strategy Consultation

The UK Government strategy for Civil Society comes at a critical time. Businesses, government, communities, people and charities are all reaching for a new vision for a post Brexit Britain; a new way of creating wealth that works for everyone. Wealth that is categorised in its broadest sense; not just how much we produce or consume, but how well we are, how we relate to and understand each other, whether we feel secure in our home and job, or whether we feel like we have a stake in our economy, community and democracy.

Fundamentally, this is a shared endeavour, a shared responsibility. And our partnerships, policies and practice need to now reflect that shared responsibility, through reimagining the relationships that bind us – and supporting entities and networks (whatever their shape or kind) that manifest these multiple forms of wealth.

It is in this context that we hugely welcome the Government's interpretation of civil society as *'those outside of the public sector who share the mission of building a strong society and improving lives'*, regardless of traditional sector boundaries. It is a helpfully provocative definition; challenging us to put aside a traditional notion of any particular sector that 'owns' civil society and challenge our perceptions of who has the moral authority and practical power to effect change when it comes to increasing the wellbeing of our people and planet.

This is not about bringing business further into the public sector, as some may have interpreted the government's definition. For us, it is about seizing a challenge to evolve and change business practice, to reward and incentivise organisations, communities and businesses who are focused on this broader definition of 'wealth'. It is about creating productive, sustained relationships between communities and different kinds of entities - who bring different capabilities and resources to tackle shared challenges that we face in our society.

Calls for more funding, particularly long term funding into key geographic places across the UK is clearly needed. But here, the Young Foundation sets out four things that we think the UK Government could helpfully do to support a stronger civil society.

1. Create an infrastructure for sharing learning, evidence, practice & innovation
2. Focus on the *exploitation* of existing digital technologies & platforms
3. Legitimise the *lived experiences* of people and communities across the country
4. Incentivise cross-sector, collective impact in places - and across different themes

1. Sustained support for sharing learning, evidence, practice & innovation

However it is defined, relationships lie at the heart of civil society. And when relationships falter and break down - either between communities, between organisations, different sectors, or even countries, we can lose much. And the relationships between communities, business and public institutions are changing.

There are more communities wanting and seizing the opportunities to take ownership of civic assets, self-organise and create positive change in their neighbourhoods. In contrast, many communities and places have low levels of community well-being, and do not feel they are listened to, do not feel they have any power or permission to act, or that public institutions care about what they think or feel, and have not been served well economically. Despite some great examples dotted about the country, the relationship between many public institutions and communities is transactional at best and dysfunctional at worst. Civil society will not thrive if the quality of its relationship to local government and public institutions is poor. This is as easy to get wrong, as right – and given some of the sharp, all consuming challenges facing some local councils this is not surprising.

The kind and quality of the relationship that people and communities have with their local government has a bearing on whether we will have a strong civil society, equipped to tackle our shared challenges. Understanding how, and in what ways, relationships are changing (either for better or worse) and how new kinds of collaborations, processes for decision making and relationships are working (or not), is absolutely critical.

As place-based strategies, regional devolution and localism gather momentum, we argue there is a clear need for a co-ordinated network of academics, community leaders, businesses, government and funders who are working in different ways to support thriving communities of place; to share evidence, insight and practice as well as providing a space for experimentation and innovation.

No-one actor or organisation holds this knowledge and information; it is distributed and networked geographically, and across sectors. Some of it is explicit, robust and published – and yet not utilised. Some of it is tacit, hidden - with no current means of expression.

That is why the Young Foundation are suggesting the development of a new Centre for Community Studies, a co-ordinated network of organisations and entities explicitly working to generate new knowledge and evolved practice to support a thriving civil society – and functional relationships with those who hold power.

We see a need to undertake continual analysis of existing policies and practice, to support the amplification of *how people experience* these policies and practice; and provide space to

explore and evaluate new ideas - systematically mapping these initiatives to wider trends, patterns and well-being data across the UK. In doing so, we believe this will support the efforts of all those seeking to work collectively with place-based communities across the country.

2. Focus on the *exploitation* of collaborative, digital technologies

The role that digital technology could play in supporting a strong civil society has been consistently underexplored and underexploited. In the commercial sector, we have seen that it is possible to unlock previously hidden resources on a global scale. Hundreds of thousands of spaces and rooms that were locked away and under-used are now visible and bookable. This has required zero investment in property. It required investment in technology. Taking inspiration from these platforms, we are now able to save lives by [integrating first responder volunteers](#) into the emergency services, co-ordinate [car sharing at scale](#) and raise money from the crowd to create community projects all over the country.

But, there are some real challenges. There is often cynicism in our sector - which can readily be justified by examples of previous investment in platforms for civil society that have fallen short of expectations. There is still quite often a disconnection between those interested in ‘tech for good’ and the public and charitable sectors. There is good use of, but distrust of the dominant social media platforms and we have a somewhat schizophrenic relationship with platforms that serve us well as consumers, but less well when we engage as producers or providers.

Government and market responses to the need for a digital infrastructure that better connect and co-ordinate the skills, resources, knowledge and funding for civil society have largely focused on the supply of new tools and platforms. These are often (ambitiously) envisioned to work at scale, but end up operating hyperlocally – affecting chances of sustainability in the longer term.

Digital exclusion, and a lack of digital engagement in ‘tech for good’ platforms (even by those who are more than comfortable using tech in other aspects of their lives) remain an issue too. In short, there are a number of challenges to overcome – and opportunities to exploit. ‘How do we manipulate digital technologies to achieve our social goals?’ – should be the driving question.

In recognition of those challenges, we are suggesting that the UK Government incentivise the *exploitation* of existing digital technology, as much as the *development* of digital innovations – as well as evolving our assumptions and vehicles for financing digital infrastructure that can grow social and community capital.

There is no doubt room for more innovation in the development of digital tools and platforms for civil society, however a sole focus on new products does not address the challenges posed above. Shifting the focus from the *supply* of new tools and platforms to a focus on the *demand*-side - incentivising the ‘pull’ of platforms and new ideas into civil society will benefit everyone. This could be achieved through a range of straightforward mechanisms, prizes and prompts – and should be undertaken in a co-ordinated way that tracks what works - and rewards collaboration across the sectors.

3. Amplify lived experiences and community aspirations

Genuinely understanding what it feels like for people who are (say) navigating the path back to work, or transitioning from school, living with unpayable debts, juggling work and parenting, living in poor quality housing, or any of the other complexities of modern living, is more important than ever. Not listening or responding to those lived experiences is not a neutral act. And doing so actively ignores the best possible source of insight to support public and social innovation and change towards a more inclusive economy and healthy civil society.

There are a number of organisations who are focused on the voices and experiences of people in communities, including the Young Foundation. Our [Amplify](#) method (designed in partnership with communities) responds to the real, lived experiences of people and the communities in which they live. In simple terms, Amplify connects people to take action together. It combines research, community engagement and action to spark new ideas for tackling the challenges that people care about. There remains an evident and pressing need for processes such as Amplify, particularly in places where traditionally there has been far less civic or social action – and consequently a lack of investment and philanthropic funding.

Alongside this opportunity for more systemic, local change which can get a kickstart from amplifying voices and lived experiences, there also exists an opportunity to influence national thinking and policy.

Decision and policy making by other kinds of actors at regional, national, EU and global level tends to lean into highly quantitative approaches to understanding issues and rationalising the debate. Nearly all recent innovations in ‘data-driven’ approaches look at existing, quantitative data sets. There are almost none that seek to crowd-source unstructured, qualitative data. At present, ‘data’ is so esteemed as a route to driving specific kinds of change and innovation, it is a huge gap that the collective stories of people experiencing difficulties, or in specific circumstances, are unable to find expression within this, often very top down discipline. We suggest this is a real opportunity for data-driven social innovation, to enable mass perspectives and lived experiences of particular issues and circumstances, to take their place alongside these other, more privileged types of information at a policy-making level.

4. Incentivise cross-sector, collective impact in places & different themes

Many different intermediaries, funders and investors are active in different towns, cities and regions across the country. Many local government and combined authorities are seeking higher degrees of collaboration and collective action to tackle shared challenges. There is limited visibility of what this collective work looks like – or adds up to. At a very basic level, this lack of visibility of what others are funding or investing in could be readily addressed, perhaps through extending or building on the work of the [360 Giving Initiative](#). (This is certainly data that the Young Foundation are building on – to create more shared intelligence on the collective activities of funders).

However, there is a bigger issue that requires resolving.

Part of the rationale for working in a ‘place-based’ way is that it provides an opportunity to take a holistic, system approach to supporting positive change. It recognises that many forces conspire to perpetuate certain circumstances, behaviours and systems and that lasting, meaningful change on a complex issue requires many different people and organisations in different sectors to shift behaviours or practice.

If you’re trying to do this and you’re restricted to social investment as a vehicle, you’ll only fund (and perhaps even notice) part of the solution. If you’re a grant funder, again, you’ll likely only be funding part of the solution. If part of the solution rests with local government you may not be able to fund them at all. If as a funder you want quick (<3 years) returns (either social or financial) you’ll very likely not see any profound changes in the longer term, regardless of starting ambitions.

In short, our funding and finance infrastructure will fall short of its job to support place-based change if each funder works in mindful indifference of the other. Unless there are more blended funds that can be highly responsive to providing different kinds of finance dynamically depending on what is most appropriate for that context, time and place we will not be doing civil society justice. Social investors, corporate foundations and grant funders may achieve much more working in active partnerships.

As a starting point, we propose a significant sized trial fund which blends different kinds of finance and resources together in one geographic place, that can accommodate funding any kind of organisation, with flexibility over what kind of finance is most appropriate, that crowdsources other kinds of non-financial resources to support activity - and is ambivalent about the ends to which the finance is deployed. Namely, decisions about what particular challenge or issue should be addressed through the finance rests in the hands of the “community of place”, not the funder. If it works well, this would inform a route for the wider

deployment of blended finance partnerships between government, social investors and philanthropic funders.

We also suggest a place-based pilot of the Government's 'Inclusive Economy Partnership' which convenes actors from across the sectors to focus on particular challenges that are of shared interest and on which different cross-sector resources can be brought to bear. The Young Foundation have developed a model for how this would work in practice.

And Finally...

A Civil Society strategy must not stand in isolation from the Industrial Strategy, its local manifestations or any future Shared Prosperity Fund. Some places across the country - often now characterised in shorthand as those 'left behind' or by their EU referendum voting habits – do require sustained, long-term investment of different kinds - that are as economic as they are civic in their intent.

But we should also use the opportunity to question the relationships that exist between our towns and cities. Our models of regional growth will not be inclusive or successful in the long term, or generate multiple forms of wealth, if they are predicated on wholesale drift of working populations into the cities. This dynamic is ageing our towns and forcing continued pressures in our cities – and in both cases, it is those who are less well-off who end up getting the rawest deal; entrenching inequalities inside – and outside – our cities. If civil society is to flourish, as the foundation and operating system of a functioning society, economy and democracy, this is a challenge that can't be dodged.

Given our technological infrastructure, the opportunities for distributed manufacturing, working, training and sharing, there will be multiple ways to improve economic, environmental and community well-being through reimagining the connections, resource flows and relationships between our smaller towns and cities.