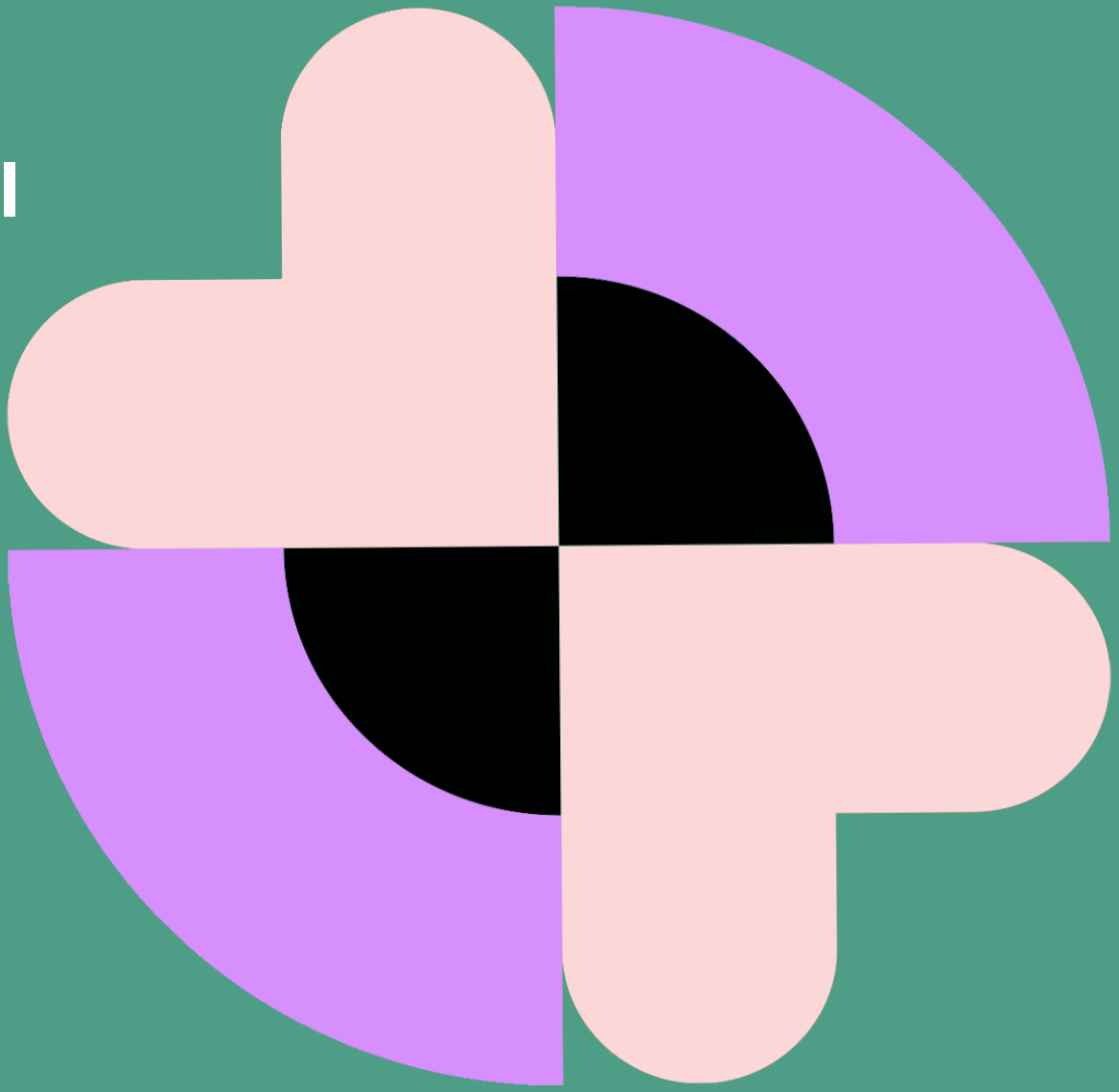
Investing in infrastructure

How to build movements, missions and muscle in civil society



A Playbook for the Future

In times of crisis and transition we necessarily find ourselves focusing on how to respond to short term needs and challenges. This can sometimes be at the expense of looking further ahead and scanning the long-term possibilities. 'Joining the dots' between what is happening now, and the emerging patterns or 'signals' of things to come, can help us plan for positive horizons and make those possible futures a reality.

Civil society is going through an important transition as we learn from the pandemic and navigate an uncertain future.The resources and support which civil society organisations draw on now will be critical to their sustainability for the future. This Futures Playbook looks at what we know about civil society infrastructure – what its purpose is, how it is resourced and strengthened, and how building and resourcing infrastructure can support civil society to be impactful, resilient and adaptive in the future.

May 2022

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Who should use this Playbook?

We hope this Playbook will prompt conversations and thoughtfulness that may eventually lead to deeper strategic planning or programme design. It does not intend to prescribe the solutions or specific ways of working, but to provoke fresh thinking and ambition.

This Playbook is primarily designed for:

Funders of civil society organisations and social movements, who want to understand how to invest in and shape an enabling context for systems change. This might include independent charitable funders and public funders or commissioners.

Insights may also be useful to:

Experts and commentators scrutinising the effectiveness and impact of public and charitable funds, who want to understand how investing in infrastructure can be important and impactful for frontline civil society organisations and other stakeholders. This might include policymakers, public bodies, think tanks, and academics.

Other supporters and advocates for the growth and development of civil society. This may include leaders from the public and private sectors, politicians, academics and media commentators.

Civil society leaders who want to forecast trends and possibilities which may affect them directly or advocate for interventions which may shape the overall ecosystem in which they operate.

Providers of services and support which may be defined as infrastructure, who want to articulate and position their purpose and impact within a long-term vision of the future. This may include organisations who self-define as support providers, membership bodies, peer networks, incubators, advisors or specialists. It could also be those who contribute to the capacity, development, sustainability, learning and voice of civil society organisations but wouldn't identify themselves as 'infrastructure'.

Methods and Acknowledgements

This Playbook has been shaped and informed through a series of research interviews with independent funders, interviews with organisations who may be defined as 'infrastructure organisations', and a desk review of literature relating to the provision of civil society infrastructure and the theory and practice behind funder interventions and funding design.

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> Infrastructure organisations in all their forms are crucial to supporting community businesses to thrive and helping communities across the country make the places they live in better. We know there are many ways that funders like us can work with infrastructure organisations to create a resilient and thriving sector and are excited to have supported and worked with Common Vision to deliver this Playbook. It will help us and others think more creatively about partnerships with infrastructure for the future.
>
> – Susie Finlayson, Power to Change

About Common Vision

Common Vision is a think tank specialising in community listening, deliberative dialogue and public imagination. Our work joins the dots between emerging social and economic trends, shares learning from best practice, and identifies pathways to achieving common goals. We share these insights and stories with policymakers, funders, and others who can implement change in their personal or professional communities.

www.commonvision.uk
@commonvisionUK

About Power to Change

Power to Change is the independent trust that supports community businesses in England. Community businesses are locally rooted, community-led, trade for community benefit and make life better for local people. The sector owns assets worth £870m and comprises 11,300 community businesses across England who employ more than 37,000 people. (Source: Community Business Market 2020). From pubs to libraries; shops to bakeries; swimming pools to solar farms; community businesses are creating great products and services, providing employment and training and transforming lives. Power to Change received an original endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund in 2015 and a further £20million grant in 2021.

www.powertochange.org.uk
@peoplesbiz

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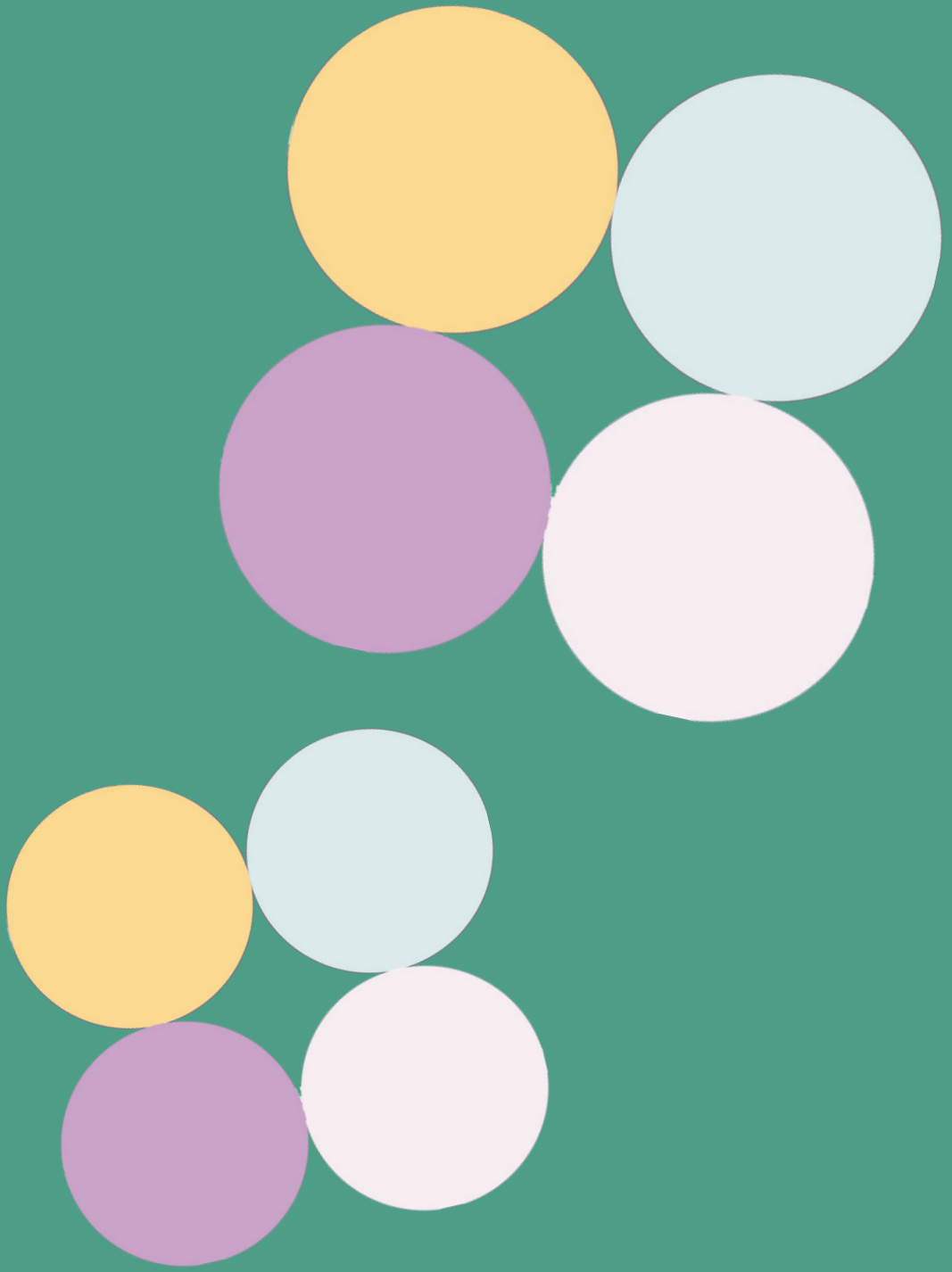
Introduction: Why infrastructure, why now?



Why infrastructure, why now?

The 'backbone', the 'foundations', the 'scaffolding' – these are a few of the words used in descriptions of why infrastructure is important for civil society organisations to be effective. Common definitions of infrastructure focus on the services and functions provided by infrastructure organisations – direct capacity building and development support, networking and knowledge sharing, and joined advocacy and influence – all of which help frontline organisations (i.e. those directly working with individuals and communities) to achieve individual and collective impact.

Definition:
Civil society

'Civil society' is a broad and sprawling concept which encompasses large and small charities, community groups, voluntary organisations, social enterprises, community businesses, co-ops, faith organisations and cultural organisations – as well as more informal groupings of individuals. Civil society shouldn't be regarded as a singular entity; it can be difficult to make collective assumptions or sweeping statements about recent experiences and future needs. What we do know is that the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the extent to which a range of different civil society organisations have the knowledge and relationships to respond to social needs, reach the most vulnerable in our society, and leverage human capital and goodwill in a way that the state and the private sector cannot. But doing this effectively and sustainably doesn't happen in a vacuum – it is linked to the support and systems which civil society organisations draw on to survive and thrive.

Definition:
Infrastructure

The word 'infrastructure' usually brings up imagery of roads and railways, bridges and telephone masts, things which are critical to society operating effectively. When applied to specific sectors and communities, infrastructure means the shared services and networks which individual organisations draw on for support not only to operate, but to be more effective and achieve collective impact beyond the sum of their parts. 'Support intermediaries', 'second tier organisations', 'trade bodies', 'membership networks', or 'umbrella bodies' are all terms synonymous for infrastructure.

Often a nebulous concept, infrastructure is a topic ripe for critical appraisal and sense-making because of:

Gaps in understanding and interest

Changing economic contexts and government priorities over the past three decades have meant that infrastructure has waxed and waned in terms of recognition, profile, and public and charitable funding that it receives. In recent years there has been a notable near-absence of mentions of infrastructure (or any of its synonyms above) in prominent thought leadership and commentary on civil society such as the Future of Civil Society Commission led by Julia Unwin, the Law Family Commission on Civil Society, and Danny Kruger MP's Levelling Up Communities report.[1] This may be because infrastructure is not seen as important, or it may be that it is taken for granted, or perhaps the concept is seen as staid and uninspiring in both vision and practice, unworthy of commentary.

Emerging positive trends and signals

A handful of recent programmes from independent funders have demonstrated a renewed interest in infrastructure, and core support for organisations which provide it. Some of these funds have been a direct response to the pandemic, while others preceded it. These potentially 'signal' the start of a renaissance of infrastructure - or at least a growing recognition of its importance to a systems change approach.

> Over the last ten years or so politicians, policymakers and funding organisations have been very keen to support and promote civil society and voluntary action, but decidedly reluctant to support its infrastructure. During COVID-19, however, there are tentative signs that support for infrastructure has increased. It appears that 2020 has witnessed something of a surprising rehabilitation of the idea of infrastructure, a wider recognition of its role and value, even an unlikely renaissance.
>
> - Rob Macmillan, Principal Research Fellow at CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University (2021)[2]

> The economic case for infrastructure is strong. It is not about funding bureaucracy. It is about effective capability at the secondary level that creates value for the primary voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises that operate across the UK.
>
> - Ed Mayo, Chief Executive, Pilotlight (2020)[3]

Practical relevance for the recovery

The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for joined up cooperation and collaboration to deal with uncertainty and speak with a shared voice to national and local government. Emergency funding from charitable and public funders was made available through infrastructure organisations, who had the relationships and reach with their memberships and wider communities. As we move forward from the pandemic, building capacity and sharing knowledge is a vital part of adapting to ongoing unpredictability, and weathering both the immediate and longer-term impacts of economic scarring, social upheaval and geo-political disruption. Understanding how to invest in infrastructure so that it meets these needs is an important part of rebuilding the foundations of a resilient and diverse civil society.

Diversity, inclusion and power shifts

This is a continued time of critical reflection and determined action to address the gaps in diversity and inclusion in civil society and its funding. Often, infrastructure organisations have positioned themselves 'downstream', serving the sector that exists, rather than shaping what it should be. This has meant that sometimes traditional infrastructure bodies have sustained and reproduced structural inequalities in the networks, support, and funding they provide. Funders and infrastructure organisations alike are taking time to reflect on the power they hold to challenge entrenched power structures and redesign support systems around equity. This may include designing and investing in specialist or disruptive infrastructure to rebalance and sustain diversity and equity in the future.

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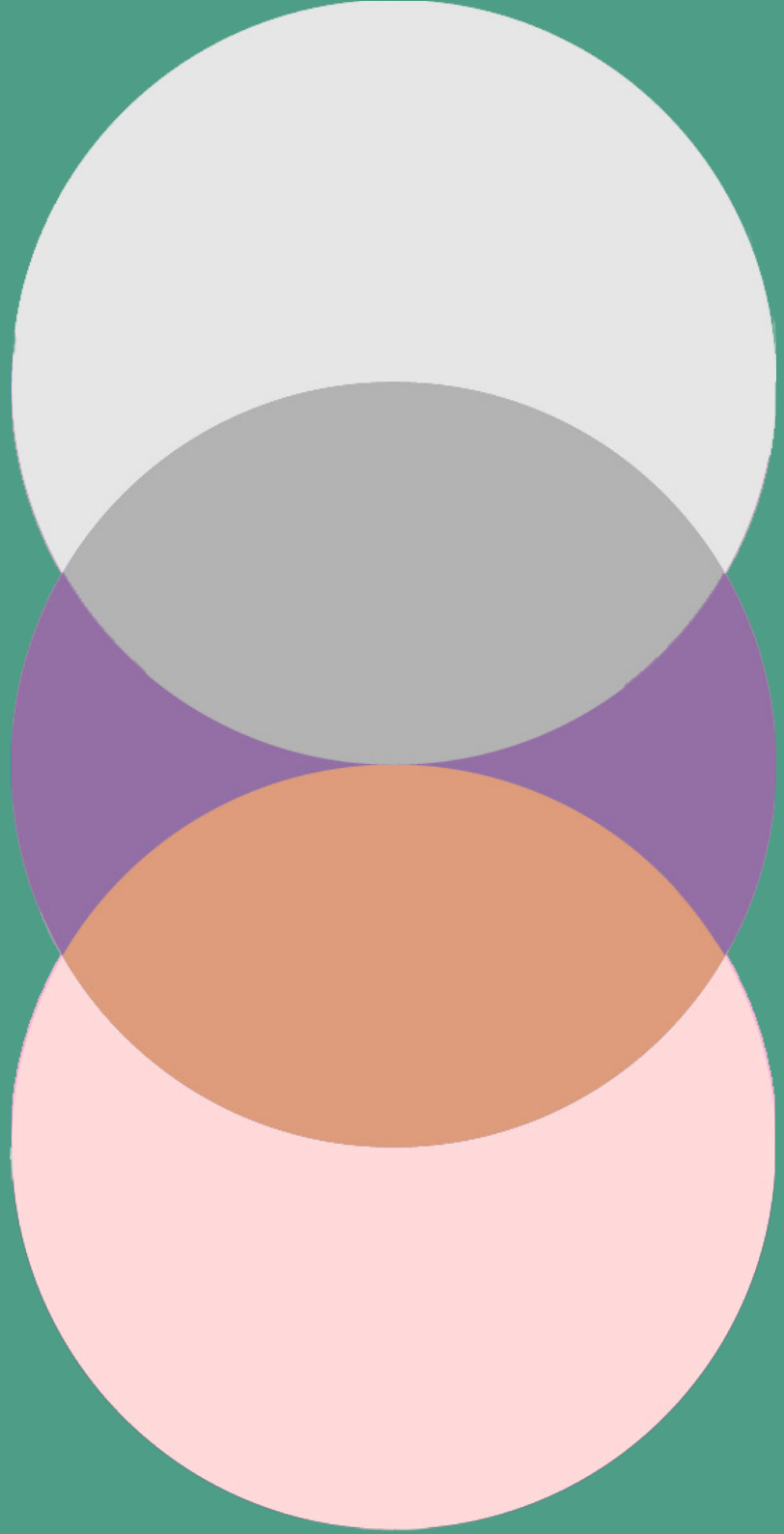
Infrastructure in practice



Infrastructure in practice

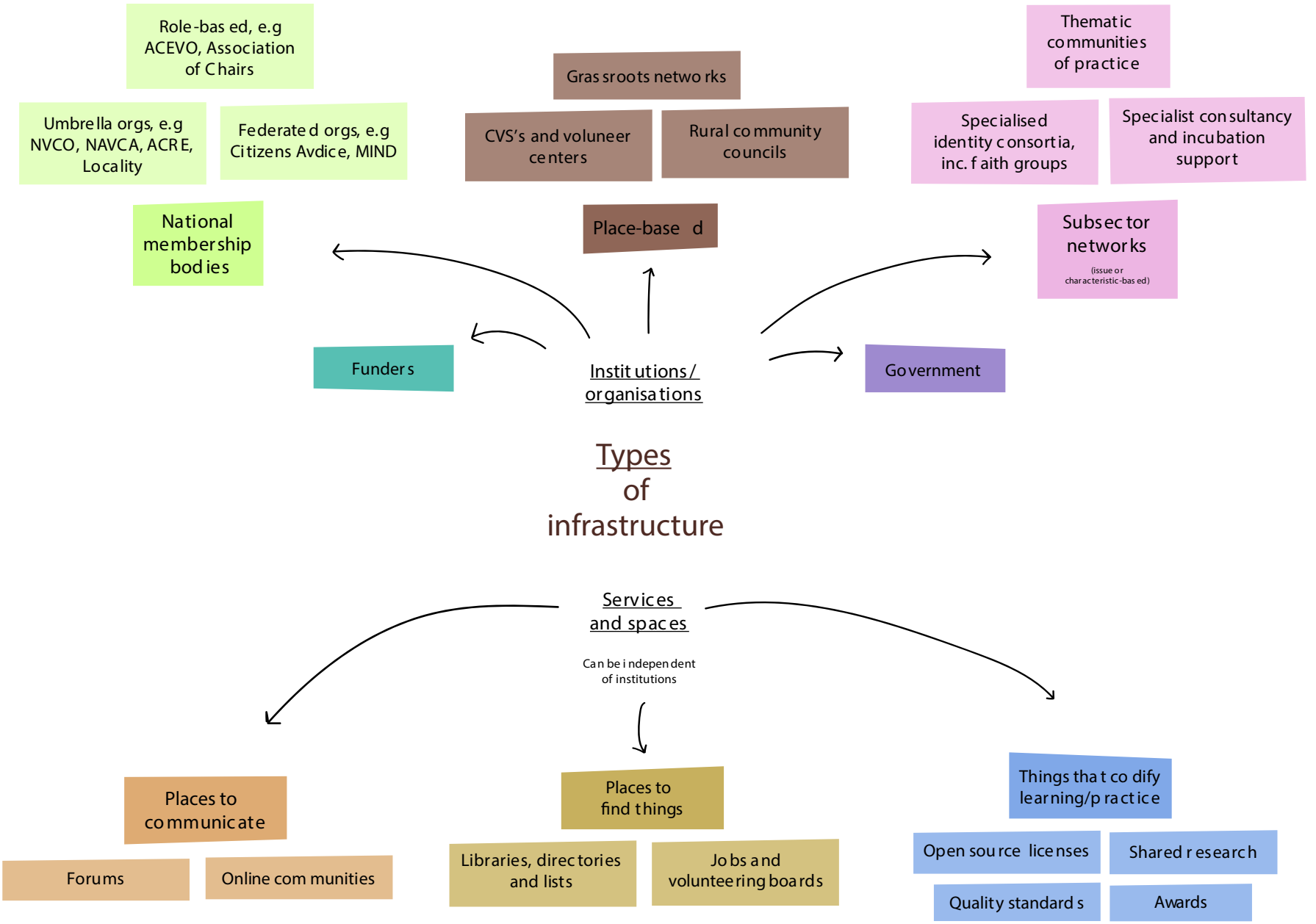
Infrastructure is a wide-ranging term which in its broadest sense means the services and support which 'frontline' organisations draw on to be effective and resilient. Usually 'infrastructure' refers to the organisations which provide these services. Some organisations may provide these services and functions but do not self-define as 'infrastructure organisations'.

The concept of infrastructure is not unique to civil society/ the social sector – support networks and trade bodies exist in the private and public sectors too. When used by civil society, the term is often used synonymously with 'support intermediaries', 'second tier organisations', 'membership networks', or 'umbrella bodies'.

Infrastructure can be local/ regional, serving organisations in particular geographies, or national networks. It may serve a broad base of civil society organisations, or operate on a more sector-specific basis (such as the youth sector, social enterprises, criminal justice charities or disabled people's organisations for instance). Infrastructure organisations may specialise in technical functions like digital capacity building or community asset ownership. They can also be digital platforms providing resources, directories and places to communicate and share knowledge online.

Infrastructure functions are also provided by other organisations for whom infrastructure is not their primary purpose (such as funders and government bodies), as well as through other structures such as federated bodies, bidding and delivery consortia, alliances and through a market of consultants.

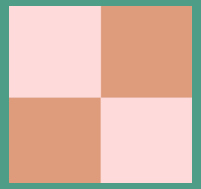
> Infrastructure organisations are those whose primary purpose is to provide infrastructure functions or services (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to front line organisations. They are sometimes called umbrella organisations, second tier organisations or intermediary organisations.
>
> – Home Office, 2004[5]



Adapted from TNL Community Fund, Digital Fund Round Two Research[5]

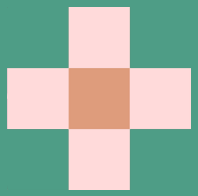
Infrastructure functions

Civil society definitions of infrastructure usually focus on the services which are provided to frontline organisations, so that in turn those organisations can work more effectively with the individuals, communities or user groups they support.



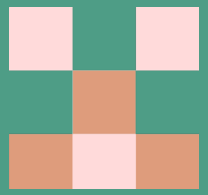
Direct capacity building and development support

Providing support for operational and strategic planning and development including advice on funding, volunteer management and staff training, leadership development such as mentoring or coaching, governance, incubating new initiatives, and understanding external issues such as policy and regulation or forecasting trends. This can be through 121 channels or group programmes.



Networking and knowledge sharing

Convening and facilitating networking and peer support/ learning opportunities, sharing intelligence and data, securing and distributing collective resources (including funding), and collective bargaining. Many infrastructure organisations may operate on a membership model with these being members-only benefits.



Advocacy and voice

Raising awareness, facilitating and co-ordinating a joined-up voice and representing their 'sector' or membership to government and funders. This includes intelligence gathering, research and policy work, and advocacy and campaigns.

> A good infrastructure body will offer the right mixture of support, challenge, leadership, resource, skills and knowledge. It will also help to foster relationships… promote social action and make sure local communities have a voice.
>
> – NAVCA, Change for Good report (2015)[6]

As common definitions of infrastructure tend to focus on functions and services, this can lead to a very 'technical' view of what infrastructure is and does, whereas in reality it is fluid and takes different shapes and forms depending on the social cause, location and 'user' demographics of the civil society organisations who require support.

Another way of defining infrastructure is through the ways it creates the enabling conditions for frontline organisations to succeed in their mission and become more impactful both on an individual basis and collectively, adding up to 'more than the sum of their parts'.

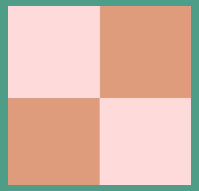
> We take infrastructure to mean the underlying support system that provides the conditions for a movement to flourish and thrive... It can cover both tangible and intangible things, from basic operational support to mental health, well-being and community-building.
> It can emerge and be provided in organic ways, can be community driven and centred or be more structured.
>
> – Ubele Initiative (2021)[7]

Infrastructure outcomes

Stronger and more resilient and sustainable organisations, which contribute to a stronger collective

Diversity of existing organisations and new entrants

The ability to access and successfully attract funding



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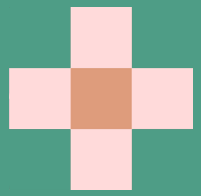

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Collective learning, action and impact

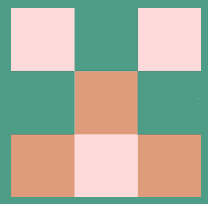
Collaboration and partnerships

Shared quality standards

Increased solidarity, visibility, public profile and policy influence

Favourable regulation and legislation

New funding opportunities



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The role of funders

Investment in infrastructure has ebbed and flowed with different political cycles. Austerity and public spending cuts, changes to public procurement and the emergence of social investment[8] have changed the ways in which infrastructure 'services' have been valued and funded. Since 2010 many infrastructure organisations have sought to increase their funding from fee-charging consultancy and membership subscription schemes, as statutory funding for infrastructure was squeezed.

Funders tend to invest in infrastructure organisations in two ways:

Commissioning support services

...for frontline grantees. This can take the form of supply-side models whereby predetermined support is provided alongside grants, or demand-led models whereby grant recipients are issued 'vouchers' or development grants to spend on capacity building support of their choice or choose from a 'menu' of approved providers[9].

Direct funding or investment

...either via core grants for infrastructure organisations, local authority contracts, or funding programmes which are designed to encourage new infrastructure consortia.

Both models demonstrate the privileged role which funders play in choosing, endorsing and shaping what's available to civil society organisations and who provides it. This has significant power, diversity and equity implications which are sometimes under-acknowledged.

In practice, many funders deploy a mixed approach where support for infrastructure is threaded throughout their programmes.

Power to Change: A mixed model approach to partnerships to grow and diversify infrastructure for community businesses

Power to Change is an independent foundation with a mission to support and strengthen community businesses to tackle some of society's biggest challenges at a local level. In 2016 when Power to Change was established, 'community business' was an unfamiliar term, encompassing a range of different types of organisations from community-owned assets such as pubs and libraries, to community-led housing, to health and social care services, and spanning a range of legal forms and entities including charities, social enterprises and co-operatives.

One of the key strategic aims for Power to Change in its first five years was to grow the market of community businesses and support existing community businesses to become sustainable and impactful at a local level. Another goal was to raise awareness and recognition of community business, not only by funders and policymakers but also in encouraging constituent organisations to see themselves as a 'movement' with a shared cause. Investing in infrastructure was an important part of this journey.

Power to Change adopted a mixed model approach to its partnerships in order to support and grow different kinds of local, sector-specific and national infrastructure for community businesses:

- Strategic partnerships with national membership organisations, providing core unrestricted grants to a small number of national organisations: Co-ops UK, Plunkett Foundation, Locality, Ubele and SEUK whose membership base and services aligned significantly with a broad range of community business models and needs.

- Sector-specific commissions for specialist support for community-led pubs, libraries, health and social care, housing and energy provided alongside targeted grant funding programmes.

- Investments in local and regional infrastructure via place-based funding programmes such as the Cities and Counties programme, which aimed to establish local coalitions and alliances between voluntary sector and social enterprise bodies, private sector organisations (such as Chambers of Commerce or LEPs), other funders and social investors, and with local and combined authorities.

- Investment in peer support infrastructure has involved contracts or commissions funding leadership development, networking, peer-led business support, and initiatives which enable community business leaders to access and learn from wider movements.

- Partnerships with policy, advocacy and research organisations have also formed an informal evidence-building and influencing infrastructure.

As well as directing funding to infrastructure organisations via both strategic and demand-led models, Power to Change's partnerships strategy has facilitated relationships and encouraged more collaborative working between partners. Many smaller infrastructure organisations have benefited from this support at a pivotal time in their own development, while larger strategic partners used the core investment to improve their operational sustainability. This has led to a more resilient and diverse landscape of infrastructure for community businesses, whilst Power to Change has also benefited as an organisation from closer allies and proponents, and a common language and framing whereby the term 'community business' is recognised in sector and policy documentation, and by frontline organisations themselves.

The Backbone Fund, Paul Hamlyn Foundation: Sustained support for the portfolio

Paul Hamlyn Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK, supporting civil society organisations with a focus on arts, arts-based learning, migration and integration, youth, and social entrepreneurship. The Backbone Fund complements PHF's open funds by backing organisations which build capacity, enable collaboration, and enhance collective voice for these sectors. The Backbone Fund does not stipulate what the grant recipients should do or how the funding should be used, acknowledging that infrastructure needs will be different in different sectors and ecologies.

"We know that stable and flexible funding from an independent source is hard to come by, particularly for activities that are not 'front-line' or less visible, but nonetheless incredibly valuable to enabling civil society organisations to do what they do well now and in the future. Through the Backbone Fund, we support organisations to resource essential activities as part of a wider response to back civil society and its leaders. The Fund is unrestricted and makes a lasting commitment of up to five years to each organisation. It will enable those involved to resource their core services, fund essential posts and ensure that there is funding that can be relied upon for a significant period of time, free of political cycles."

Strategic priority	Examples of funding work directly with communities (via other programmes)	Example of funding infrastructure organisations (via the Backbone Fund)
Arts	A community theatre working with marginalized communities in Bristol.	What Next? is a network for arts and cultural organisations across the UK to build alliances, share learning and advocate collectively.
Arts-based learning	A charity working in partnership with schools to provide creative education and continuous professional development for teachers.	The Cultural Learning Alliance is a membership organisation working to advocate for a coherent national strategy for cultural learning, unite the education, youth and cultural sectors, showcase best practice and and demonstrate why cultural learning is so important.
Youth	A youth-led social enterprise supporting young people to develop skills, confidence and networks through creative activities and events.	The Centre for Youth Impact works to advance thinking and practice in evaluation and impact measurement in the youth sector.
Migration and integration	A research charity testing new ways of involving people with lived experience of migration in policy development, influencing and decision-making in Wales.	Immigration Law Practitioners Association is a membership organisation that exists to promote and improve advice and representation in immigration, asylum and nationality law, through an extensive programme of training and by providing information and opinion that draw on the experiences of members.

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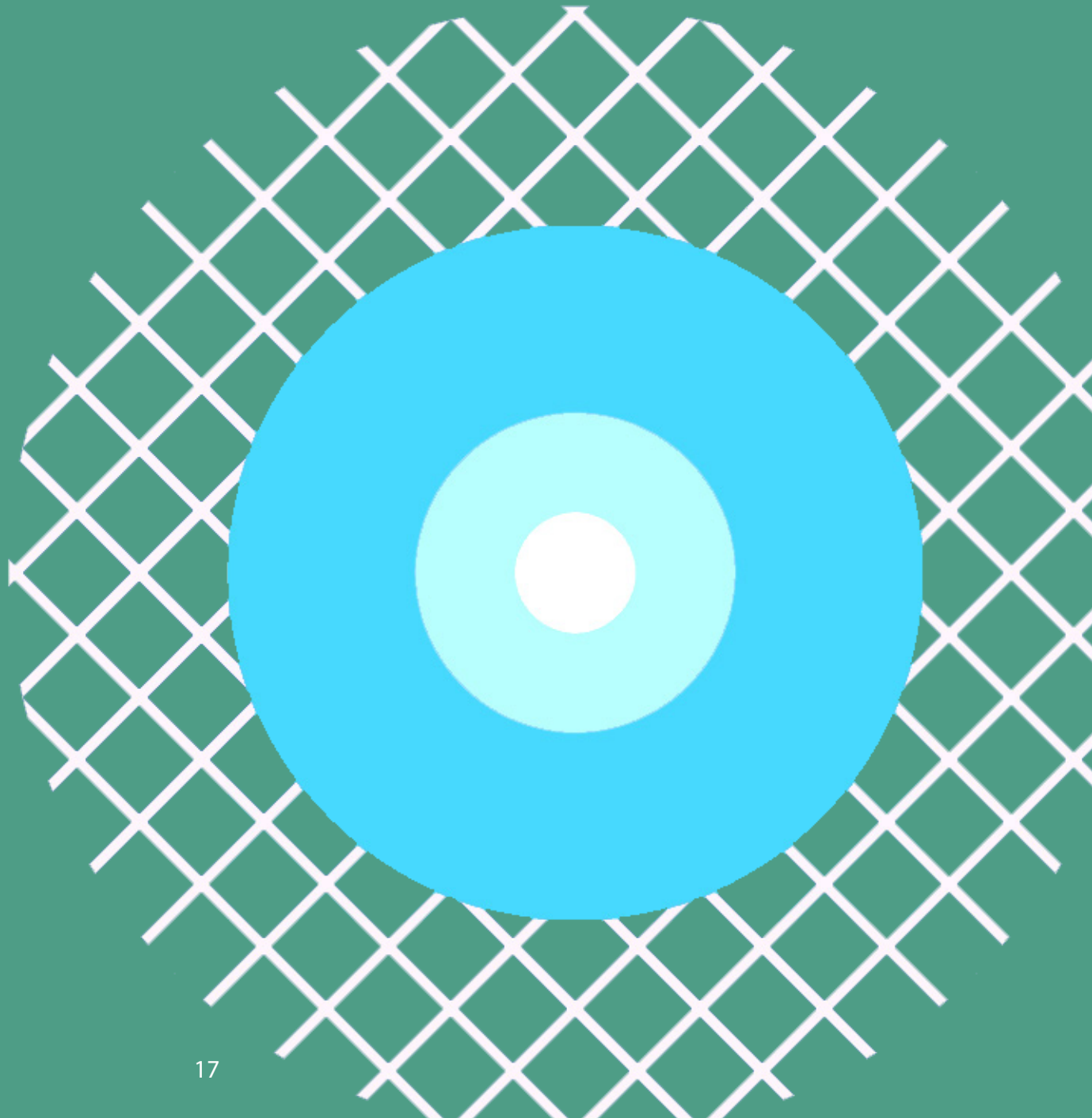
Building systems, not services



Building systems, not services

Civil society definitions of infrastructure usually focus on how infrastructure improves the effectiveness and impact of frontline organisations through capacity building, networking, and shared voice. However, this definition doesn't acknowledge the interdependent nature of civil society – the effectiveness of one organisation and the experiences of its beneficiaries are influenced by a range of different interconnected actors in the system.

> Covid-19 has provided many clear examples of effective systemic action, and stark lessons in the consequences of non-systemic thinking. Leaders and decision-makers everywhere are being compelled to think broader and deeper about causation and consequence... Systemic thinking, planning, action and leadership must now be mainstreamed - individually, organisationally, societally, across public, private and charity sectors.
>
> – Seth Reynolds, NPC[10]

> "Given that many of the issues civil society seeks to address are complex and require the contribution of many actors over the long term, there is increasing recognition that grant-making needs to change – away from funding short term projects delivered by single organisations, to create the conditions for long term systemic change
>
> – Collaborate[11]

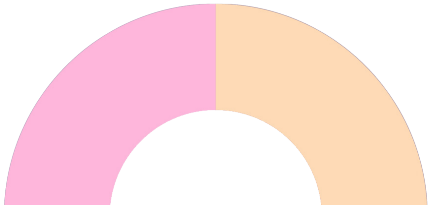
In recent years, many funders have been using a systems change lens to understand the complex and interconnected nature of entrenched social issues. In a systems context, multiple actors must contribute to a process of long-term change. Infrastructure acts as the scaffolding for this – helping to build a shared understanding between different frontline organisations and other stakeholders, working iteratively and experimentally, and encouraging cross-system relationships, collaboration and learning.

A systems approach often involves identifying the mindsets, behaviours, practices and relationships which will help achieve long-term change, rather than simply the services or support contracts.

The pandemic highlighted the complexity and interconnectedness of our systems, and the context of the COVID-19 recovery provides fertile ground for thinking about long-term systems change.

Infrastructure, ecology, or operating system?

Perhaps, 'infrastructure' is not the right word at all, to describe the structures and networks which underpin a healthy civil society. Consider the following three metaphors and the language associated with them. How do these concepts apply to civil society?



Infrastructure[12]

'Infrastructure' usually brings up imagery of roads and railways, bridges and telephone masts, things which are critical to the supply of our basic needs as a society.

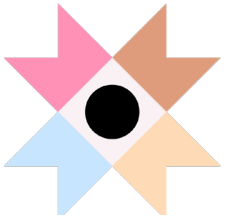
Long-term fixed assets underpinning our livelihoods and the national economy

Essential public investment

A feat of engineering, design and organised practice

Upfront investment which delivers long-term returns

Underappreciated or taken for granted, 'invisible' until something goes wrong



Ecology[13]

The connections between living things and the world around them.

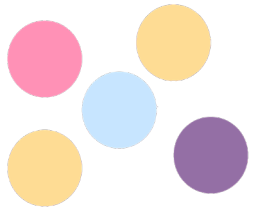
Sowing seeds, pollination, germination and taking root

Growth, nourishment and flourishing

Biodiversity, mutual dependency, relationships between big and small

Fragility, conservation and stewardship

Regeneration and rewilding



Operating Systems

The vital software on an IT system which allow the other applications to run effectively.

Provides common services for other programs

Controls processes, information and data flows

'Mesh networking' – when different nodes within the system connect to each other to share resources

'Forking the code' – a term which describes when developers use the code from one program to develop a new or separate piece of software

Infrastructure for systems change behaviours

Below are examples of systems change behaviours – not every organisation can do these things individually, but they can do collectively, and infrastructure organisations help drive or deliver this collective action. Thinking about systems change behaviours is a way of identifying who already plays an infrastructure role in your system or sector, and where there are gaps to fill.

Midwife

Bringing new life and alliances

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Hostess

Championing inclusivity

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Bellman

Sharing news and information

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Librarian

Archiving knowledge and intelligence

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Scout

Leading reconnaissance work

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Pollinator

Taking ideas from one testbed to another

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Analyst

Drawing together research and data

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Conduit

Channelling energy and resources

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Broker

Connecting and facilitating people and organisations

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Diplomat

Developing collective vision and shared purpose

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Futurist

Horizon scanning, predicting

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Guru

Championing collaboration, mutual trust and respect

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Polymath

Understanding a range of perspectives and specialisms

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Other

Current Actors	Potential Actors

Systems change at different scales

Systems change takes place at different scales and a systems lens is also applicable at a local level. Although traditional local infrastructure such as VCS (voluntary and community sector) networks have been hit hard by austerity and the loss of statutory support, over the last decade there has been a growing interest from funders in place-based investments which tackle complex issues and enable systems change on a geographical basis. Many of these place-based approaches have identified local infrastructure organisations to lead a partnership consortium, distribute funding or act as an anchor point for the programme, because of the local relationships, convening power and insights they hold.

Cornerstone Fund: Funding new partnerships to address inequalities

The Cornerstone Fund provides funding for civil society support organisations in London to become "adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, with a focus on tackling deep seated structural inequalities to improve outcomes for Londoners." It funds partnerships, led by civil society infrastructure organisations, to build the capacity of civil society groups, augment the voice of communities, or influence policy and practice. There is an emphasis on building trust through convening, facilitating and connecting.

"The Fund has highlighted the importance of funding activity beyond traditional 'delivery' roles such as convening, facilitating, and connecting which are essential for enabling collaborative whole system efforts. The importance of these roles has been reinforced in response to the pandemic, with civil society infrastructure acting as a source of collective intelligence for the sector, distributing essential information and resources, and connecting and convening people and local groups and supporting them to act." – Collaborate, the fund's learning partner[14]

The Fund is a collaboration between City Bridge Trust, National Lottery Community Fund, Trust for London, the John Lyons Charity, the Greater London Authority, and London Funders. Learning and experimentation on the part of the funders is a core component alongside the grants.

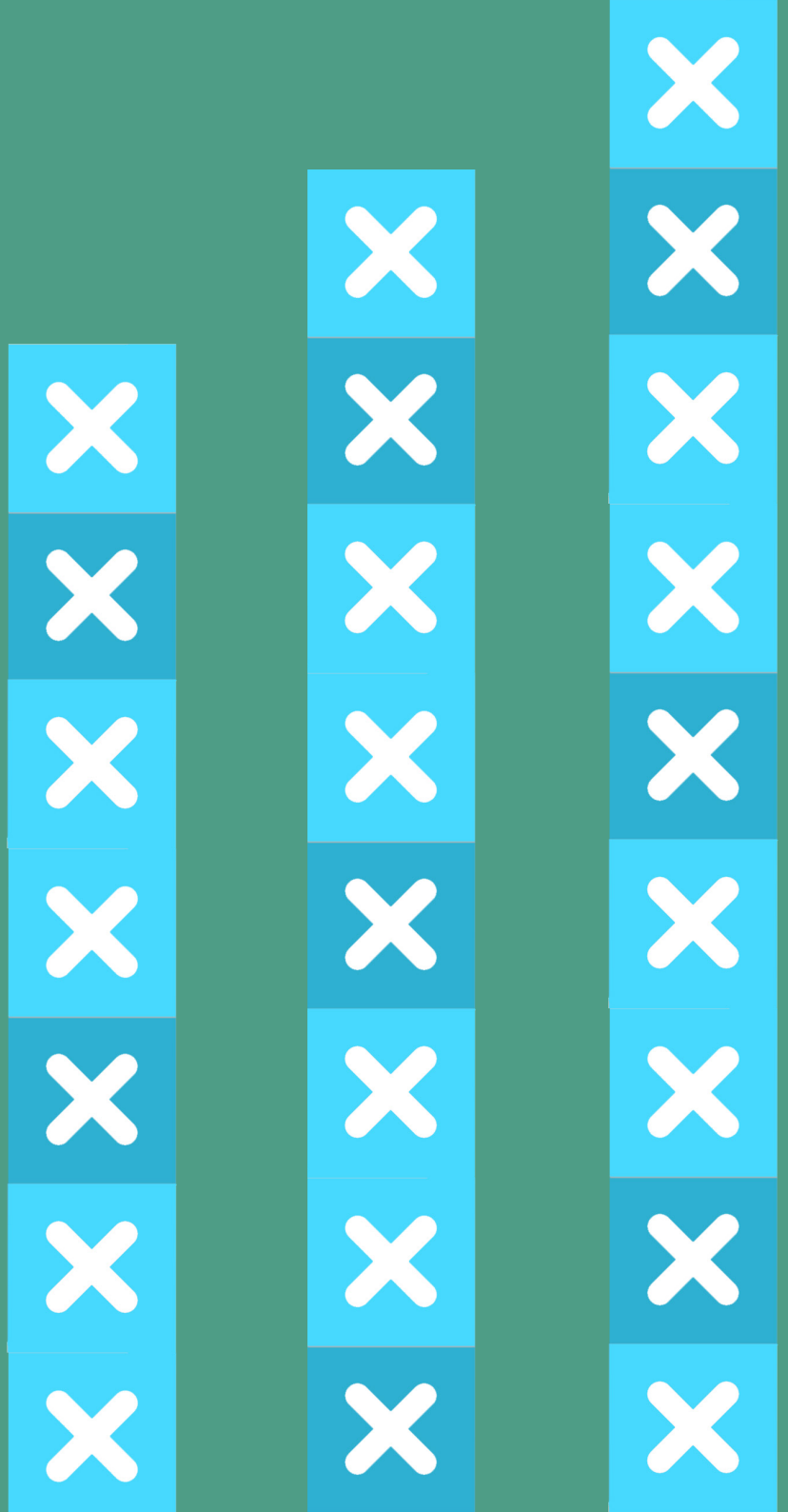
Like other systems change funds, the Cornerstone Fund's ambitions are centred on testing and learning from ways of working which may result in systems-level impact:

- Systems change ambition 1: Developing and testing new ways of working (for civil society support organisations) to achieve a thriving civil society for Londoners.
- Systems change ambition 2: Developing a new way of funding to achieve a thriving civil society for Londoners and influencing for the adoption of this practice more widely.

Power to Change: Investing in the local conditions for enterprising communities

Power to Change's mission is to support community businesses to make social and economic impact in their local places. Alongside a number of open grant programmes, Power to Change's activities has included targeted interventions in specific city regions, to understand and to demonstrate "how community businesses can have a transformational effect on place". This has involved influencing and shaping the existing organisations who can provide development support, networking and shared advocacy for community businesses, including local government/ combined authorities, voluntary sector and social enterprise bodies, private sector organisations (such as Chambers of Commerce or LEPs) and other funders. Partners do not 'specialise' in community businesses, or sometimes even recognise the term to start with, but the goal is to foster an enabling environment in which community businesses can grow and thrive.

One example is the establishment of Kindred in the Liverpool City Region. Kindred is a social investment vehicle owned and led by a community of 'Socially Trading Organisations' (STOs) - businesses that trade commercially while delivering social benefits. These include community businesses, community land trusts, CICs and social enterprises, cooperatives and some mission-driven companies and family businesses. Kindred fills a gap in support through a mix of cash grants and loans alongside peer support, specialist expertise and learning, with the aim to strengthen the collective impact of investees. Co-funded by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Power to Change, Kindred is an intervention in the social economy which is aligned with wider city or city-region strategies, embracing different language and alliances to position community businesses within a broader mission and narrative for the region.



Developing local infrastructure partnerships

National funders or commissioners working at a local scale may not have a readily available network of specific providers or networks specialising in the frontline groups which you want to support. This means thinking bigger than your direct beneficiaries or a specific sector and more about who is well-placed to help create the enabling conditions for your target groups to thrive in the locality. Have a think about the questions below.

Who might you work with to:

Influence new market or commissioning opportunities?

Gain a seat at the table in local policy discussions?

Provide peer networking opportunities?

Generate new knowledge and learning?

Leverage funding and resources from others?

Also consider:

- What does a critical mass of supportive organisations and opportunities look like?
- Are relationships with one specific actor (such as the local authority) are enough to achieve the impact you want?
- How can you combine and coordinate your local efforts with the reach of your national networks and partners?
- How would you plan for and respond to potential political change or shifts in power?

Equity in the system

Who do our systems serve, and who do they fail? Using a systems lens prompts us to think beyond what already exists, to look at the gaps in support and the actors who do not benefit from the current infrastructure landscape.

The conventional definition of infrastructure as providing capacity, networks and shared voice means that the organisations who do this most prominently are those which have significant ready-made memberships or more informal groupings and can operate at a certain scale. On the other hand, minority communities and organisations by definition are working with smaller populations.

Infrastructure Resilience Fund, Youth Futures Foundation: Reaching into communities through diverse partnerships

The Youth Futures Foundation was established in December 2019 with £90m endowment to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Its Infrastructure Resilience Fund aims to build the resilience and sustainability of organisations who help young people who face intersectional barriers move towards and into work.

The Fund has been cognisant that conventional definitions of infrastructure organisations as 'membership bodies' or 'networks' means that a lot of smaller organisations that provide employment support aren't funded. Instead, they stipulate that eligible infrastructure organisations are those with networks, members or collaborations of 20 constituent organisations or more.

In order to work with groups outside of their existing reach, they have looked to organisations who don't specifically work in the youth employment sector, but which support organisations whose work involves young people who face racial and ethnic barriers in the labour market, have experience of the care system, are a young parent or carer, have special educational needs and/or disabilities, have experience of offending, homelessness, exclusion, substance abuse or who have a mental health or long-term health condition.

"In designing our approach to infrastructure funding, we intentionally wanted to build a diverse portfolio of infrastructure grantholders that enabled us to partner with organisations who had the membership and reach into communities that aligned with our mission of decreasing racial inequalities in youth employment. This nationwide coalition of support helps identify 'what works' and ignites new ideas to change behaviour and practice." – Aron Fulton, Youth Futures Fund

The funding is currently supporting 11 organisations including those focused specifically on empowering young people from Black and ethnic minoritised backgrounds, including support for the Traveller Movement to develop a youth employment strategy in response to the increased need to tackle high unemployment rates among Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people; for the Ubele Initiative to design and deliver a new targeted intervention for organisations supporting young people from Black and ethnic minoritized backgrounds; and for Money4You's BAMER HUB which provides capacity building support on financial literacy and enterprise skills. Ultimately the Fund wants to support these organisations to stay relevant and useful, generating the space and capacity to make the improvements to their systems and services so they have a better-quality membership offer and can become sustainable on this basis.

Emerging Infrastructure Design Lab, TNL Community Fund/ Careful Industries

The Emerging Infrastructure Design Lab is a ten-month programme working with seven small voluntary, community and social organisations to strengthen their networks, adapt to their changing environment, and become more digitally resilient. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and delivered by Careful Industries.

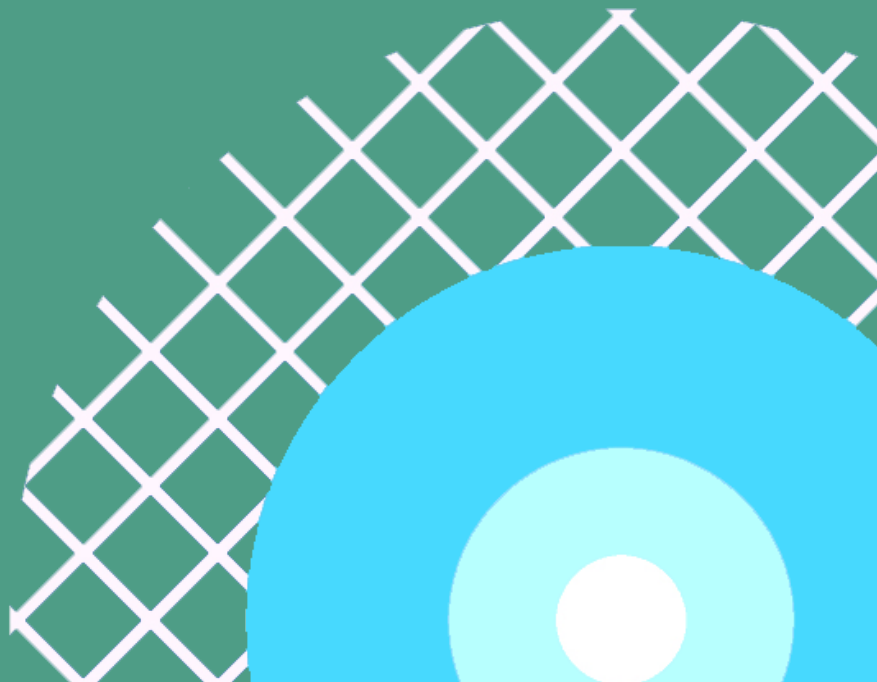
All of the cohort work with or support groups of people who have been historically under-represented in positions of power - including young people, Travellers, disabled artists, young women of colour, and people living in poverty. The programme recognises that these types of organisations may be going through intense periods of growth in response to community need, may be navigating the retreat of other services, and some may be facing challenges of how to define their role in the system or evidencing their impact.

"Sometimes it can feel impossible to prioritise nurturing your own organisation when pursuing the outward mission is urgent and feels all-consuming… The broader context of change makes it an interesting time to think about organisational infrastructure. It means that many of the Lab members have a keen sense of things they want to change, but not the time and space to work methodically through the steps to get there."

The Design Lab offers them the time and space to reflect on their work, and coaching and expertise in digital skills, user segmentation and user-centred design, content design and distribution, approaches for testing and experimenting, and partnership building amongst other things. Grants of up to £50,000 cover their costs working with the Design Lab and implementing changes in their organisations. The programme also aims to stimulate a conversation around the ways infrastructure can reinvent itself for the digital age, and the resource and support it needs to do so.

The pandemic shone a light on fault lines in the existing infrastructure landscape – who was able to access support in times of crisis, who was served by existing networks and conduits, and who was excluded. The Ubele Initiative convened local, regional and national Black and Minoritised infrastructure organisations to raise concerns that while these organisations do exist, they have been systematically underfunded and underrecognised, and therefore unable to provide Black and Minoritised communities with the links into emergency funding that they needed[15].

Funders have started to recognise the need for fluid definitions of infrastructure, proactively working with new and emerging organisations, many of whom who may not self-define as infrastructure.



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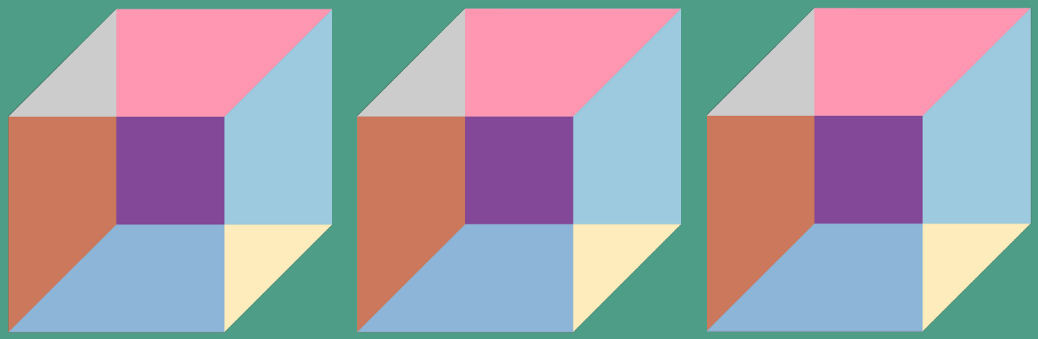
Funding infrastructure in a new era

Funding infrastructure in a new era

There is a growing recognition that infrastructure is not static or passive, it is both the consequence and the driving force of active design processes. It is not neutral or impartially representative of civil society organisations, but reflects and shapes existing patterns of privilege and inequality.

Ultimately, infrastructure is about power - how power is built and shared, who define and sustains its legacy, and who facilitates a common understanding and consensus. This means that funders must be intentional and purposeful about the infrastructure they fund.



> "The profound changes of the last year have dramatically shifted the landscape of anti-racist action. We've seen how social movements have the power to fundamentally reshape public discourse and catalyse mass action. Past and current experiences may lead us to worry that these gains will be short-lived, undermined and co-opted. This is exactly why we feel it's necessary to look at the role of infrastructure, as one of many inputs and support systems that underpin and sustain racial justice work… More people are engaging, new groups are being established and existing groups are elevating their ambitions. What are the underlying support systems that can meet the evolving scale, depth and complexity of racial justice work?"
>
> – Yvonne Field, Ubele Initiative[16]

Being intentional about infrastructure funding decisions requires stepping away from purely functional definitions of infrastructure as the organisations and services which build capacity, knowledge, relationships, and voice - these are in fact 'ingredients' of effective infrastructure rather than its underlying purpose.

Our provocation to funders is to think about infrastructure as part of, rather than in service to, a broader mission, and resourcing movements and human capital to those ends. This may not require a wholesale departure from past funding models, but it is likely to involve a mindset shift around purpose and intentionality.

Mission

Past funding of infrastructure provision has been characterised by the 'support need' rather than the overarching goal. A funder identifies the types of support that might be required by its current or potential grantees, then commissions or core funds providers which meet these needs. As such, the funder's early design decisions may heavily influence the outcomes; judgements are inevitably made around who is consulted, whose expertise matters and what is effective.

New and emerging approaches to infrastructure funding start with a mission. This means that funders let go of their role as 'commissioner' of support. They readily acknowledge that they might not be in the best position to truly understand the challenges and opportunities of communities, especially minoritized groups who are below-the-radar or systemically excluded. Instead, they use their platform to encourage open innovation towards the mission or long-term goal that they want to see (for example the climate emergency, youth employment, or structural racism). This does not need to mean that generalist infrastructure for civil society is deprioritised in relation to advocates of specific causes, rather it means that the role of identifying the best methods, activities and metrics for the mission is distributed to others in the field. Some design lessons could be drawn from the open innovation models emerging in the private and public sectors.[17]

Movements

Past models of infrastructure seek to support partnerships and networks which foster collaboration and relationship building between different actors in the system. However, networks - by definition - are exclusive. There are also various challenges around establishing partnerships and building relationships in a way that doesn't reinforce power imbalances, introduce competition, or extract short-term knowledge and know-how from infrastructure organisations instead of encouraging longer-term sustainable knowledge exchange.

Emerging approaches recognise the importance of building a movement behind the mission. These approaches prioritise relationships over transactional partnerships; broad alliances rather than membership-based networks. Sometimes, achieving a mission means doubling down on the efforts of those already working towards this agenda. At other times, it means disrupting and diversifying the agents in the field to achieve a stronger and mutually supportive ecology of vision and practice.

The infrastructure required to build and sustain movements may be very different to conventional civil society support providers and networks. For example, it might be the private sector which plays a capacity-building role, or public bodies which host peer learning exchange. It might also be digital and dispersed networks, online spaces where people congregate, have conversations, and spark collaborations.

Muscle

Conventional infrastructure funding approaches focus on stronger organisations. The emphasis is on enabling infrastructure organisations to become sustainable so that they in turn can provide ongoing support for their member organisations. However, this approach can exacerbate inequalities, by prioritising the infrastructure organisations which are already established, and the members which are already served by infrastructure.

New approaches to infrastructure focus on stronger people. In today's disintermediated world, it can just take a WhatsApp group to self-organise and spark new coalitions. These informal groupings of people might need infrastructure in the most basic sense - back-office admin and finance functions, incubation support, or accessible software. Some established infrastructure organisations explicitly focus their efforts on new, smaller or more fragile organisations – but newer early-stage services are emerging, for example collectively.org, the Social Change Nest CIC[18] and Climate2025.org which provide capacity-building support to emerging movements.

To address gaps in existing provision, some funders are also thinking creatively and working with individual 'brokers' who may be able to reach into and work to build trust in underserved communities. This is underscored by the recognition that different forms of 'relational capital' exist and need to be leveraged for a more diverse and equitable sector.

Design principles for new generation of civil society infrastructure

If infrastructure in the future is about supporting missions rather than prescribing methods, then design principles may include:

Openness

Historically, a number of infrastructure programmes have been closed funding streams or restricted tender processes. Being inclusive of more diverse, hard-to-reach and minoritized groups may require open tenders and EOIs to engage 'unusual suspects'.

Fluidity

New infrastructure approaches recognise the need for a fluid and flexible approach in terms of language and criteria, accepting that coalescing around a movement can be more effective.

Bravery

Being clear, consistent and purposeful in the mission and the agenda you want to support will be key to retaining trust and confidence from partners and allies. Intentionality is key: what do you want to achieve in the system and why?

Which of these other values or principles would influence you, and why?

Freedom	Integrity	Security
Agility	Courage	Dynamism
Excellence	Learning	Patience
Innovation	Generosity	Reciprocity
Justice	Forgiveness	Truth

End notes

[1] Civil Society Futures was an independent inquiry that ran from 2017-2018, chaired by Dame Julia Unwin. It convened community events, academic research and online debate. https://civilsociety-futures.org/

The Law Family Commission on Civil Society is a programme of research and commentary on civil society that launched in 2020, hosted by Pro Bono Economics and supported by the Law Family Charitable Foundation. https://civilsocietycommission.org/

Danny Kruger MP was commissioned by the government to review the role that civil society can play in the recovery. The resulting report, Levelling Up Our Communities: proposals for a new social covenant, was published in September 2020. https://www.danny-kruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

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[3] Ed Mayo (2020) It is a word that government and funders have avoided for years infrastructure, CivilSociety, https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/ed-mayo-it-is-a-word-that-government-and-funders-have-avoided-for-year-infrastructure.html

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[5] Adapted from TNL Community Fund, Digital Fund Round Two Research, https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1WBOb-6m9GH1s4JPU_RwPcv2zHPB1Xd54S6NRtALrcRDI/edit#slide=id.g655ec12870_0_19

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[10] Seth Reynolds (2020), Covid-19 means systems thinking is no longer optional, NPC, https://www.thinknpc.org/blog/covid-19-means-systems-thinking-is-no-longer-optional/

[11] Collaborate CIC (2020), About the Cornerstone Fund, Collaborate, https://collaboratecic.com/collaborate-is-learning-partner-to-the-cornerstone-fund-the-fund-a-funder-collaboration-between-bddf1e9cbce

[12] Dan Gregory (2018), Skittled Out, Local Trust, https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/essays/skittled-out-an-essay-by-dan-gregory/; Susan Leigh Star (1999), The Ethnography of Infrastructure, American Behavioral Scientist, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00027649921955326; Shannon Mattern (2016), Scaffolding, Hard and Soft: Critical and Generative Structures, Spheres, https://spheres-journal.org/contribution/scaffolding-hard-and-soft-infrastructures-as-critical-and-generative-structures/

[13] Particularly in the cultural sector, the term 'ecology' has been used to refer to the systems and networks of interdependent relationships between different creators, producers and participants, and the cyclical processes of creation. Credit is due to John Holden's work on this concept. John Holden (2016), Organism not Mechanism: An Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning, A New Direction, https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/local-partnerships-program me/creative-ecosystems; John Holden (2015), The Ecology of Culture, Arts & Humanities Research Council, https://publicartonline.org.uk/downloads/news/AHRC%20Ecology%20of%20Culture.pdf

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