What next for ‘place’ in the capital’s funding landscape?

An essay for London Funders on Place-Based Funding in London

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Foreword

This paper was commissioned by London Funders as part of our ambition to support effective place based funding in the capital.

London Funders is the network for funders and investors in London’s civil society. We’re here to enable funders from all sectors to be effective. We’re focused on collaboration – convening funders to connect, contribute and cooperate together, to help people across London’s communities to live better lives.

The paper coincides with the launch of a new advisory group on place. Building on our work convening funders and other stakeholders around place-based giving and funding approaches, this new group seeks to re-examine what place means to London’s communities in light of the covid-19 pandemic, and generate new thinking about the opportunities and challenges this may bring.

We are excited about the ideas and questions posed by the paper, which will act as a focus point for the group’s first meeting. However we hope they will also provoke much wider discussion amongst funders in London and beyond. Together with our members, we will be sharing and building on the lines of inquiry presented here to help guide our work through the next stage of London’s recovery.

Introduction

There is nothing more current and relevant in funding and policy discussions than the concept of Place.

> *“We know that there is more we should do to support and boost the potential of people and communities, and crucially to do so through a place-based approach”*[1]
>
> Local Motion Funders

From the perspective of the capital, that relevance is double edged.

It is a city with many ways to think about and apply the concept of Place, and many examples of cutting-edge approaches to place-based change.

But it also a city that is not currently the focus of government interest, and a city that, because of its size, economic weight and hyper-connectivity, does not neatly break-down into defined and contained places. London can feel less relevant to place-discourse, and the concept of Place can feel harder to use in the capital.

> *“Imagine if we could level up – not just lengthening London’s lead around the world. But closing the gap between London and the rest of the UK’s great cities. That would increase the national GDP by tens of billions”*
>
> Prime Minister Boris Johnson[2]

As a result, there are many questions about Place for London. There is plenty to be learnt from national and international practice, and some opportunities, constraints and contexts that are particular to the capital. This essay aims to explore some of the key issues and pose a set of relevant questions for funders, policy makers and other parts of civil society in London to consider about place. It does not claim to answer them neatly.

The essay looks at other research, work and practice that has advanced thinking on what Place means, and how it can be applied by funders. It then explores the current context of the capital, particularly regarding COVID, and what relevance Place might have to that context.

Then it looks at four ways in which London is different to other parts of the UK, and what that might mean for funders, alongside four recurring themes that always come up in conversations about Place and that need to be considered here to do it justice.

The essay finishes with some lines of inquiry based on the above.

[1] https://www.phf.org.uk/programmes/localmotion/

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-prime-ministers-levelling-up-speech-15-july-2021

Place

Definition

Place is one of those words in the social and philanthropic sectors that, after a while, gets so used that it risks losing all definition and value. To try and avoid that, this piece sets a definition from the start.

When talking about the concept of Place, we don’t really mean geography. If we did, then everything could be place-based or about place, because everything happens in a (geographic) place (even when accessing an online service, you’re sitting somewhere). And so it is more than mere geography.

There are also lots of different ways to apply and use the concept of Place, and so a too tight definition would be limiting to a provocative and inclusive conversation. Our starting point will be that:

Place is an invented and, therefore, contested understanding and experience of a geography.

Place-based work is the application of the concept of Place to social change. At this point we will define place-based work with two foundations:

1. **Place-based work is social change that emerges from and is defined by the relationship between an uncontested geography (the borough of Camden, the neighbourhood of Harold Wood) and the contested experiences and understanding that different stakeholders (residents, service providers, statutory bodies, workers, funders) have of that geography.**

   It is defined by hard parameters but contains multitudes of different perspectives and experiences. We both know what we mean when we talk about Camden, but my Camden will never be the same as yours. Place-based work starts with acknowledging that difference, and by taking an interest in the opportunities and challenges of it.

2. **Place-based work is primarily about relationships and is never limited to any one need (homelessness, unemployment, poor mental health) or any one solution (charity X, Council Y, community group Z, digital tool A).**

   It may start with a need or be initiated by one organisation or group in a place, but it doesn’t stop there, and doesn’t try to replicate or sustain that organisation or model. Place-based work instead engages with other needs and solutions that relate to the starting point. How that is done, who decides where to start or stop is up for debate, but place-based is potentially inclusive of all issues, assets, and organisations within the place. As a result, place-based work considers the relationships between issues, organisations, and assets.

Once you have those two building blocks, there are lots of ways you can cut the ‘place’ cake, and lots of ways you can do place-based working.

Approaches to place-based work

At Renaisi, we use the following five categories as a way to think about place-based approaches. They may all be ways to use the language of place, but they come from very different perspectives and understanding of how social change happens within contested geographies. A funder could have funds or programmes that emerge from different categories and they can complement each other, but it is unlikely that any one programme can genuinely be from more than one category.

1. **Place as regeneration** – this is a view of social change that is about fixing a problem that has affected the economy of the whole place: “that place needs regenerating”. It negatively frames the place, and therefore judges the interventions around their value in fixing the problem. It is, as a result, focused a lot on economic value (Green Book methodologies and the What Works for Local Economic Growth sit neatly here). It can be big, developer-led regeneration schemes like King’s Cross, but it can also be smaller approaches to regenerate the local high street of a small town centre through developer or local authority led land deals. This perspective of change looks for a clear economic return on investment, and it is quite linear. It would see the community as a stakeholder to engage and the council as a facilitator. It is good at leveraging significant investment as a result of this approach to change.

2. **Place as targeting** – this is about seeing social change as coming from evidence-based interventions that target resources on places that best fit their approach and work with the context of those areas: “that place lags behind in certain ways” . It can be deficit based, like regeneration, but is typically targeted on a specific social issue or challenge. Place is the way to contain targeting and manage or measure impact, and as a result this type of change may focus more on the programme than the place. It fits with the thinking of the What Works centres, like the Early Intervention Foundation, Education Endowment Fund and others, whereby approaches are tested, replicated and targeted. It can be quite siloed in how it thinks about change in the place.

3. **Place as devolution** – this is a view of change that would result from localising decision making, and potentially tax raising powers, to more local forms of government: “that place needs to take powers back from Whitehall”. It frames the place as being held captive by decision makers that are either malevolent or, more often, not close enough to understand the local realities to make good decisions in service of that place. In this understanding of place local government is crucial; sometimes that would mean municipalism and power in councils, including through in-sourcing, and at other times creating new devolution structures like Metro Mayors and LEPs (these are obviously less about London).

4. **Place as the community** – this is a view of change that sees local residents as the real sources of knowledge, strength and ownership of a place, and any work must be led by them: “that place needs to be led by its community”. It is asset-based in its assumptions, and creates geographies, ownership and decision making strucutres that are legible to local people. Community organising, community development and the (now much maligned) Big Society approach fit within this understanding of place-based social change. The Big Local programme is the biggest single expression of it in the UK, but there are pockets of it everywhere, often far from the eyes of government or foundations.

5. **Place as a system** – this is a view of how social change emerges from systems of relationships between institutions such as public services, charities, and the community in a place. Places are ways to geographically bound and define the system that emerges from those relationships: “that place needs to think about the whole system, not just the parts”. This work explicitly focuses on the second definition from the start of the paper – looking to build relationships across a place and seeing relational and network strength as the whole point. It can be seen in the work of West London Zone and other models that have been influenced by Collective Impact approaches. Not all systems-change is place-based (far from it), but there is a system of relationships and interconnections that exist within a place that can be the focus of an intervention. This approach sees the system as being the way to understand the strengths and challenges of a place, and therefore as the way to understand how change emerges from the relationships.

Common strengths

If we started with a two-part definition of place-based work, and then five different approaches to doing it, what are the common strengths of a place-based approach? In our view it is that Place:

1. resonates with those who live or work there, which helps build a clear and understandable long-term vision

2. encourages consideration of people who are in the place but not in the decision making or delivery room

3. breaks down service silos, bureaucracies, and organisational distinctions by posing different questions about social change to those that are normally asked

4. brings focus on sustaining relationships that engender long term resilience, support and, potentially, systems change.

The role of funders in place-based work

There is an enormous literature on place-based work in general, with a significant international literature as well as a lot of well-known UK examples. This essay does not attempt to summarise that literature, rather to point towards three groups of work that might be of value for funders to use to consider their role. What is common across these pieces of work is the fact that funders can play very different roles in terms of their involvement in places, all of which can have value but understanding what this role is key to doing it effectively.

Previous work of London Funders

London Funders and other partners commissioned IVAR in 2017 to look at the role of funders in place-based work. The reports that came out of that study remain useful today, whether it be the essay, the case studies, or the set of questions that are posed as a framework. Those questions remain a useful starting point for any funder considering their role in place-based work, and how they might approach it.

1. What does ‘place’ mean?
2. Why are you considering using a place-based approach?

3. What contribution are you seeking to make?
4. What is your attitude towards risk and uncertainty?
5. What is your position on impact?
6. What is your existing knowledge of the area?
7. What duration of involvement is required?
8. Where will control sit?
9. What will your role be?
10. Who will you need to work with?
11. What kinds of relationships are required?
12. What commitment of staff and trustee time/effort is needed?

Systems, power, place and learning

Lankelly Chase were a part of that work, and along with others like Corra Foundation, have gone on to be seen as leading funders in how they think about and work in place. Through their own publications, and joint work with their partners such as Northumbria University and Collaborate CIC they have focussed on the role of systems in place-based work. A recent learning report from Lankelly and its learning partner contains a wealth of information about what they have learnt and the central importance of three concepts:

- power (how funders engage in power dynamics);
- support (what support do funders provide); and
- learning (how do funders learn and support learning more widely).

Lankelly has particularly worked in five places, including Barking and Dagenham in London, and Corra Foundation has a couple of approaches in Scotland.

Every One Every Day

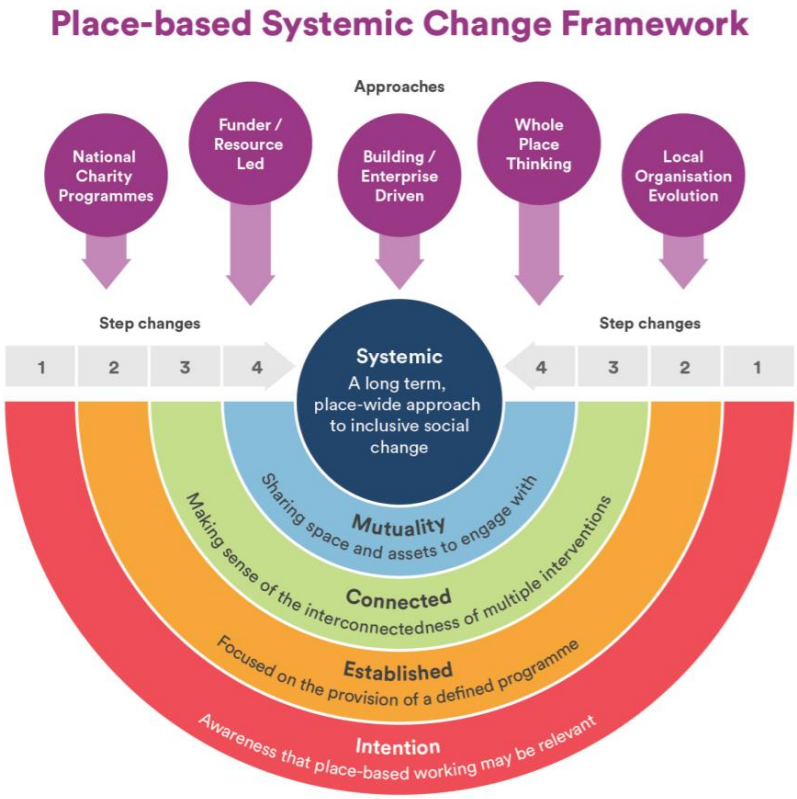
Every One Every Day is a network of 1000s of people living in Barking and Dagenham who are working together on different neighbourhood projects around the borough to make everyday life better for everyone.

This approach has seen funders support a new organisation to bring a new approach to the challenges of a borough that has long been seen as having a weaker level of entrepreneurial and community activity, and a weaker voluntary sector.

https://www.weareeveryone.org/

Funding place-based system change

Renaisi, supported by Save the Children and a steering group of other charities and funders, led a piece of work explore the challenges for funding place-based systemic change. While the content of that research is applied to the ‘system’ approach to place-based work, the framework that was developed is all about understanding the journey towards long term change.



This work built on much of the previous learning, endorsed the questions of IVAR and the core approaches highlighted by Lankelly Chase, and suggested that funders should be seeking to understand the lead organisational appraoch, the step changes needed to move the place along that journey of change, and that the funder should be targeting its resources at those challenging points if it was really interested in supporting place-based change.

Key questions

1. What existing examples and types of place-based work resonate with you as a funder, and which give you **a way to understand this through your existing work**?
2. What about the definition of Place and place-based work feels **alienating or challenging** to you as a funder?
3. What **more do you want to know** about place-based change and the role of funders?

London’s context going into 2022

This section looks from concept to the city itself. What is going on in the capital that may give us opportunities or challenges for using place-based approaches and funding? We highlight five as provocations, rather than as a complete list.

Future scenarios for two inner London boroughs

The work of Impact on Urban Health in exploring future scenarios for Lambeth and Southwark is useful here to stimulate other ideas abut the coming decade in London. While it is specific to those boroughs, many of the trends are worth considering for the capital as a whole.

1. **Politics in the city**: London has been described as an anti-Brexit city, and as a Labour stronghold in the national press. But both ‘average out’, and therefore remove the differences from, the politics of over 9 million people. The key question is what the combination of these national assumptions about London does, when they interact with local elections in 2022, a shorter mayoralty due to Covid, and the kind of political story that the city tells of itself and the rest of the country. Will we see a return to the inner and outer distinctions encouraged by the Prime Minister when he was Mayor? Or a strengthening of local authority leaders that gives more voice to boroughs? Or a return to conversation about strong sub regions within the capital as local authority budgets challenge their ambitions? What will local campaigns about specific development sites and issues like the politics of low-traffic neighbourhoods do to neighbourhood level politics and power? The interplay between politics, narrative and place will be an important one for all funders to consider.

2. **Post-Covid funding landscape**: From politics flows a conversation about money. There are two ways to look at this. Firstly, what has the short term, crisis funding experience of 2020 done to the budgets of funders, and also **how they give** (a growth of local giving schemes), the **relationships** they have with grantees and places (more trust?), more direct **involvement** in work (approaches like LocalMotion questioning the role of funders), and also the **internal practices** of funders (focus on race, equity and inclusion and institutional change). Secondly, what has the politics of post-covid done to how money will come into the capital. ‘Levelling up’ was a term used before Covid, but its usage has increased, and is more often about central government investment in parts of the country that are not London.

3. **Post-Covid community landscape**: Has the shock of Covid done anything to the landscape of the local voluntary and community sectors in the capital? There was evidence and examples all over the country of people coming together to help their neighbours and respond to the unprecedented circumstances, but much of this was never going to be sustained outside of the crisis, and distribution was far from even. At the same time, certain organisations and groups struggled during the pandemic, and their business models will have been weakened. All of this leaves a range of questions for what the community sector landscape looks like now and in the coming months. One thing that does not look like it’s going to go away, is the significant increase in the focus on equity and inclusion across the social sector.

4. **Changes to the London map**: London has long been dominated by the idea of an economic centre, with rings of wealth, economic function, public transport prices, migration patterns and housing prices rippling out. When you dig under the skin of that simple idea, there are obvious practical challenges to it, whether it be the emergence of new economic centres at different points in history, or the role of transport lines and links to disrupt the simple ring. But the idea broadly holds, and so for many people their experience of place in London can be transient, with communities of faith, interest, employment networks or whatever knitting their lives between their current rental, friends in another borough, a family and faith connection on the other side of the city and a social life in Soho. For others, communities have been rooted in a geographic place for generations, and the importance of the idea of that place is a strongly held as anywhere in the rest of the UK. This duality has overlapped for years. Will the longer-term fallout from the pandemic disrupt this? Evidence from the US suggests that people aren’t leaving cities but instead are moving to the edges. Will this happen in London? It is too soon to tell, but it will have a significant influence on the mental map of all Londoners if it does.

5. **Migration into and out of the capital**: What will Brexit, Covid and the economic consequences of both mean for the city’s changing population? During the pandemic there were stories of population decline, but already there is evidence of housing prices rebounding. Is that a sign of people returning, or just a further symptom of a dysfunctional housing market? Evidence from KCL suggests that Londoners are still happy with their city. As well as this, the changes to international migration caused by the combination of Brexit, Covid and migration policies will alter the ways in which people come into and leave the city. It is too early to know what this will look like, but it is happening.

Looking at these five broad ideas there are:

- some **continuing trends** that are an accentuation of a trend that start after the financial crash;
- there are things that may have **appeared significant during the Covid months**, such as self-help groups, that might fall back to old patterns; and
- there are questions about the **changing ideas of places** in London that are unresolved.

When thinking about places and funding, are we overthinking the gravity of an event, and not considering the longer time horizon? That is a hard question to ask when the gravity of the most recent event – Covid – is so significant and strong. Changing the city is a long-term goal.

Key questions

4. What is the **timescale** that matters when considering change in London?
5. What trends genuinely feel new, and might need **different responses**?
6. Which trends and pressures on London have connections to both geography and relationships, so that they would be **relevant to place-based approaches**?
7. What fits with **your role as a funder in London**?

What makes London different?

As funders there are some questions to consider about place-based change in general, and about London in general. But what makes London different and relevant to questions of Place, is what really matters.

The following five areas highlight some issues, opportunities and challenges for thinking about place practically in London, which may stimulate further ideas and approaches.

1. **Healthy economies in the capital**

London’s economy doesn’t stop at a neighbourhood edge. It barely stops at the edge of the 32 boroughs, with a much larger commuter geography.

As a result, it can be hard to think about economic development for a place in London compared to, for example, a town in northern England. Local government often focusses its work on supporting individuals around skills and employment (developing the skills supply side), or through the bringing forward of specific sites in partnership with others for development. Both of these pull away from whole place thinking, towards individuals or wider economies.

The Mayor has a role that allows for cross city working. But questions of inward investment and wealth building are not the same as in Preston, for example, where approaches could focus on bringing in more public sector spend to Preston owned businesses.

So what is possible and relevant for places, in relation to the work of local government and the Mayor? Every One Every Day, highlighted earlier, takes a place-based approach to small scale economic and social activity. There are other place-based approaches to investing into the social economy rather than the whole economy.

Local Access

The Access Foundation is supporting the social economy in six places, including in Southwark. The Southwark partnership is exploring how to invest in the black and women led social enterprises of the borough to develop the economy and tackle significant issues of equity in ownership and assets.

These two approaches connect economic questions to other questions, such as health inequalities, community resilience, equity and poverty. They have to be about more than one thing to work in a place-based way. It is a long way from London, but a recent piece in the FT on the work of the Onion Collective in North Somerset highlights this interconnectedness, and requirement to think differently about economies.

2. **Community connection in the city**

Many communities across the capital have little connection to any one part of the map of the city. They might be members of a faith, religious, family, or interest community that has several hubs, meets in central London at times, and is more connected by digital media. The idea of place feels distant to them.

Digital communities particularly challenge this, and there will be a whole range of ways in which people may feel more connected to social change that moves from London to Lagos, rather than within Lewisham.

That being said, Big Local approaches and work like that of the Cares Family began in London, and Little Village is in three boroughs. Community connection matters greatly, and questions of mutuality, loneliness and building networks are just as relevant to London as other places. The challenge is how to build them in a way that are relevant to the whole place, and not just one sub community.

The Cares Family

The Cares Family helps people find connection and community in a disconnected age.

It started in North London (Camden and Islington) in 2011, moved to South London (Lambeth and Southwark), before growing to Liverpool and Manchester, and recently adding a fifth charity in East London (Hackney and Tower Hamlets). Through befriending and social clubs, it attempts to build meaningful connection within communities.

Cares, on its own, is not place-based by definition, but explores many of the questions that might be asked in a place-based approach to social change, and could be a significant part of such approaches.

https://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk/

3. Childhood and family development in the city

Growing up in London is not the same as growing up in other places, but at the same time, the growth of scale of mental maps from the home, to the street, to park, to school, to town centre and beyond to city is the same for many children. This growing scale, alongside the linear journey through education and out of the family home, means that approaches to supporting children and families in a place-based way are found the world over, many being inspired by Harlem Children’s Zone.

What is common to all of these approaches to place and children, is the interrelationship between education, the wellbeing of children, and **wider issues of poverty**. The costs of childcare and child-poverty make this particularly relevant in London. There are lots of other ways to look at poverty in London, but children and families is particularly pertinent.

Feltham Reach, Cradle to Career

An approach which began with a school in Hounslow, and then began to look both earlier and later than school years in children’s lives, and also out into the wider community and what happens around the school day, has grown into a foundation influencing thinking and practice.

https://www.reach-c2c.org/model

Pembury Children’s Community

A partnership between a housing association (Peabody), the local authority (Hackney Council) and a national charity, (Save the Children UK), saw the development of an approaching to supporting the children and families in a particular estate around a wide range of issues and concerns from 2015.

https://www.peabody.org.uk/neighbourhoods/whats-on-at-pembury/pembury-children-s-community

4. System change for policy in London

The opportunities of being a global city can mean that some of the systems that are influencing the capital can feel a long way from the levers of local control. There is amazing wealth and opportunity, but the forces that dictate people’s lives can feel more about international questions than local politics and relationships.

As part of the New Deal for Communities programme in the 2000s in South Islington, Renaisi had significant resource for community-led place-based change, but the land values and pressures of the proximity of the City shaped how much the programme could do about housing, education, or the use of buildings for community economic development. London’s scale can overpower place-based work, to the extent that it can feel like the wrong tool for a systemic problem.

This question of the right tool for the right problem is perhaps best seen in questions of poverty. The relational potential of Place can be valuable for service connection and development, new local ideas, and local growth approaches. But it can’t replace a £20 a week loss of Universal Credit, nor can it (as JRF have been exploring) change how poverty is framed.

At its best, place-based change engages in the wider local system. But not all systems are about place, and so not all problems can be solved by place.

5. Strong place-based infrastructure but also strong national-based infrastructure

London’s community infrastructure in many places is very busy, crowded by small groups, interest networks, old charities and new ideas. In those places it can be hard to start something place-based when there is a need to build consensus in approach.

In other places, it can feel quiet and under-resourced. In those places, it can feel like the opposite – difficult to find partners and build relationships, and equally difficult to find funders.

London is also crowded by national organisations and institutions based in the centre of the city.

There is an uneven, crowded space of ideas, of organisations, and of power. Power and relationships are everything in place-based work and London has a lot of it going on.

Key questions

8. Would place-based work only be possible in **certain parts of the city**?
9. Which issues should be treated with other approaches?
10. **Where are the opportunities to build from**, and is building from existing work what funders want to do?

Conclusions and broad areas to explore

This document has not tried to be a complete review of place-based work in London, nor an exhaustive list of potential approaches or questions. It has, instead, pointed to the issues influencing place, influencing London, and how they might interact. It is designed to stimulate a conversation and a deeper exploration for funders about what their role could and should be.

In looking across the issues highlighted, there are three broad areas of questions that may be a useful starting point for conversation

Defining the place and issue through relationships and power

London is one city, 32 boroughs, inner and outer, a set of sub regions, four ordinal points, a city of villages, a place defined by transport nodes and much more. It goes from a total population of over 9million to an average ward size of around 13-14,000.

If you were to take a place-based approach in the capital, is there a right scale?

Scale is not unimportant in place-based work, but often it is a distraction from the more important questions of the relationships and power between issues, geographies, organisations. In choosing to invest in places, funders are adding a new relationship and a new power dynamic to multi-layered existing ones. Engaging in that fully and honestly is just as (more?) important as drawing a red line around a place.

Issues that are particular to London and place

What is common to all the examples in this paper and is relevant to London, is the issue of equity. If place-based work is centred on relationships, equity is central to getting it right. This is important for London and the issues the city faces.

But not everything can be solved with place-based approaches. Identifying the issues that would benefit from the strengths of place-based work is crucially important.

Intentionality of funders

Implicit in all the questions raised in this essay is the importance of funders being intentional about their role. Place-based approaches require clear, active engagement in critically exploring a funder’s role. It is not like the role of a more passive funder who waits for applications following a funding call. Even if that funding call was geographically bounded, a more passive funder can never be place-based in the way described here.

What does that intentionality mean, and is the whole organisation ready for it, are, two central questions for any funder engaging in place-based work.

About Renaisi

We’re passionate about creating the conditions for strong, inclusive communities to thrive.

We’re constantly learning from the different perspectives we see working directly with communities, with the providers of services and the investors in communities. It gives us a unique perspective on how systems work and how to improve places equitably.

The combination of our research and evaluation consultancy with employment & advice programme delivery, makes Renaisi a uniquely well-rounded learning partner for the voluntary and community sector.

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