Social innovation in Corby: Past, present and future

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THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

SOCIAL LIFE

Introduction

This report brings together the results of a participatory process aimed at developing social innovations for Corby - new ideas to tackle some of the challenges facing the town. The process, centred on a series of workshops, was designed to replicate some of the enabling conditions for successful social innovation. Namely, by creating a collaborative process where ideas for future innovation were grounded in the local context.

In the first workshop, participants identified Corby's strengths and weaknesses, establishing a clearer picture of the town's challenges. These are documented in our earlier report *Understanding Corby: A Social Sustainability Assessment*.[1] The second workshop explored Corby's history of social innovation - the activities and projects which have helped to address social needs in the past. During the final workshop participants worked together to develop a set of practical responses to meet the town's current needs.

This report shares the outcomes of our second and third workshops. In it we set out the history of social innovation in Corby, highlighting some projects which have supported residents in the past and others which continue to do so today. We identify lessons that can be drawn from these traditions of social action. We then share a new set of ideas for social innovations developed by participants during the final workshop. Finally, we highlight a few resources which could be used to develop and test the ideas further.

What?

3 workshops were held in Corby between November 2018 and March 2019. The report also draws on interviews conducted with individuals involved in local organisations.

Who?

34 participants from the voluntary sector, local businesses, and the local authority.

About the project

This report is part of Bright Future, an ESRC-funded project in association with JPI-Europe, working with people in industrial towns in Europe to explore their socioeconomic characteristics, qualities and underlying resilience.

Bright Future is exploring how locally-driven social innovation can help respond to the needs of industrial towns across the continent. The research will also inform a set of policy recommendations geared towards supporting industrial towns to thrive in the future.

Social Life and The Young Foundation are the UK partners on Bright Future.

1 Social Life (2019). *Understanding Corby: A Social Sustainability Assessment*. Report can be accessed at: http://www.social-life.co/publication/ UnderstandingCorby_SocialSustainabilityAssessment/

What is social innovation?

Our understanding of social innovation encompasses a range of features:

- They can be both wholesale new ideas, or projects and initiatives which are new to a place or context

- They can take an array of forms, such as campaigns, digital platforms, new products, services or regulations

- They are context specific - new ideas arise out of specific circumstances and are driven by particular needs

- While ideas often come through the third sector, they can be driven by a range of actors, including individual citizens, government bodies and businesses

- Cooperation and the relationships between different actors are also central to their effectiveness

- They can be incremental, building on existing knowledge and resources, or radical - a significant depature from what was there before

- Social innovation should be considered both a process as well as a set of particular interventions or outcomes.
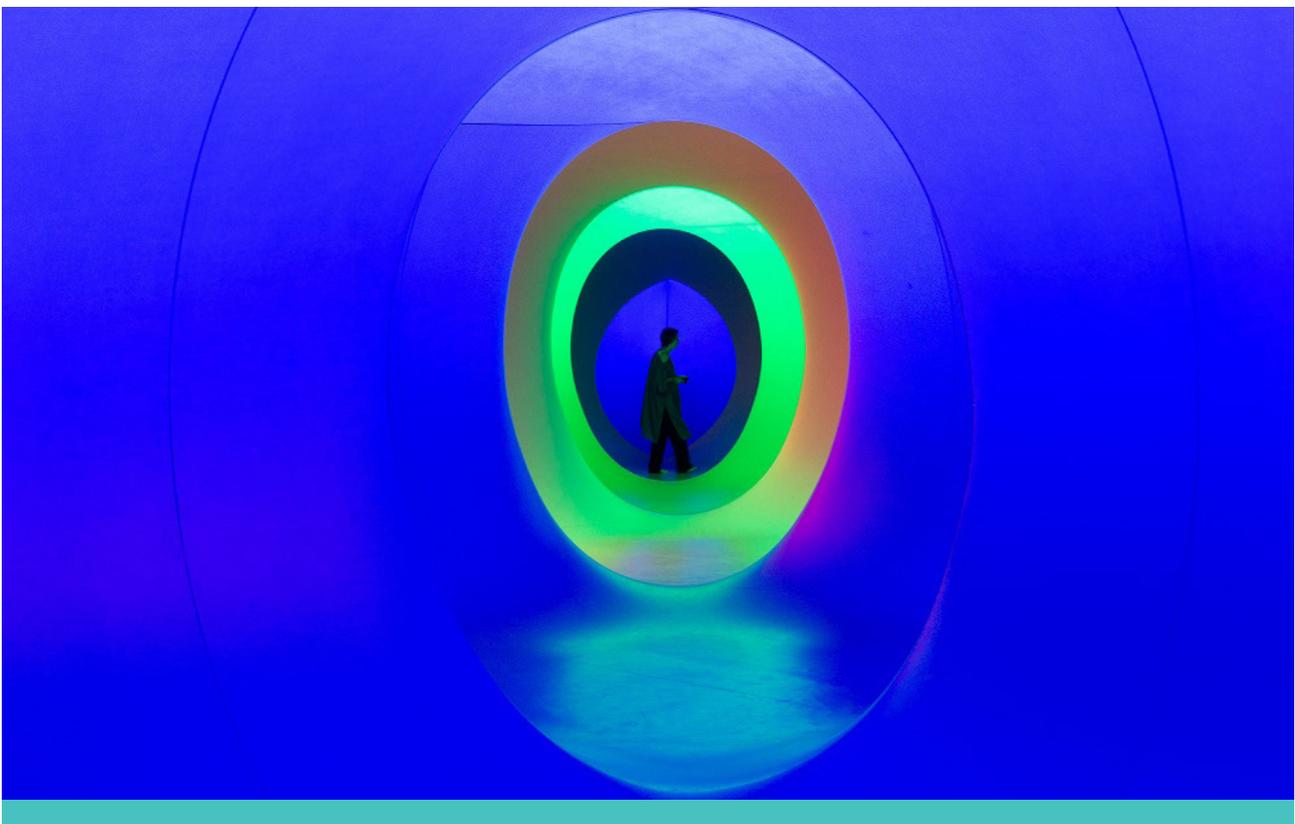
The Colourscape at Grow Festival 2018. The festival is organised by Made in Corby, a participatory arts initiative reshaping how people access culture in Corby. Source: Pam Clipston and Mark McAnaw.

Social innovation in Corby: a short history

I n this section we explore how new ideas and projects have responded to the changing needs of the town, echoing the upheavals faced by Corby over the past century. This history highlights how initiatives are shaped by Corby's changing economic, civic and social architecture, which helps define the opportunities and resources available for social action.

Corby: the steel town

From the 1930s Corby grew from a village to the centre of Britain's steel industry. During this period of rapid growth, Corby shared many of the characteristics of company towns, built and populated for the demands of a single local employer. It was under the auspices of Stewart & Lloyds steelworks and its associated unions that much of Corby's social infrastructure developed, from the calender of community events, to its trade and labour clubs. Many social innovations borne of this time also spoke to the heritage of the town's population of recent migrants. Among these, the annual Highland Games, and Grampian and Irish clubs still exist today.

In 1950 Corby was designated a 'New Town', its modernist town centre exemplified the civic ambition characteristic of the New Town project. The wellbeing and needs of a growing population living in the shadow of heavy industry drove new social and cultural initiatives. Corby's Festival Hall was the largest cultural centre in the East Midlands, its programme of events enabled by the sponsorship of the steel industry. In the early 1970s a boating lake was created near the town centre, the first open water space accessible to its citizens.

Timeline

The examples of social innovation listed here were shared by workshop participants or encountered through other research. They are only a selection of the rich history of innovation and social action in the town.

1972 ● **Boating Lake**

1973 ● **Play Leadership Scheme**

1977 ● **Corby Car Pool**

Corby & the steelworks.

From left: ROSAC Campaign against the steelworks closure. Source: Corby Community Arts. Regeneration in Corby: the Coby Cube and the East Midlands International Swimming Pool.

1979	Save Corby Steel Campaign
1980	Corby Community Arts
1982	Beanfield Community Centre
1983	Pen Green Centre
1994	Late Developers Photographers

Social solidarity and the steelworks closure

By the late 1970s the steelworks were threatened with closure and a campaign was mounted by the unions. Local networks galvanised to support striking steelworkers and their families, through initiatives such as a soup kitchen and a strikers' supermarket.

The closure of much of the steelworks in 1981 created significant unemployment and a decline in the local population. Growing social needs provided the impetus for new social innovations. The Beanfield Community Centre was created by a local church, it was a first of its kind, a holistic space catering to the needs of different generations and interests, including the town's newly-unemployed residents. This period also saw the creation of the Pen Green Centre, a pioneering family centre offering integrated early years services. In 2018, Pen Green was awarded the Times Educational Supplement (TES) School of the Year in recognition of its global leadership in early years practice.

Regeneration and growth

2001	Catalyst Corby
2005	Rejuvenation of West Glebe Park
2011	Electric Corby
2015	Love Corby
2017	Oakley Vale Sculpture Park

The early 2000s saw the development of a new strategy to reanimate the town. Partnership working would be the basis for sustained and large scale regeneration. Catalyst Corby brought together actors from across sectors to deliver major projects in the town centre, including the construction of the Corby Cube and the East Midlands Swimming Pool. Social innovations of this period and following years, such as Love Corby and Electric Corby, reflected this ambitious drive to recast Corby into a forward-looking town by working in partnership across the private and public sectors.

A new housing-led growth strategy was also devised. Its successful implementation has seen the rapid expansion of the town through the creation of a series of urban extensions, new neighbourhoods with distinct needs from more established parts of Corby. The desire to forge a sense of identity and build community within these new developments has spurred a number of recent local projects, such as the Oakley Vale Sculpture Park.

BMX rider in Adrenaline Alley, a social enterprise which has become Europe's largest indoor urban sports venue. Source: Adrenaline Alley.
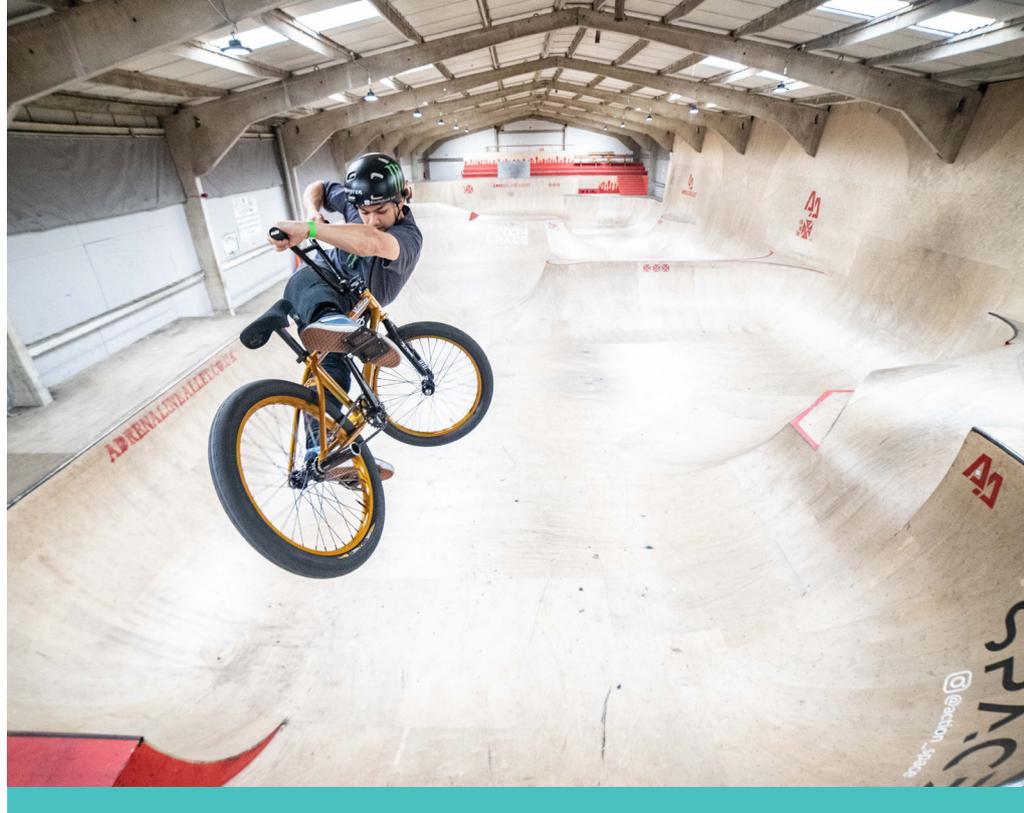
Citizen-led initiatives and new voluntary sector models

2011 Corby Heritage Centre

2012 Rooftop Arts
KHL Big Local

2013 Access Corby

2014 Made in Corby
The Compound

2016 PLUTO Project

2017 Save Corby Urgent Care Campaign

2018 Corby Climbing Centre
Sharing the Kindness

New voluntary sector projects have proliferated in recent years, responding to ongoing social challenges, including a lack of opportunity for young people, anti-social behaviour and mental health issues.

While funding cuts have affected many initiatives, new funding models have enabled some organisations to better weather reductions in statutory funding. Adrenaline Alley is a local social enterprise which has become the largest indoor urban sports centre in Europe, visitor revenues support its activities providing opportunities for young people. Another means of supporting the third sector is being developed by Access Corby, a platform which enables small voluntary organisations to bid together for public sector contracts. Digital technologies have also enabled new forms of social solidarity, evident in online crowd-funding campaigns, like the Save Corby Urgent Care campaign, and digital support groups, such as Sharing the Kindness.

In recent years, many projects have sought to ensure the town's physical regeneration is met with cultural renewal. Made in Corby, a community-led arts programme is seeking to widen participation, by supporting innovative arts projects capable of reaching new audiences. Other initiatives, such as Corby Heritage Centre and the PLUTO project, have also sought to build a renewed sense of pride and local identity by engaging residents in the town's history.

Recent examples of social innovation in Corby

JAM Team

Two local policewomen developed this new model for community safety to deal with the high levels of anti-social behaviour in some Corby neighbourhoods. Through youth outreach services, the JAM team responds to incidents of anti-social behaviour ahead of police, helping to de-escalate the situation and avoiding the criminalisation of young people. Its impact has been evidenced in reduced levels of anti-social behaviour in the areas where it operates.

Sharing the Kindness

This Facebook group allows local residents to make and request donations or other acts of support from other Corby citizens. In under a year the group has grown to 13,000 members with many acts of kindness made every day, often to those in need locally.

Rooftop Arts Centre

A community arts centre created in Corby's former library building. It offers affordable artists studios, alongside a cultural offering for the town, with a programme of events, exhibitions and other activities. It has become a focus for local arts and ensures that a space that might otherwise be derelict is kept in use.

Oakley Vale Rangers

The Rangers were created by a community association in response to complaints of anti-social behaviour on one of Corby's new housing developments. Young people in the project were offered guitar lessons in exchange for community service, such as litter-picking. At the request of participants, the project soon evolved into a rock band which practices weekly at the community centre.

From left: Corby Living Legends exhibition at Rooftop Arts Centre, documenting the town's unsung heroes. Source: Made in Corby. Oakley Vale Rangers. Source: Paul Balmer.

Key themes

Corby's history of social innovation points to a number of trends which have characterised previous social action. These could present both opportunities and challenges for future innovation:

Partnership working

Many initiatives have been created and maintained by partnerships with the third sector, the local authority and local businesses. Corby's scale, its local authority structures, and its close networks have facilitated this kind of partnership-working. However there are concerns that increased competition for funds can undermine the basis for collaboration.

Drawing in funding

Corby has been adept at attracting in external resources, from large scale regeneration funding, to targeted national grant pots. Expertise has built locally around tapping into such opportunities, yet as access to European funds ends and austerity continues to reduce public sector budgets, Corby's third sector will continue to face significant challenges. The difficulty of sustaining existing projects, even those making a good impact, was also highlighted, with funding often favouring novelty over continuity.

Town-based initiatives

Many projects have been developed at a town or neighbourhood level, rather than a regional basis. This local lens helps ensure projects are relevant to conditions in Corby but it also poses challenges. Local political configurations are set to change with the introduction of a unitary authority and the abolishment of the borough council. In the future, resources may increasingly be deployed on a regional basis and some local groups will need to adapt.

Emblematic local projects

A few distinctive social innovations often feature in residents accounts of the town, and are felt to be illustrative of Corby and its achievements. In this way organisations such as Adrenaline Alley or the Pen Green Centre produce outcomes beyond those they set out to achieve, helping build pride in the town - which is felt to be a key need locally - and acting as showcases for external audiences. Initiatives such as Corby's Living Legends have helped more of these stories be told.

Catering to niche interests

Many successful local social innovations have catered to a niche interest, rather than seeking to engage a wider audience. Among these a photography group for women offered participants a safe space for experimentation, while 'The Compound', a calisthenics gym, has brought together young people from different ethnic groups. They demonstrate how communities of interest have the potential to cross-cut traditional social divides and forge lasting relationships.

Ideas for the future

The ideas below were devised by participants during our final workshop. Participants worked in groups focused on different local needs of their choosing. These were a lack of opportunities for young people, poor mental health and wellbeing, and negative perceptions of the town. Groups were first tasked with defining the need and problem in greater detail. They then generated a range of ideas for social innovations, before selecting an idea to develop in more detail.
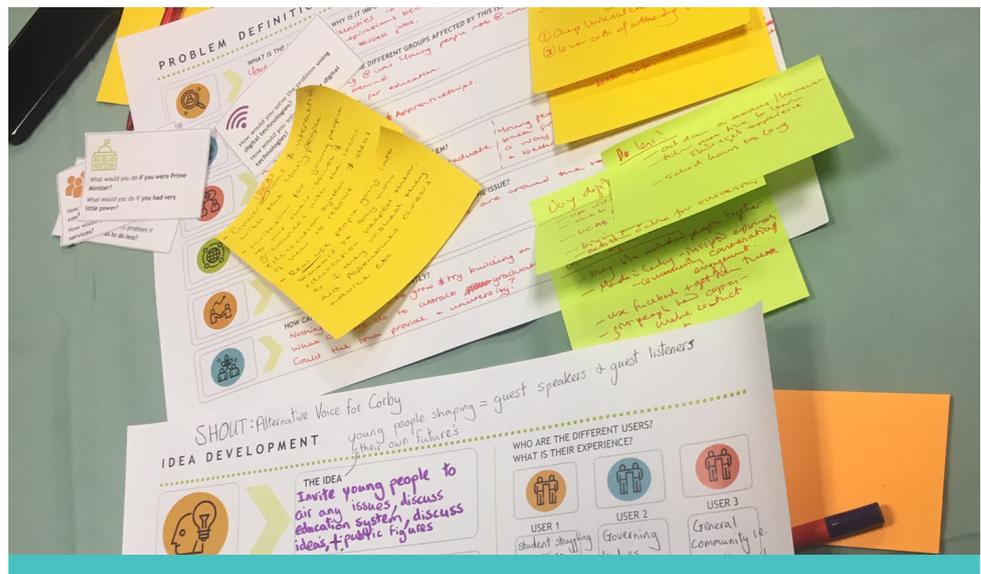
The Corby Pound

What's the need?

This group focused on Corby's weak tourist economy and the relationships between this and negative preconceptions of the town, which the group linked to a poor awareness of Corby's history and heritage.

What's the idea?

The Corby Pound takes its inspiration from other local currencies in the UK, which have been designed to help ensure that money spent locally, stays in the local economy. The group recognised that local currencies also act as emblematic social innovations, helping to attract external interest and develop a sense of local identity. The design of the coinage and notes was considered an opportunity to increase awareness of Corby's heritage. It was also felt that the Corby Pound could enable collaboration and networks to build between local businesses.

Online/Offline walks

What's the need?

This group sought to address growing challenges relating to mental wellbeing in the town, which they linked to cuts to adult social care and other services. A lack of joined up thinking and the time limited nature of many local projects were both factors considered to be excerbating the issue.

What's the idea?

Use social media to organise walks in and around Corby which are open for all to participate, helping tackle social isolation and promoting physical activity. A start time, location and route would be shared through existing contacts and networks, bringing relationships forged online into the offline world. For those with difficulties engaging in social settings, the act of walking itself enables easier conversations and interactions than 'face-to-face' situations, helping build confidence and overcome anxiety around social interactions.

Corby Community Forum

What's the need?

This group aimed to improve social integration in Corby, in particular to tackle a concern around a lack of engagement between ethnic minority groups and the longstanding community. Corby's high vote to leave the European Union and the withdrawal of funding for ESOL courses were felt to be exacerbating the problem. Wider challenges in Corby, such as a lack of affordable housing, was also identified as contributing to tensions between groups.

What's the idea?

Create a community forum to bring together different groups to share experiences and build understanding. The forum would allow people of different backgrounds to meet and participate in conversations to help shape town. It would provide a focus for developing projects and services which contribute to improved community cohesion and integration.

Shout! Alternative voice for Corby

What's the need?

This group felt that a lack of decent opportunities for young people after school is driving many to leave the town, while others remain stuck in low paid work with low aspirations for the future. The group decided that young people needed to play a greater role in shaping their own future.

What's the idea?

A youth-led community conversation focused on the challenges faced by young people in Corby. This would be conducted through various forums, including 'guest listener' sessions, where those with decision-making power in the town would come hear from young people about their concerns. Engagement through schools and other youth spaces and services was also suggested. The conversations would raise the concerns of young people with those shaping the services that affect them. They would also offer an opportunity for young people to build their confidence and experience.

YAPP

What's the need?

Participants in this group were concerned that young people in Corby have low aspirations, which they linked to a perception that the town lacks opportunity. This group felt that there are already many projects for young people locally, however a lack of awareness is a key barrier to participation.

What's the idea?

An app designed for local young people which would be a 'one stop shop' for information on events, activities and services they can access locally, helping young people know what is out there. The process of designing and building the app itself would be an opportunity for local young people to develop their skills.

Our reflections

**The workshops produced a practical set of proposals for the town.** Projects such as the online/offline walks could be implemented at low cost by a small group of people, offering a model which might be resilient to changes in funding. Many participants expressed a desire to explore their ideas further in collaboration with others. Several also reported that the workshops helped build relationships and networks in the town, both with individuals working in similar fields, and others who they might not typically encounter. Crucially, it is both relationships, alongside new ideas, which can help form the basis for future social innovations in Corby.

Several ideas focused on voice as a key mechanism for social change. Focusing innovation around inclusive spaces for dialogue and participation, as proposed by the Corby Community Forum, highlights how social innovation can be considered a process as well as a particular product or outcome. In doing so it helps build the capacity to act within a place or sector, by forging new networks and relationships. The team behind YAPP, an app for young people in Corby, also recognised the potential of the means of social innovations. They proposed that young people would be engaged in designing and building the software, gaining experience and skills in the process.

Some ideas offered parallels with innovations that have worked well in other settings. For example, the Shout! Project proposes a reversal of traditonal roles through 'guest listener' sessions, where those who hold power and authority listen to the concerns of young people. This is similar to People's Assemblies or truth projects, which have been credited with changing local understandings of challenges and needs, and helping engagement with local democracy. Likewise, the Corby Pound draws on the lessons of other local currences in the UK and community wealth building or circular economy exercises. Building on previous experiences can provide a good foundation for local innovation and help make the case for implementing new approaches and sharing resources.
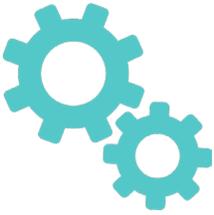
Further resources

Here is a selection of resources for developing and testing new ideas, from online toolkits to courses and funding sources.

Doing social innovation: A guide for practitioners, TEPSIE

Provides an overview of what social innovation is, who does it and why it's important.

https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Practitioner-Report_FINAL-FOR-WEB.pdf

DIY Toolkit, NESTA

The DIY toolkit features 30 practical social innovation tools that can be used to help generate, develop, adapt or test ideas.

https://diytoolkit.org/

Digital social innovation toolkit, NESTA

Collaboratively designed toolkit which helps project scale

https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/launching-the-digital-social-innovation-toolkit/

Method Deck, Social Innovation Lab Kent

Collection of methods, principles and prompt cards to help design, develop and test ideas.

https://socialinnovation.typepad.com/silk/silk-method-deck.html

UnLtd

Organisation offering funding and support to social entrepreneurs at different stages of setting up or scaling down their projects.

https://www.unltd.org.uk/

School for Social Entrepreneurs

Offer a range of courses and networks for social entrepreneurs.

https://www.the-sse.org/

About the project partners

Social Life is an independent research organisation that aims to put people at the art of places. We work with local authorities, developers and local community groups in the UK and across the globe to find practical ways to build stronger communities.
www.social-life.co

The Young Foundation aims to develop better connected and more sustainable communities across the UK. We are a multi-disciplinary team, bringing together research, investment, innovation and community development covering a range of themes, from place-based work, to inequality and support for young people.
www.youngfoundation.org

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