

Place and Evidence *in the UK*

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Foreword

This work was collectively commissioned by a group of practitioners with expertise and interest in how, and how well, place-based work is being evidenced.

Place Matters convened the Group, inviting experts in evaluation, learning, measurement, practice development, and the delivery of change in places to participate as stewards of this collective challenge. The work was funded through a grant from Impact on Urban Health and through Place Matters' core funding from Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the National Lottery Community Fund. We thank them for their generous support.

The challenge that brought the Stewardship Group together is a shared concern that, despite a growing interest in place-based work, the lack of agreement about what constitutes good evidence around the impact and value of place-based work is holding back confidence in investing in communities to lead local change, particularly from cash-strapped local and regional public sector organisations needing to justify tough spending choices. Many community organisations that receive funding believe the demands for data don't reflect what they consider important and relevant in evidencing effective change. Equally, evaluation evidence is very mixed in nature and quality, making it challenging to learn across place-based approaches. In this still emerging field of community-centred, place-based change, we need to develop evidence, learning, and evaluation practices to build the quality of evidence necessary to strengthen place-based working.

This requires identifying gaps in our knowledge and understanding, and developing meaningful, relevant forms of evidence and insight to plug these gaps and grow the field. This work is a start to this process.

This work has achieved a definitional framework that enables greater precision in understanding the field of place-based change and provides a platform for researchers, evaluators and practitioners to build upon. Two key elements of the work are the typologies of place-based work developed around a series of dimensions, including the mechanisms of change they use and an analysis of evidential practice per typology. The typologies of place-based change identify the drivers of difference that inform what types of evidence are most appropriate. The mechanisms of change then orient the focus of evidence to the means through which change is created. This is essential in complex, systemic work where clear outcomes often take longer to measure than the duration of specific programmes or funding.

We invite those engaging with the framework to share how it is being put into practice, along with case studies and other content that will enrich the platform for the field of practice. This Substack site serves as an open community space and you are invited to contribute to it.

placeandevidence.substack.com

We thank John Hitchin and Anna Waldie from Stories of Change and Michael Little from Ratio for the considerable thought and effort that has gone into this work and look forward to engaging with and developing the framework as partners in practice.

The Stewardship Group on Evidence in Place-based Change

place
matters



Impact
on Urban
Health



collaborate
for social change



Summary

This report presents an argument that to better understand the evidence to support place-based change, we need to better understand what place-based change is, by what it does. In doing that, the evidence question becomes clearer.

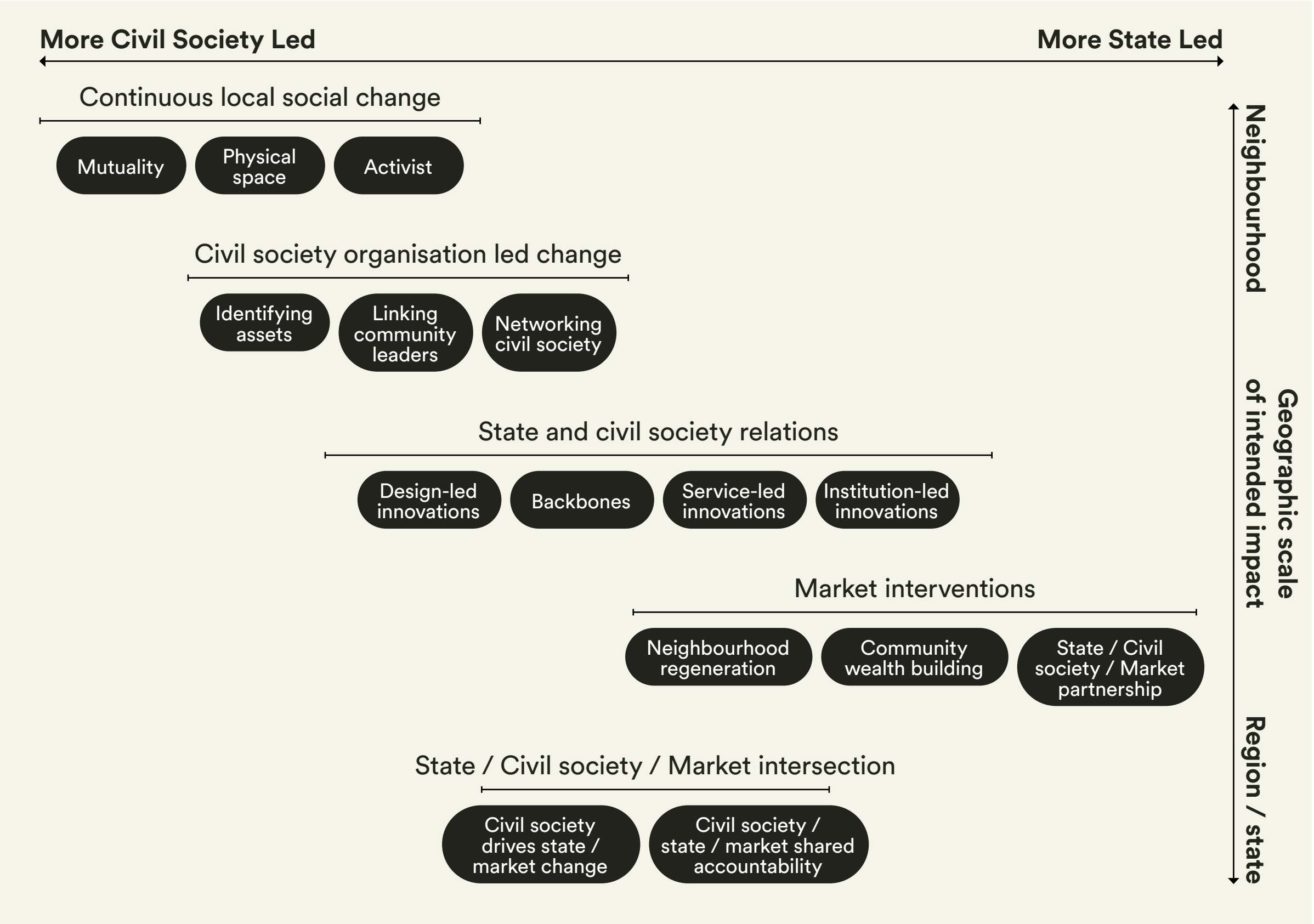
The heart of the work is five categories of place-based change that should be seen as helping us to understand the field of work through approaches of change. It is not trying to categories every place or organisation, rather showing the range and nature of practice that exists. Much place-based research is rightly rooted in the places, but this work is explicitly trying to look across the field.

Our significant hope is that these categories help those leading, funding, researching and working with place to think more critically about the practice, and to be part of an approach that builds the field, the language and the impact of what we believe can be a powerful force for change and support in our communities.

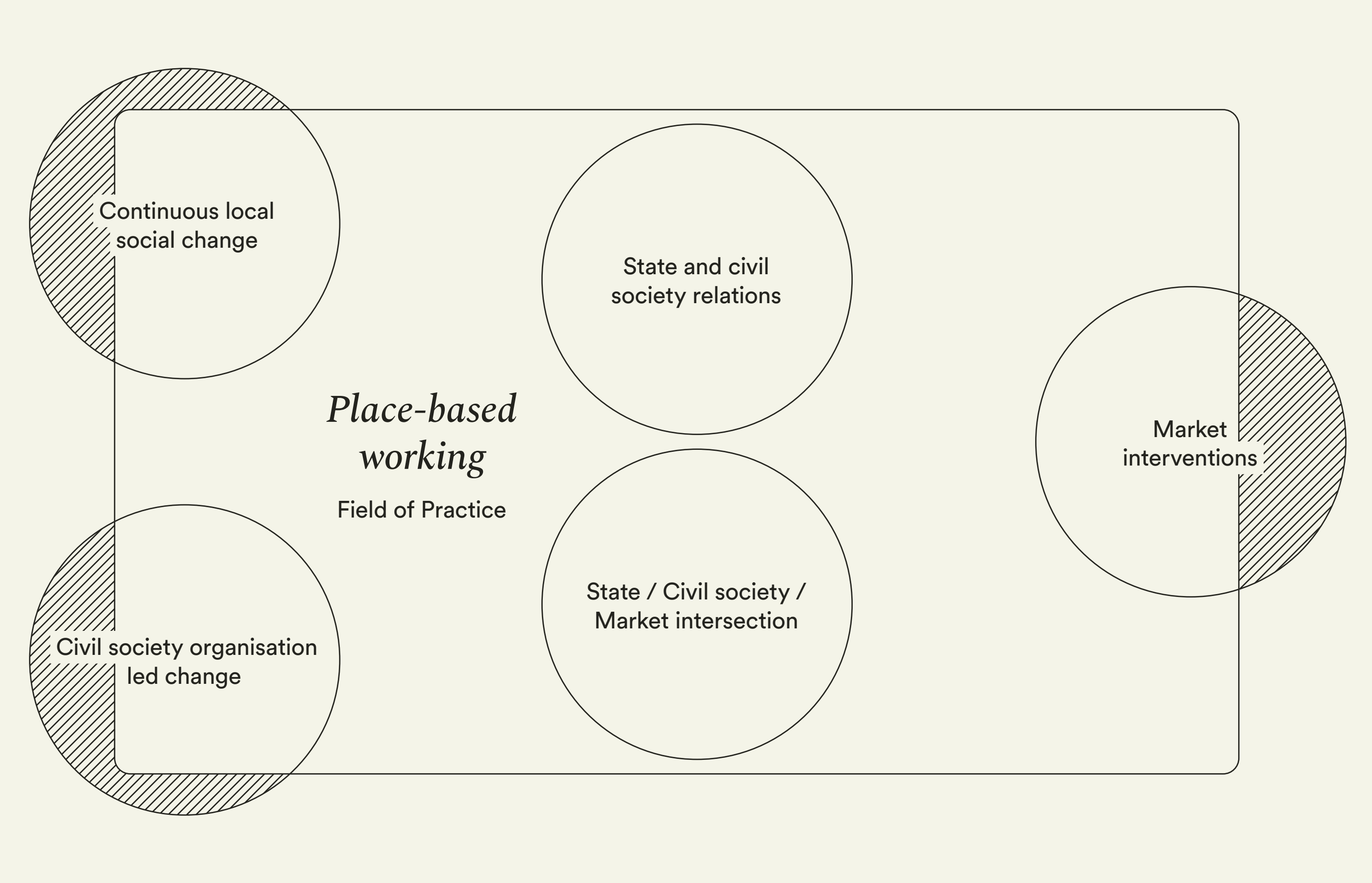
There are three key tools to understand how to navigate this work:

1. A table summarising the five categories we develop in chapter three.
2. A diagram showing the sorts of approaches to change (we use the language of mechanisms in this report), that sit within the categories, and how they can be understood in their relationship to civil society, and their scale of impact.

Category	In a nutshell
Category one	Self-organising communities working to improve their place.
Category two	Charities and community organisations using their assets to support the development of social, relational and community capital.
Category three	Service delivery organisations working to improve outcomes for sub-groups and simultaneously driving wider change through engaging and influencing both civil society and state actors.
Category four	Driving larger-scale change through meaningfully connecting smaller areas to economic growth and shifts in markets.
Category five	Large scale, ambitious projects (often philanthropy-led) that use a combination of mechanisms to solve 'wicked problems' in places.



3. A diagram mapping out how those categories create a field, showing the kinds of work that we feel is clearly within place-based change, and that which maybe overlaps with other kinds of practice and isn’t so neatly in the field.



As stated throughout this report, this is a starting point, not the final word. We are excited to build on this work with the many individuals, organisations and communities who are making it real and driving change in communities up and down the UK.



John Hitchin
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October 2025

Introduction: A call for better evidence for place-based change

Much social policy focuses on helping people to achieve a specific change, improving their health, or education, or income. Place-based change works *around* people: changing the social and physical infrastructure that connects them, relationships between individuals and between them and public institutions, shared norms and behaviours, and much more. In doing so it works with a different understanding of how social change happens.

Place-based change is well established in the UK. Those with memories of the Blair governments will recall Enterprise zones, Single Regeneration Budgets, Regional Development Agencies, and New Deal for Communities. Later policy shifts towards devolution and public service collaboration within geographies have maintained the focus on place. The current Labour government is returning to the language of place and targeted interventions.

Philanthropic funders have also followed the trend of exploring place in different ways over the last two decades, and many have their own place-based programmes or interventions, and some use the language of place to drive approaches that explore power, agency and community control. It is a full and busy landscape.

Nonetheless, place-based change in the UK is widely considered to lag countries like the US, Canada, and Australia. Practitioners in the UK experience a more fragmented policy and funding landscape, and this limits opportunities for shared methods and learning. As a result, the evidence base is weak, and progress in one place rarely enables progress elsewhere. The UK context discussed further in the Chapter 1.

This report, compiled with the help of Place Matters and practitioners around the UK, focuses on one of these challenges: the nascent evidence base.

It seeks to answer a single question:

What kind of evidence do people who lead, fund, or participate in place-based change need to do their work?

Answering that question led to what many practitioners in this field might consider to be a blindingly obvious finding. There is not one type of place-based change. There are several. And each type is informed by different sets of knowledge and learning tools.

This report develops this finding. It sets out a way of **classifying place-based change**. It describes five categories of work; each rooted in the way change is intended to happen.

This is followed by an analysis of **evidence use in each category**, and how each could better use evidence.

A corollary of this work is a **new definition of place-based change**. The classification also provides a platform on which **communities of practice and knowledge exchange** might be built. And, mindful of the radical changes in data collection, analytics and dissemination building in the wake of the A.I. revolution, there is a **review of future evidence use**.



This is a summary report. More detail can be found on all the issues covered in these pages in the Place & Evidence Substack. The Substack will continue to be used to share deeper dives into the evidence for each category of place-based change, and to apply the findings of this report to better public policy and community work. We invite readers to engage with that work as it evolves, as this report is only a starting point and one which may need revision and rethinking.



01

What do we know
about place-based
change in the UK?



What do we know about place-based change in the UK?

The core principles of place-based change are common across nations: a long-term focus on relationships in a specified place, collaboration between multiple stakeholders, and ambitious, shared objectives for impact. The global evidence base holds examples of extraordinary shifts in population health, education outcomes, economic growth and better relationships between state, market and civil society, alongside misfires and difficulties in delivering this work.

There are great examples of place-based change in the UK, several of which are referenced in this report. But the world does not turn to these shores to learn about the subject in the way that they do to the US, Canada, Australia, and, increasingly, the Global South. What stands in the way? There are at least six confounding factors:

First, UK government is centralised. The idea of giving places agency and autonomy to innovate in a way that is right for that place is more challenging here than in federal or devolved systems.

Second, more than a decade of austerity has weakened local government and civil society, reducing capacity to engage in the complex, time-intensive work required for place-based change.

Third, much place-based change demands government and other state-led institutions to work together with the community sector. The complexity, size and consequent insularity of the NHS and the siloed nature of central, regional and local government departments further hinder cooperation.

Fourth, many important UK place-based initiatives, the New Deal for Communities for example, have benefited from substantial investment but lacked sustained, long-term commitment to realise change beyond the programme horizon. Some communities, such as those classified as 'deprived' according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, may receive multiple sources of funding that don't shift the dial on disadvantage in a more systemic way. This can leave community members feeling fatigued at multiple approaches.

Fifth, the fragmented nature of place-based change in the UK contributes to a lack of professional identity among practitioners, fewer shared frameworks or a common language. The 'Collective Impact' model¹ built in the US and used widely in countries like Australia, has not gained the same traction in the UK as a collective practice framework.

Sixth, there is a lack of larger scale ambition among philanthropic funders. The literature in this field has multiple examples of philanthropic backed place-based programmes generating economic growth, advancing children's development, reducing preventable deaths, and building community power, but none come from the UK, partly due to the size of the UK foundations and partly due to the other factors at play here.

Finally, there is a lack of maturity in the use of evidence to plan, monitor and evaluate place-based change in the UK. In the last decade, there has been a disproportionate focus in central government funded evaluation on demonstrating "what works"² using linear methods and with a focus on clear outcomes that is not always suited to the complexity of place-based policy and the collaborative context of the work.

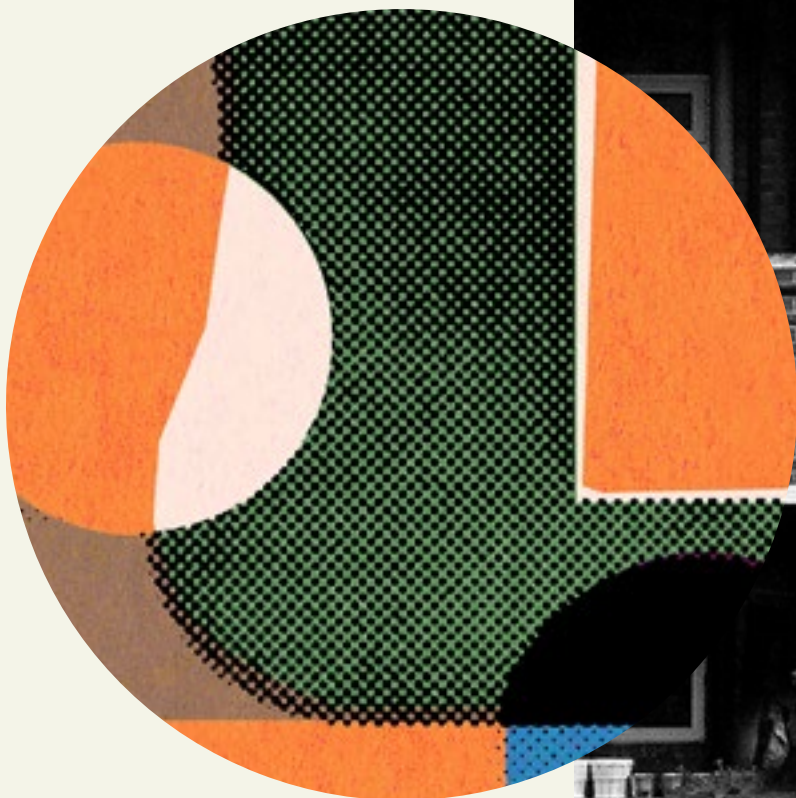
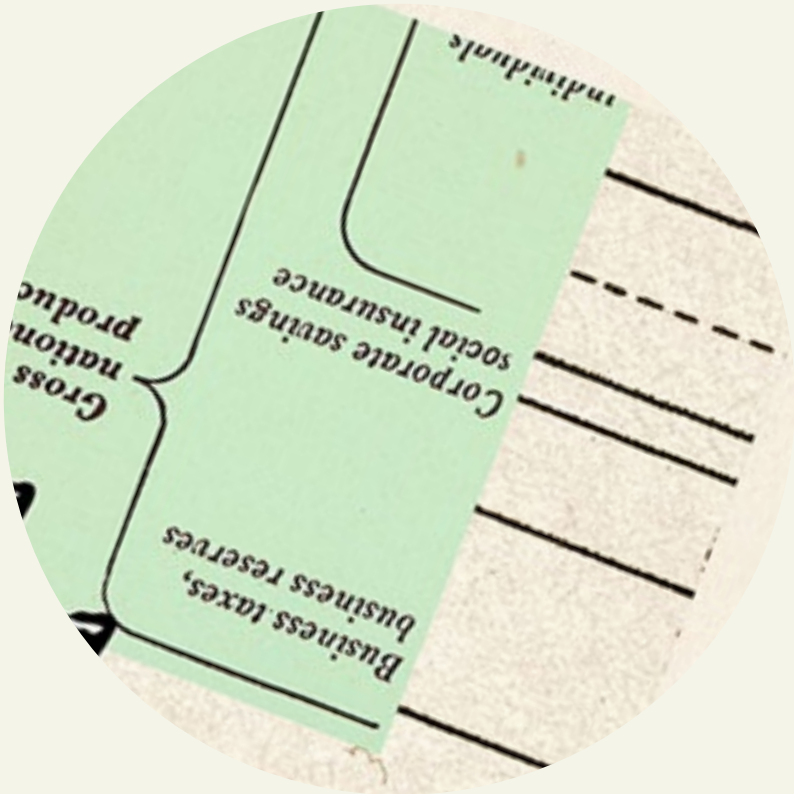
Are we now seeing a more auspicious policy context?

The current administration is addressing some of the potential barriers to effective place-based change in the UK. Devolution is one of three core principles underpinning the public system reform, and it is recognised that 'Good joined-up, place-based working' is at the heart of the 'Levelling Up mission to create opportunities for everyone across the UK'³. There is a focus on neighbourhoods in multiple policy documents, including NHS reform⁴ and the English Devolution Bill.⁵ There is a recognition that local people understand the needs of their communities best, leading to the principles that policy should be designed with and for people, in partnership with civil society. A Test, Learn and Grow team has been established in the Cabinet Office to encourage more innovation, and matching methods to the proposed mechanism of change, and there is interest in place-based partnerships in ICBs in the health landscape⁶.

This may be a moment when regional and local government, and NHS leaders begin to innovate and use place to tackle deep rooted social challenges. Knowing how change happens and knowing how to make better use of evidence to achieve that change, will be vital to support this progress.

02

Our approach for defining, classifying and evidencing place-based change



Our approach for defining, classifying and evidencing place-based change



As described in the introduction, our work consisted of:

- Developing a new system for classifying place-based work
- Reviewing how different types of place-based work use evidence
- Offering a new definition of place-based change

The next steps for this work are to further test and validate these outputs with a range of people and across a range of contexts to see how well our thinking holds up and where it might need to be adapted.

Below, we discuss our ways into each of these tasks and how we got to the current stage of thinking.

Our broad approach was to:

- Build up an evidence base bringing together sources on place-based working from the UK and internationally. The total number of sources reviewed for this work were 105.
- Develop a system for coding and analysing this evidence base
- Interview key stakeholders to test and validate our assumptions
- Test and iterate the work in conversation with Place Matters and their stewardship group
- Publish initial findings from the work on the Place & Evidence Substack to invite further feedback.

For more details on the methodology, please see Appendix A. Our full list of sources can be found in the bibliography in Appendix C.

How did we classify place-based work?

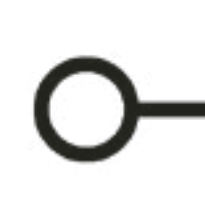
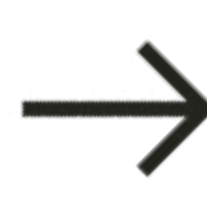
We were keen to get right to the heart of what differentiates different types of place-based work, and so we took a bottom-up approach to developing our classification system.

Looking at the literature, many of the definitions and classifications of place-based work take a top-down approach: describing the people involved, project length and who is accountable for change. This can give a sense of how different types of place-based work *look* without fully unpacking the mechanisms of change that lie beneath the surface. This is a bit like trying to categorise trees by surveying a copse from the sky.

By contrast, we took steps to identify the component parts underlying place-based work, some visible and some invisible, in order to build a categorisation system that feels more like how we categorise different species of tree: using an understanding of physical traits (e.g. leaf shape), environment (e.g. rainforest) and DNA. This has given us a draft taxonomy of place-based change that looks beneath the surface.

What were the component parts we identified?

We identified seven dimensions that were crucial in distinguishing between different categories of work. These were:

						
1. PLACE: How is the place conceptualised? Is it defined and bounded by the state using an administrative boundary - a ward, or local authority for example- or by the people who live, work or study in that place, using their sense of connection, trust and belonging.	2. POPULATION: Who is the work serving? Some place-based change brings a whole population together to address a shared challenge. Some aims to improve circumstances for a subgroup with shared and specific needs, for example homeless people.	3. INFRASTRUCTURE: What elements of a place are being worked with? There are at least three types of infrastructure binding places together; social -relationships between people; state -relationships between institutions, organisations, and services; and market -economic relationships between people and within the business sector.	4. LEVERS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE: How is change being instigated? The environmental scientist Donella Meadows introduced the idea of ‘points of leverage’ ⁷ that can re-balance the relationships in a system or place. In the Waters of Systems Change model, John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge later collapsed Meadows longer list of levers into three ⁸ structural levers, for example public policy and money flows; relational, including power dynamics; and transformative, how people in place define and think about the world.	5. OUTCOME: What is the intention? Much place-based change is focused on human development outcomes like better health or education, or wealth creation. But there is also work on the processes that hold places together, such as the way civil society organisations collaborate and engage with people to create the capacity to tackle complex systemic challenges.	6. TIME: How long does it take? Work designed to change how public services operate tend to be relatively short term, generally two to five years. Work to shift relationships between social, market and state infrastructure typically lasts a decade or more. Some hyperlocal place-based work is continuous.	7. SCALE OF IMPACT: Where does the ultimate impact occur? The breadth and depth of impact of place-based change ranges from a focus on small populations to large jurisdictions like Integrated Care Boards. But the large-scale work builds out from a handful of local places, and so the key question is the scale of impact, not the scale of work.

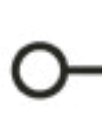
How did these component parts lead us to our categorisation system?

We used these seven dimensions to build up a coding framework which we applied to our evidence base by tagging different sources and reviewing how they clustered:











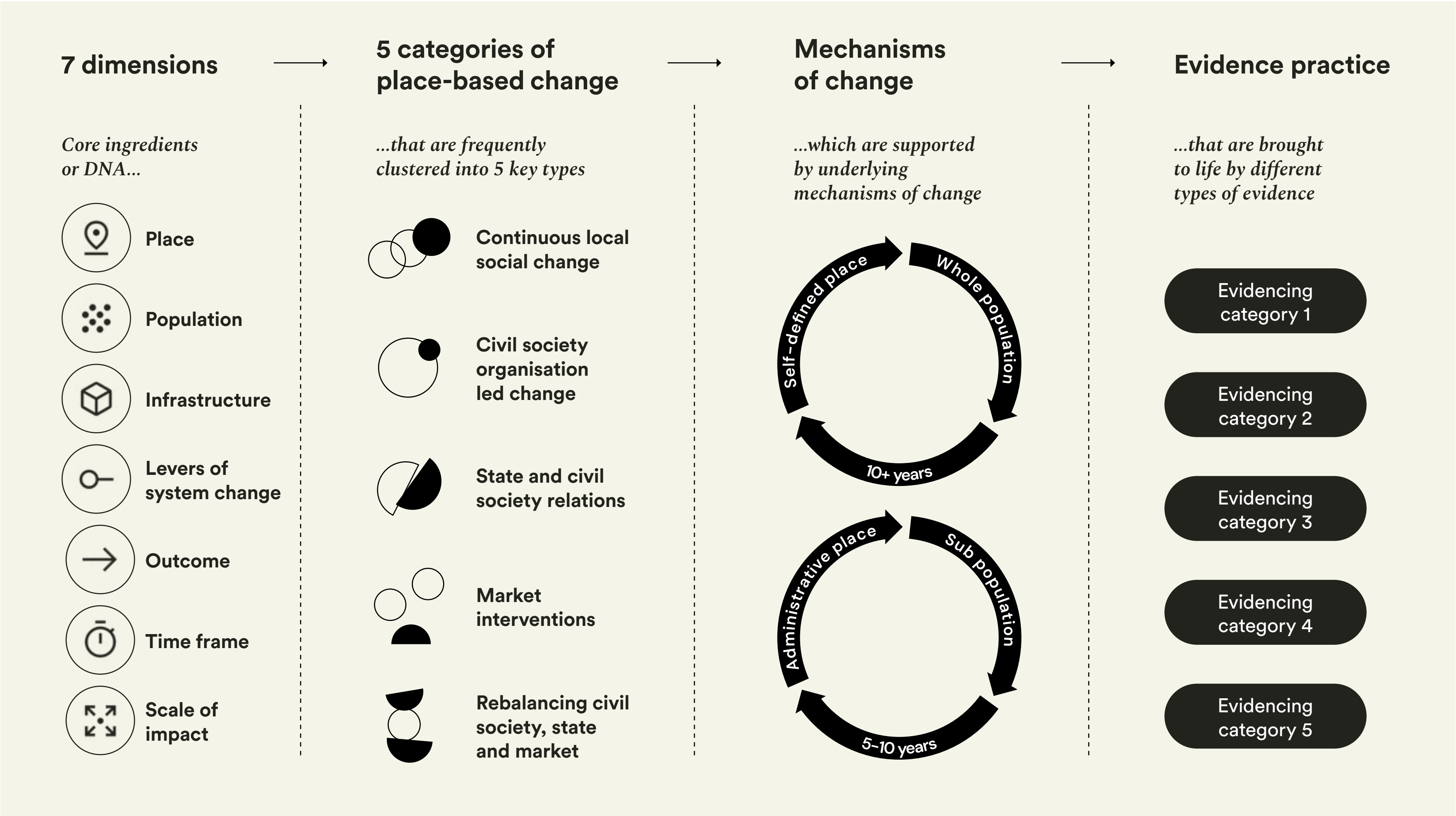




Place	Population	Infrastructure	Levers of system change	Outcome	Time frame	Scale of impact
Administrative A place that fits with a state defined, administrative boundary such as a ward or a local authority area.	Whole population The work engages with all people who live in a place, or is available to all of them	Social The work engages in the communal and civil society relationships and assets of a place	Structural leverage - numbers and feedback The work uses approaches that influence the policies, practices and resource flows in a place	Human development The work aims to achieve outcomes for individuals or groups of people, such as lower homelessness rates	Up to 5 years	Hyperlocal The work anticipates seeing impact at very local (street or block scales)
Self-defined A place that's boundaries are defined by the people who live or work there.	Sub-group The work is targeted at specific demographic or needs based population within a place	State The work engages with the state services and bureaucracy of a place	Relational leverage - materials, information, rules The work uses approaches that influences the relationships and connections and power dynamics in a place	Process The work aims to achieve shifts in processes and how things work in a place, so that other outcomes are more likely to be achieved	Up to 10	Neighbourhood The work anticipates seeing impact at the scale of a neighbourhood c 5-20k people
		Market The work engages with the market actors and institutions of a place	Transformative leverage - power, goals, mindsets The work uses approaches that influences the mental models of those working in a place	Environmental The work aims to achieve outcomes for the physical environment of a place	Beyond 10	Local authority The work anticipates seeing impact at the scale of a local authority scale, even if the focus of the work is on a smaller scale i.e. neighbourhood working that influences LA practices.
						Sub-region The work anticipates impact at a sub-regional scale, across a city or multiple-authority area. This is often economic geographies.
						Region/ State The work anticipates impact at a regional or state scale, with lots of micro-scale work adding up to a much bigger system change

How did these component parts lead us to our categorisation system?

By coding and testing the evidence, we identified five different types of place-based change. The flow of our analysis is shown in the diagram, which is explained in more detail below:



We explored the reviewed literature and evidence further to unpick and better understand the 'mechanisms' of how change occurs within each category, although we recognise further work is needed to better test and evidence these.

In this study, by mechanism we mean, how the process of place-based work enables social change to occur: how does change get into the body of the place. We know that this is used in Realist Evaluation, and whilst this is not the same usage and could be unclear to evaluation professionals, we think it is a useful overlap: 'what are the processes or structures which operate to generate outcomes of interest'?⁹

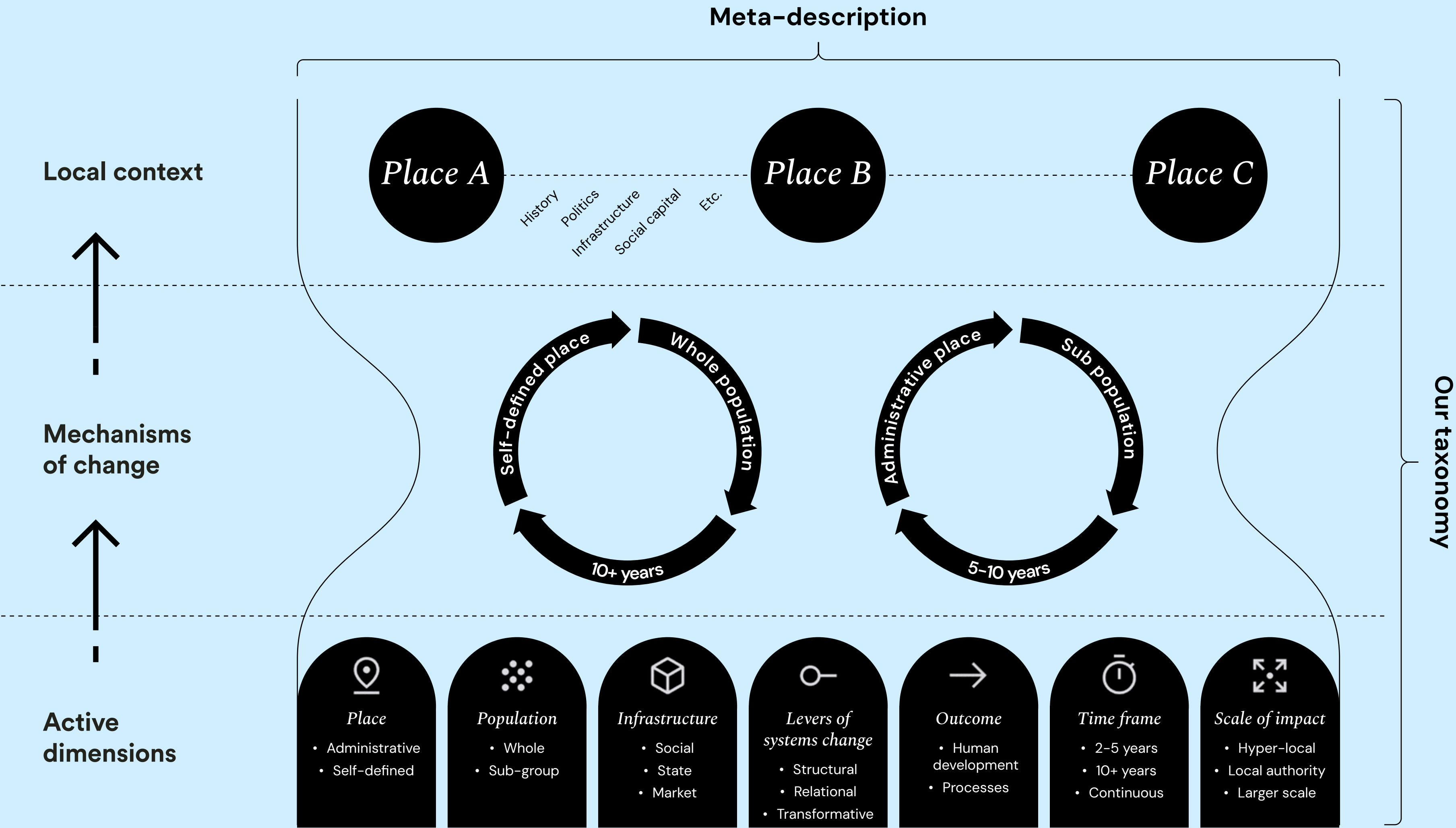
How did we review the evidence base?

After developing the classification system, we went back to the evidence base to explore what drives and limits different types of evidence, evaluation and learning work within each category. More work will be needed going forward to review and test the evidence base further for each category.

How does this support a new definition of place-based work?

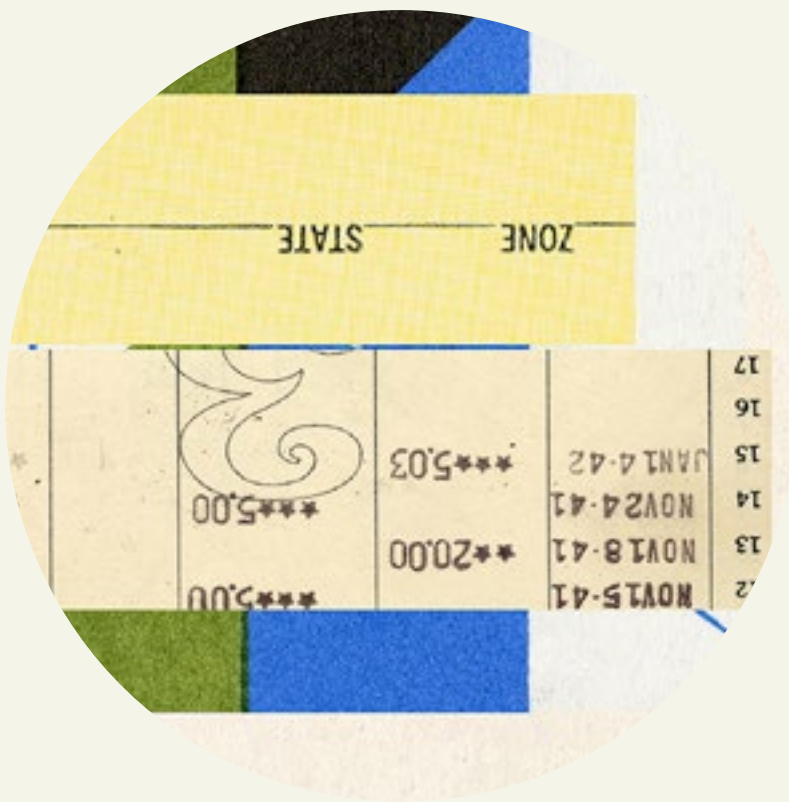
As described above, this work supports a new definition of place-based work that encompasses the underlying mechanism of change as well as the visible, expressions of place-based work more commonly found in the meta-descriptions available in the literature. The diagram to the right aims to bring this all together to show the parameters for this work:

The new definition is outlined in Chapter 5. As this definition explains, all work to change society for the better is situated in a place or places. However, most the work to change society does not fit the definition of place-based change. The new definition helps us to better map what lies within and outside of the scope of place-based work.



03

Introducing the Categories of Place-based Change



Introducing the Categories of Place-based Change

An overview of the five categories developed in this work can be seen in the below table.

Category	In a nutshell	Examples
1: Continuous local social change	Self-organising communities working to improve their place.	<u>Pembroke House Settlement</u> <u>Grapevine in Coventry</u> <u>Gateshead Community Bridge Builders</u>
2: Civil society organisation led change	Charities and community organisations using their assets to support the development of social, relational and community capital.	<u>BD_Collective</u> <u>The Wharton Trust</u> <u>Hastings Commons</u> <u>Local Property Partnerships (Platform Places)</u>
3: State and civil society relations	Service delivery organisations working to improve outcomes for sub-groups and simultaneously driving wider change through engaging and influencing both civil society and state actors.	<u>Right to Succeed</u> <u>Thrive At Five</u> <u>AllChild</u> <u>NSPCC’s Together for Childhood</u> <u>The Winch in Camden</u> <u>The Reach Foundation</u>
4: Market interventions	Driving larger-scale change through meaningfully connecting smaller areas to economic growth and shifts in markets.	<u>Preston Model</u> <u>Greater Manchester Livewell</u> and connected regeneration <u>Power to Change</u> working with Combined Authorities <u>Moving To Opportunity</u>
5: Rebalancing civil society, state and market	Large scale, ambitious projects (often philanthropy-led) that use a combination of mechanisms to solve 'wicked problems' in places.	<u>The California Endowment</u> Kerala work on death and dying

This report aims to support us building a field of practice in the UK. This categorisation system can further this by:

Giving us broad ways in to understanding place-based working and the ways in which change can occur. **The categories do not describe what a single organisation does or what is going on in a single place.** Practitioners reading this report may recognise elements of their work across multiple categories. This is designed to build the field, not label practice.

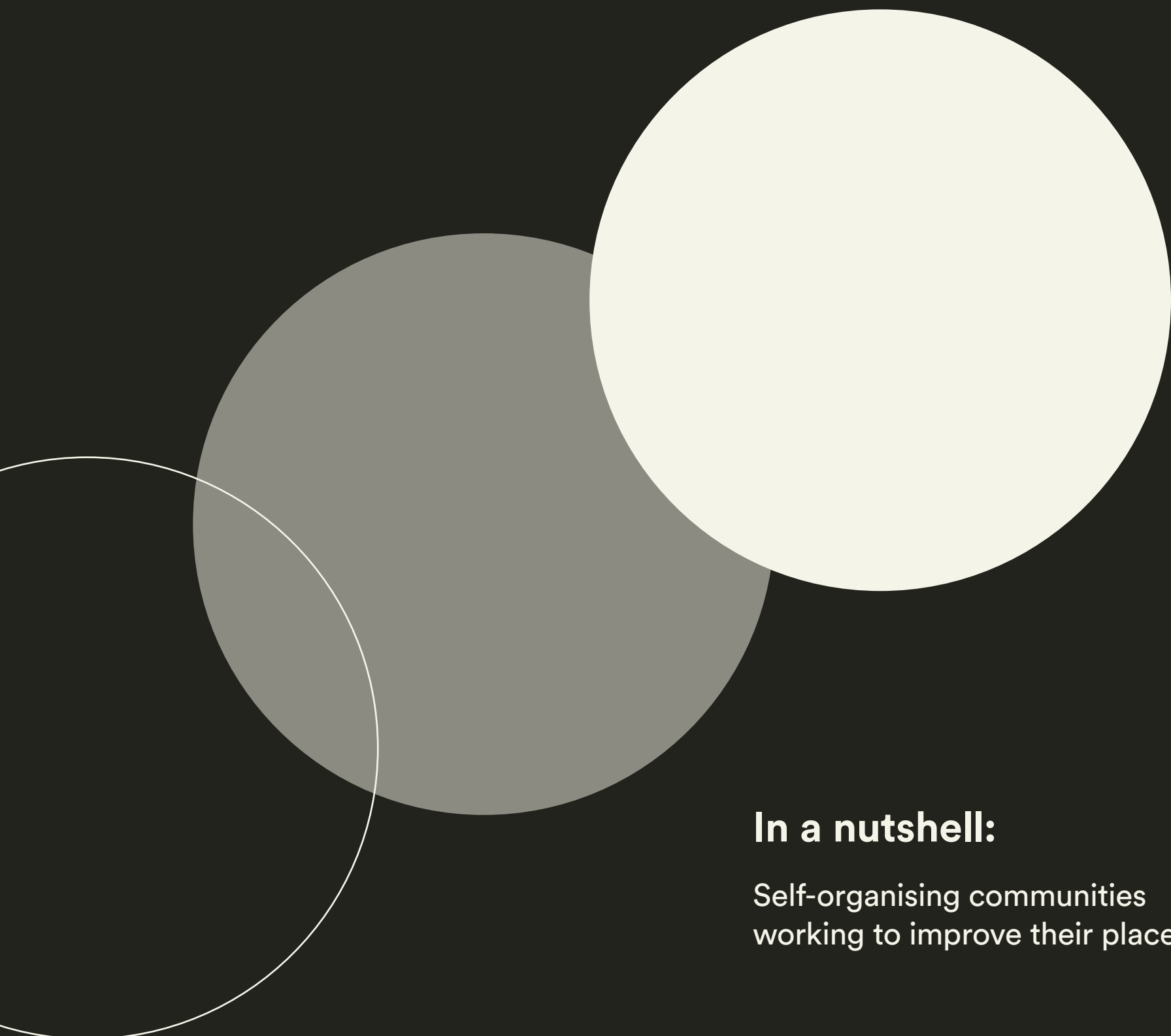
Providing insight and examples from outside the UK, so that we can contextualise UK practice within the international evidence base. **We know that Categories 1-3 are the most common types of place-based working in the UK and will resonate most with those doing the work in this country.** However, Categories 4 and 5 are significant forms of place-based work taking place at different scales and with different underlying mechanisms that we believe should be included for furthering the UK field of understanding.

In the section below, we outline each of the five categories in more detail. Each section contains:

- A descriptive overview of what the category is and how it works
- Some examples of work that might fall into this category
- A coloured wheel showing the dimensions that are relevant in each category
- A diagram showing how the mechanisms for change play out in each category. There are multiple mechanisms within each category. Individual organisations or practitioners are likely to prioritise one of these but may work across multiple.
- A discussion of how this category is commonly evidenced, looking at the drivers and limitations to collecting evidence in the context of each category.

Category 1:

Continuous local social change



In a nutshell:

Self-organising communities working to improve their place.

Overview

The first category comprises work by civil society networks, groups and organisations to enhance life in a community or neighbourhood ranging from about five to forty thousand people. The work reflects a long tradition of grassroots activism among and alongside residents in economically disadvantaged contexts and does not encompass civil society led change.

- Some examples for work in this category include:

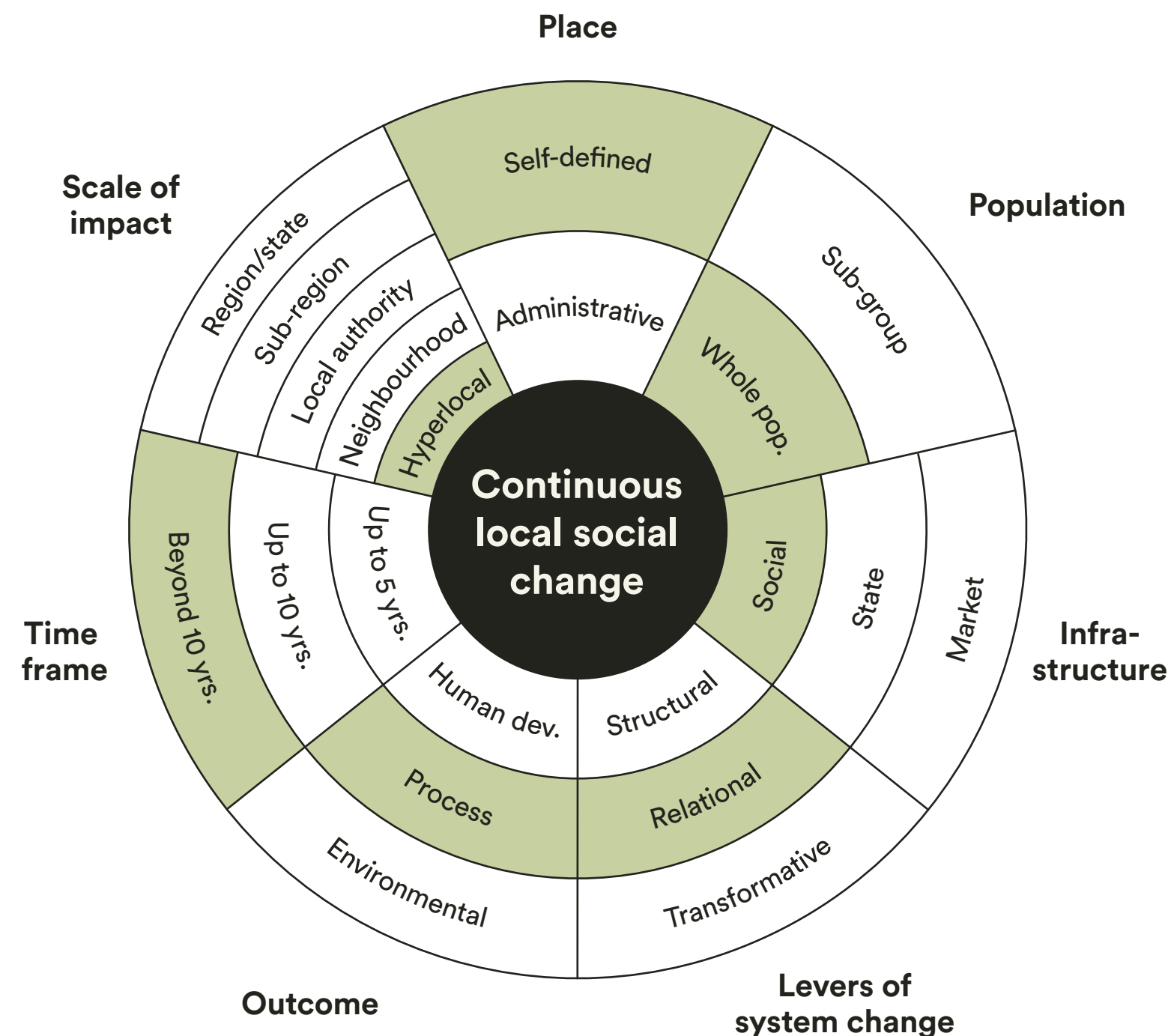
Pembroke House Settlement

Grapevine in Coventry

Gateshead Community Bridge Builders

Which dimensions are relevant to this category?

This diagram shows how the dimensions play out in this category, which typically involves working in a hyperlocal place, defined with the whole population, engaging in social infrastructure and using relational leverage to achieve process outcomes over a continuous period.

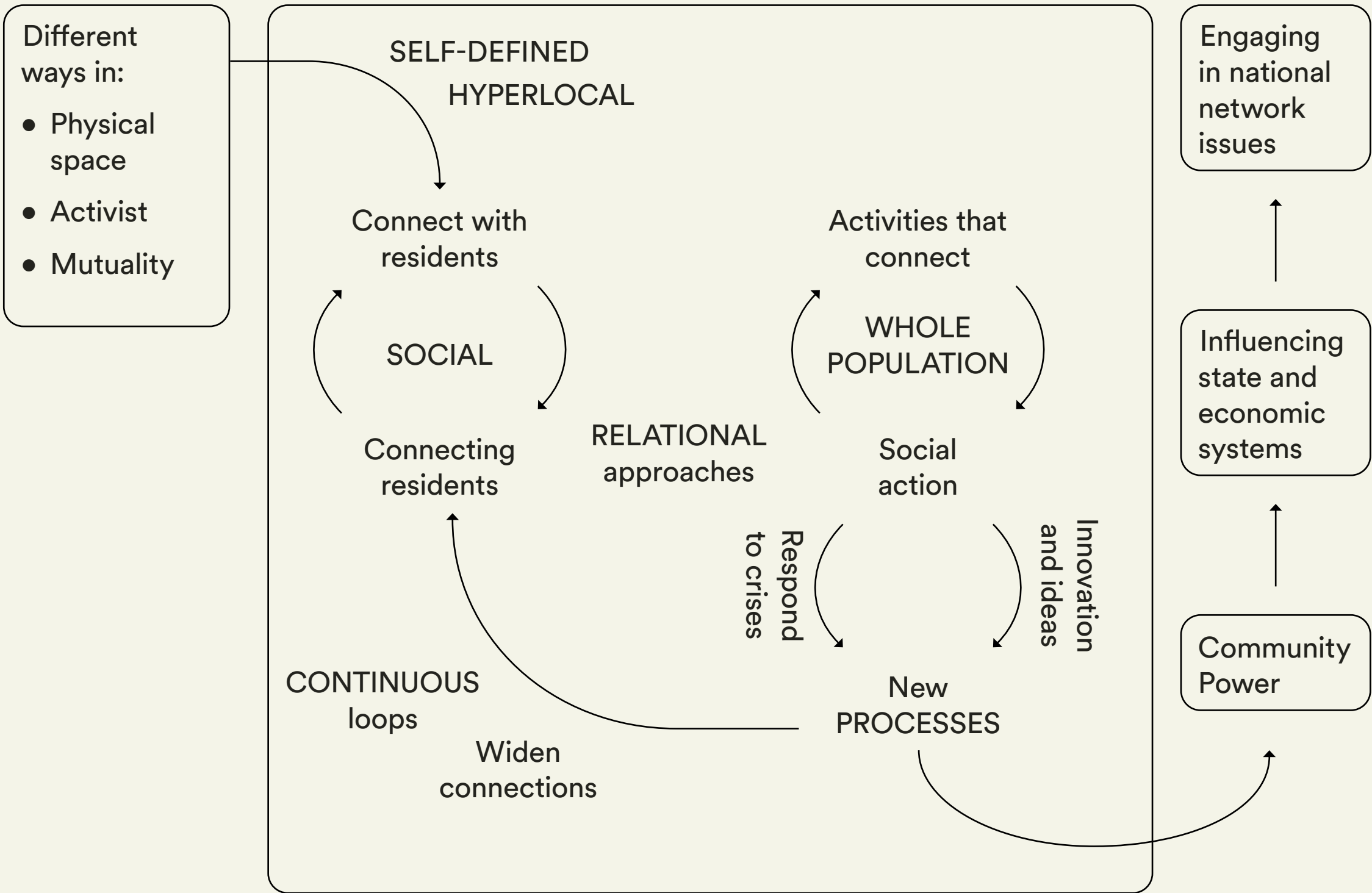


Two of the dimensions are particularly helpful in understanding the change mechanism. First, the work is not time-limited. The activism is not tied to grant or government funding. Second, the civil society networks, groups and organisations leading the work are tied to a single place. They rarely shift the activity elsewhere.

What are the mechanisms of change in this category?

There are multiple mechanisms of change in this category as summarised in the diagram below.

There are three entry points. Some use a building or space to bring people together; some have an activist or organising mindset at the heart of the work; and some focus on mutuality in relationships, working on a shared need.



This diagram shows continuous work -often evolving over several decades- to bring people together in a hyperlocal, self-defined community, generally focused on improving how a place works, not just for sub-groups. Change involves building connections and alliances with and between residents and gaining a deep understanding of their challenges and opportunities. These connections create opportunities for social action, often focused on building evidence for change in communities and achieving equity in access to social infrastructure and services.

Minoritised or excluded groups can be a starting point, but much work in this category operates across socio-economic groups living in proximity. Each new process and action widens the social connections and grows the potential for change. Some change in this category is described as building community power.

This work depends on the process outcome of strengthening connection, trust and belonging between residents. Impact on human development outcomes is viewed as a welcome side-effect more than a driving goal.

The WeWalworth work by Pembroke House Settlement in South London is typical of projects in this category. Policy makers from Central Government and Southwark Council worked with residents to complete several thousand conversations with residents about the nature of inequity, and its potential resolution. It operates from a century old quasi-religious setting that lies deep in the memory of local people. Part of the literature links the creation of the Welfare State in the UK and progressive public policy in the US to the concerted pre-war work of the settlement movement¹⁰.

Other work operating from the same mechanism of change does not depend on an institutional base, Grapevine in Coventry for example uses more of the activist and organising approaches in this category.

Evidencing category one



What are the priorities for evidencing this work?

One purpose of continuous local social change is to create opportunities for residents to build relationships, identify the change that matters to local people and, in some cases, lead that change. The demand for evidence, therefore, is coming from people who live in the place, and from service delivery leaders and grant giving organisations.

Gateshead Community Bridge Builders are an example of an approach to mutually investing in relationships. They use a learning, and discursive approach, pulling themes out of the conversations that emerge across their network, and using that to make sense of what to explore next. The learning approach is driven by the people involved in the work, and the learning follows the feedback loop of the conversation.

The ethos of the organisations leading this type of work can also encourage the transfer of power over data, analysis and application of knowledge to people who live in place.

What approaches are used to evidence this work?

Work in this category leads to greater use of historical knowledge and local data, often drawing on or re-interpreting existing datasets. Where resources allow, qualitative methods such as ethnography are applied. The Old Firestation in Oxford has developed Meaningful Measurement and Storytelling Evaluation, to better understand relations in place.

The National Lottery Community Fund has recently published an evaluation of place-based social action, a good summary of the relevant evidence and ways of thinking about evaluation in this type of work.

What are the challenges to evidencing this work?

There are two challenges to effective use of evidence in category one:

First, the deep focus on a single place over multiple years can get in the way of generating results generalisable to other contexts. This means that evidence and insights can seem entirely particular to an individual place or individual relationship. It can feel, to those outside of the work, like the evidence is weak and not transferable to other contexts. If you are not in the relationship, does the evidence have relevance to you?

Second, the lack of an end point to the work tends to reduce interest in methods designed to calculate outcome or impact. This can be off-putting to certain funders or partners who are interested in outcomes that can be understood as measurable.

These challenges highlight a recurring point in this work - the evidentiary approaches align with the values of the work, and therefore it is important that funders and partners align with them. We believe this breaks through a tension inherent within the initial question for this research of what the different evidentiary needs of those funding, doing or leading this work are. The focus should be less on balancing different audiences' needs, and more on ensuring that those audiences are aligned around what the work is really doing.

Category 2:

Civil society organisation led change

In a nutshell:

Charities and community organisations using their assets to support the development of social, relational and community capital.

Overview

The second category involves larger charities or networks of community organisations working to enhance social infrastructure across a neighbourhood or town or parts of a city. Change may be driven by a methodology - as in Asset Based Community Development¹¹ - or a network of civil society organisations -as in the BD Collective or in anchor organisations like The Wharton Trust.

Work in this category reflects a growing interest since the turn of the century in making better use of existing community resources and both developing and building on social capital.



Some examples for work in this category include:

BD_Collective

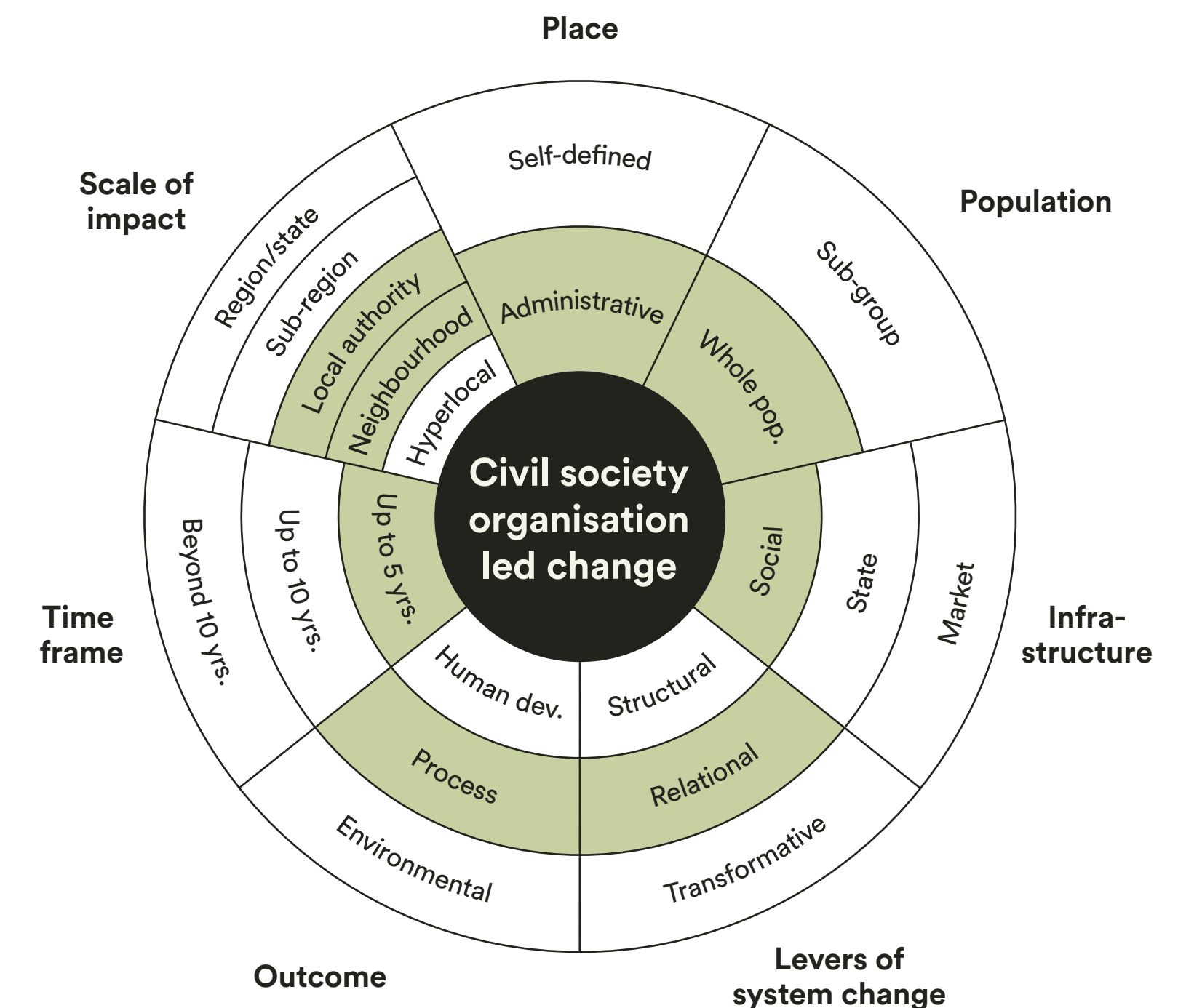
The Wharton Trust

Hastings Commons

Local Property Partnerships (Platform Places)

Which dimensions are relevant to this category?

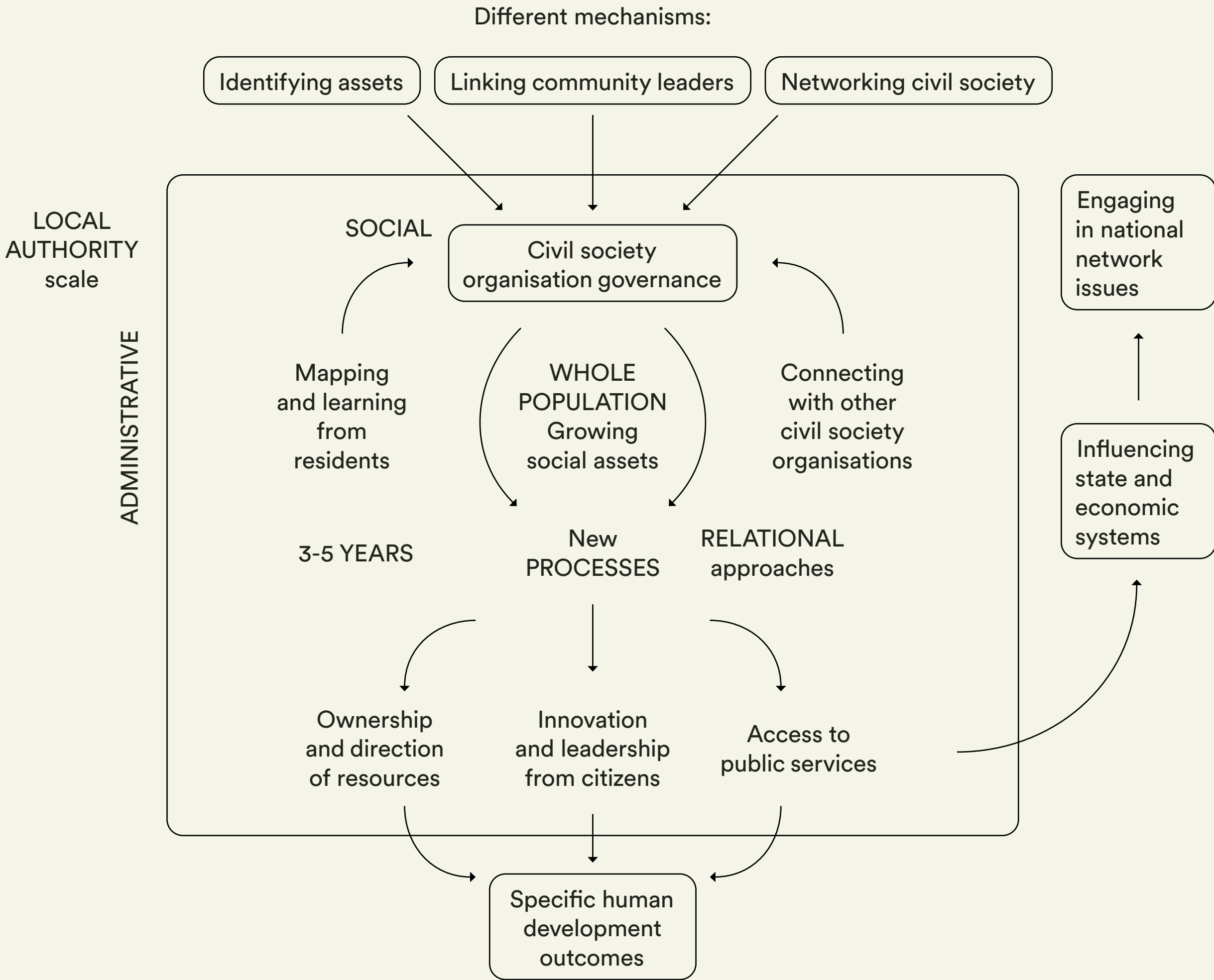
The diagram below shows which dimensions are relevant to this category:



What are the mechanisms of change in this category?

There are multiple mechanisms of change in this category as summarised in the diagram to the right.

This work stands out from the other categories in that it assumes that local civil society organisations are crucial in leading change to social or state infrastructure. The following diagram illustrates three mechanisms of change in this category: identifying community assets, finding and linking community leaders, and networking civil society organisations. Community members collaborating with civil society organisations enables the growth of social assets such as buildings and leadership skills.



The intended result is a more efficient use of civil society services and other community resources - including the acquisition and ownership of buildings, the strengthening of social capital, the networking of organisations, and community power to influence the local state.

Influence over the ownership and direction of resources is exemplified in the work of Hastings Commons and Platform Places, leading to better access to public services as demonstrated by Onion Collective and Southmead Development Trust.

Evidencing category two

What are the priorities for evidencing this work?

Work in category two will frequently be externally funded and focused on an objective. This could be an output, (such as encouraging people to be more physically active), or impact, (better health or wealth), for which measures may be chosen.

There may also be interest in measuring impact using a theory of change model, which can demonstrate the link between building better processes and delivering positive outcomes to support social change. For example, organisations may measure processes to understand the impact on concepts like social capital and community cohesion.

Approaches in this category will likely be seeking to ensure that the community is reflected and empowered through any evaluation or data collection process, although this is likely to be instigated and ultimately led by the local civil society organisation in question.

What approaches are used to evidence this work?

There is some overlap in evidence used by practitioners in categories one and two. But there are also important differences. For example, civil society organisation led change is more likely to use external actors to facilitate or lead learning, and there is greater use of specialist methods, for example generating to identify and build social networks such as the work of the digital mapping tool, Understory, which was developed between Onion Collective and Free Ice Cream.

A wide variety of methods are used in this category, including the mapping of community assets in the work of Platform Places as they look to build local property partnerships, using realist methods in a five year investment in community anchors to understand the building of social and organisational networks, and promoting resident led innovation like the Big Local model with a counterfactual approach. In all of these, there are differences in levels of how integrated the work is with local state systems, and that is important to consider in any evidentiary approach. The next two categories have a much larger state presence, but that can happen here too.

Work in this category is likely to value of qualitative research and storytelling, with an emphasis on participatory approaches that involving the community in the data collection and analysis.

What are the challenges to evidencing this work?

As with category one, the focus on a single place or community can make the data feel highly specific to an individual place and set of relationships, which can limit generalisations and comparability across different sites.

The centralisation of a local civil society organisation (rather than community group which may favour more localised approaches that resonate with community members) can mean that the methods chosen are more likely to allow for greater generalisability and shared insight, as the model can be more obviously understood and something that can be replicated. Funders are also more likely to invest in studies across multiple sites in this category.

Many of these organisations are often working on multiple projects that might support specific communities in their area, as well as working in a way that is described in this category. They are often funded or commissioned to consider evaluations and evidence of those time and cohort bound projects, and so a wide range of evidence approaches get used by these organisations. It can be difficult to disentangle how the place-based approach is specifically working, with evidence demands pulling towards projects, groups of needs, or issues. Therefore, the evidentiary experience of organisations can be a barrier to sharing insight about the role of place in this category.

This category is more often invested in by philanthropic funders than government, who can struggle with the process outcomes that are inherent in this work. Even those philanthropic funders can, however, push organisations towards human development outcomes in evidence, rather than truly understanding the processes at work here, which can weaken an appreciation of its value.



Category 3:

State and civil society relations



In a nutshell:

Service delivery organisations working to improve outcomes for sub-groups and simultaneously driving wider change through engaging and influencing both civil society and state actors.

Overview

Placed-based change in the third category seeks to re-balance or better integrate community and state infrastructure. There is a strong emphasis on innovation and evaluation, and an openness to testing and advancing new ways of working. The presence of the local state is clearer here, and so too the policies of the national state.

This category owes its origins to poor human development outcomes in economically disadvantaged communities, and a desire by public service leaders to close the gap between rich and poor, when it comes to economic and social outcomes. Compared to other categories there is a greater focus on sub-groups of people in need. The change agents tend to be service delivery organisations working across social and state infrastructure across multiple sites with ambitions for influencing national policy.



Some examples for work in this category include:

[Right to Succeed](#)

[Thrive At Five](#)

[AllChild](#)

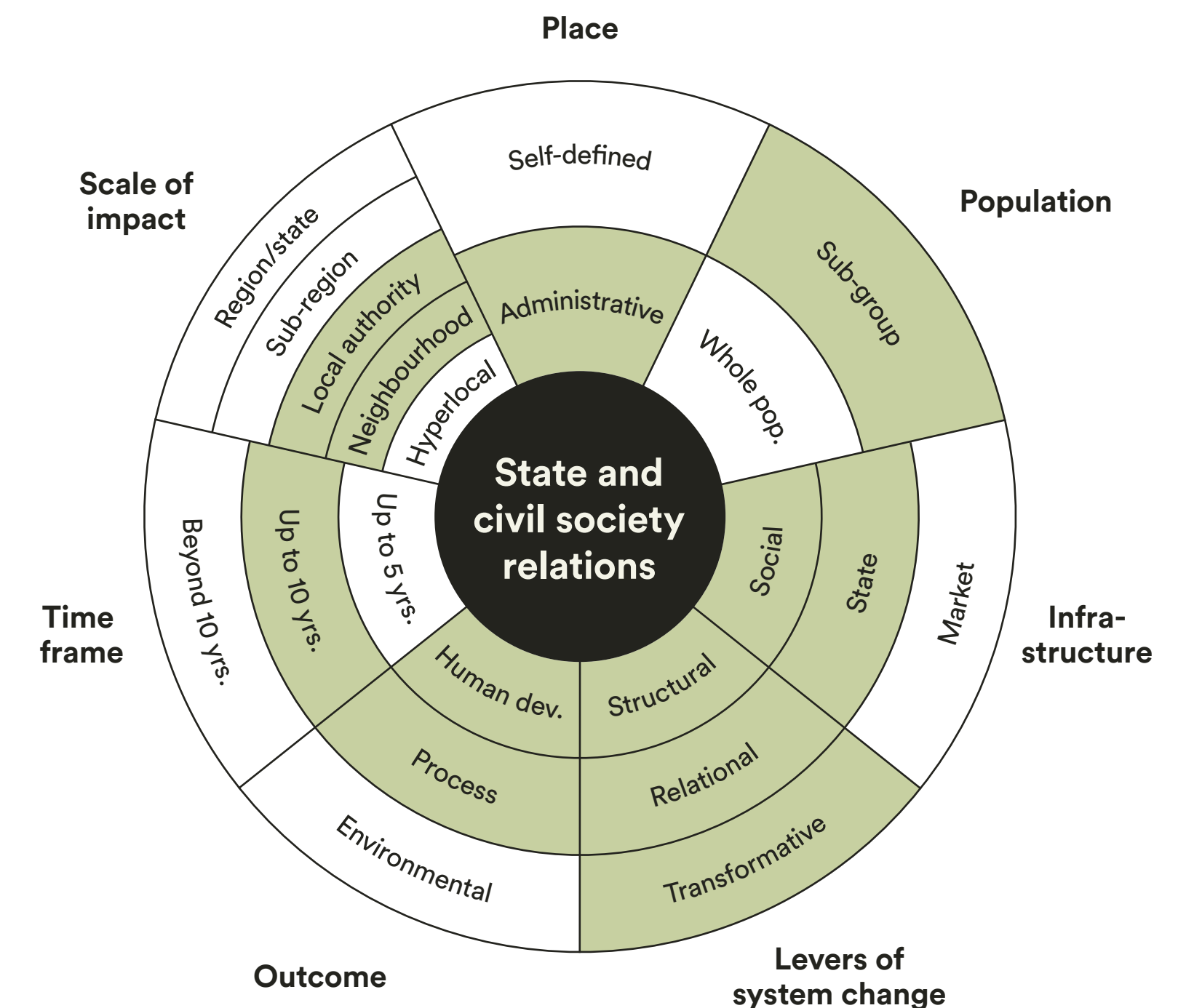
[NSPCC's Together for Childhood](#)

[The Winch in Camden](#)

[The Reach Foundation](#)

Which dimensions are relevant to this category?

The diagram below shows which dimensions are relevant to this category:



What are the mechanisms of change in this category?

The diagram to the right summaries four change mechanisms, each of which re-balances state and social infrastructure.

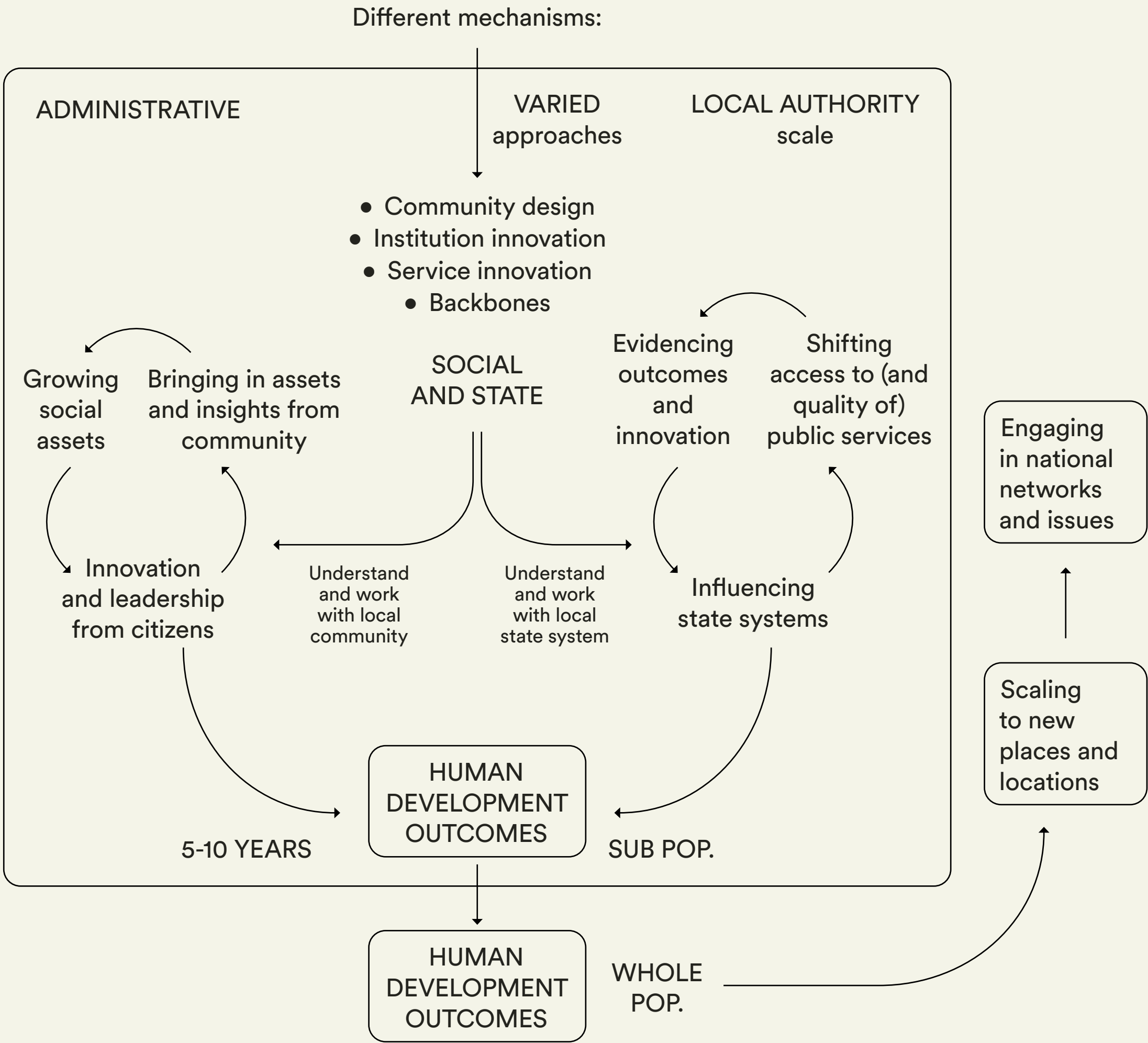
Backbone organisations act as a fulcrum for reform and development, often using collective impact models to shift how local stakeholders engage in a shared problem. UK examples include Right to Succeed and Thrive At Five, or elements of larger organisations such as NSPCC’s work on Together for Childhood.

Service and programme innovations start with an approach to work with a particular cohort or sub-population in a targeted way and need to work across the wider community and system to achieve change for that cohort. In doing so, they influence the system for the whole population. UK examples include AllChild.

Design-led innovations, that come from the community, such as The Winch in Camden, or from philanthropically funded programmes. This is approaches which lead with a vision for a place and aim to design and build change over time in collaboration with partners.

Institution-led innovations, such as The Reach Foundation's work with schools, which looks to shift the mindset of state institutions. This mechanism supports local institutions to engage and work with the community more directly.

Each mechanism can generate improved access to quality public services, innovation in public services and growth in social assets. The target is human development outcomes such as better health or education for those in greatest need.



Evidencing category three



What are the priorities for evidencing this work?

Place-based change in the third category gives greater attention to the priorities of state and other funders and operates at a bigger scale, sometimes across multiple sites. The work is generally designed to achieve specified outcomes, often those that matter to leaders of central or local government or private funders.

Evaluation is used not only to monitor progress and impact, but also to inform public service system change. Evidence is used to justify either scaling or mainstreaming the innovation.

This means that evidence may need to conform to organisation-wide metrics that support the comparison of data across different methodologies or in different locations. An example of this is in organisations such as Right to Succeed, AllChild and Thrive at Five. All are interested in child development outcomes and use slightly different mechanisms, but they all align local approaches with a need for robust child outcome data in their different sites.

What approaches are used to evidence this work?

Approaches are likely to prioritise methodologies that support generalised insight, for example through use of standardised measures or quantifiable data. Existing education administrative datasets are a clear benefit to all those organisations listed above. While stories and other evidence of the processes involved will still be valuable to bring insight to life, approaches are likely to prioritise collecting data at scale, that help to show trends and impacts on specific metrics.

The best examples create strong communities of shared interest, find innovative ways of genuine co-production between service delivery and service users, and use the power of stories to inform innovation. Our experience is that this occurs within organisations doing this work, as they mainly incentivised to share success and impact widely. They can be more protective of learning that is about enabling impact or about difficulties in delivery, and this can sometimes be the more generalisable insight that they are generating.

What are the challenges to evidencing this work?

When looking for a data set that will be context specific but also comparable in wider contexts, it is challenging to collect the 'right' data for the scale of the field and not just the scale of the organisation. This can lead organisations to collect either a surfeit of data or insufficient evidence of impact, and then it gets used in impact reports which are not places to establish causality. This also creates the risk that the organisation can be seen by others as overclaiming impact that is generated by a variety of actors across the system. These risks creating little progress for the field and learning needs to be done in safe spaces for these organisations otherwise it may not happen.

Category 4: Market interventions

In a nutshell:

Driving larger-scale change through meaningfully connecting smaller areas to economic growth and shifts in markets.

Overview

Economic/market change is arguably the largest category, underpinned by the strongest evidence base internationally.

The focus is on economic growth and equitable access to enterprise. Much of the experimentation is small-scale but builds up to large-scale change as exemplified in neighbourhood regeneration -for example in Greater Manchester¹². It is about how places are enabled to innovate, take the lead and drive economic change, as part of a framework of change at a larger scale.

Those working in place-based change in the UK can sometimes not see this work as such, as they might cite examples of too much state control, and centrally driven economic development work, and see it outside this field of practice. This can risk misunderstanding the potential of this work to connect the micro to a bigger macro framework of change.



Some examples for work in this category include:

Preston Model

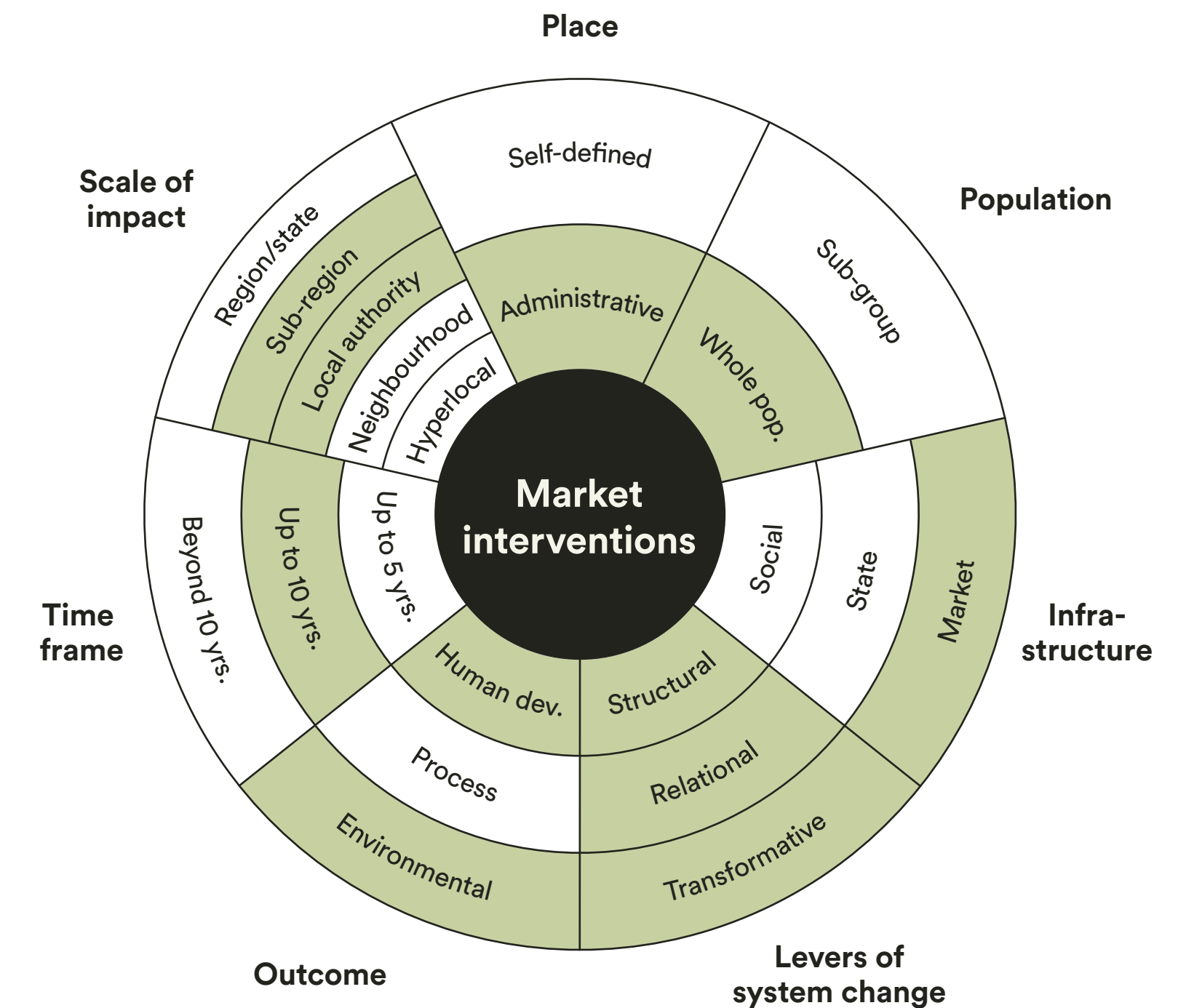
Greater Manchester Livewell and connected regeneration

Power to Change working with Combined Authorities

Moving To Opportunity

Which dimensions are relevant to this category?

The diagram below shows which dimensions are relevant to this category:



What are the mechanisms of change in this category?

There are multiple mechanisms of change in this category as summarised in the diagram to the right.

This work has its origin in variations in economic well-being and the disproportionate impact of macro-economic change from one community to another.

Market interventions in places create conditions that promote enterprise and agency. Although some of the work in this category starts with multiple small trials, it is designed for large-scale impact, generally in jurisdictions of between two to five million people. High quality evidence, generally underpinned by economic models, are fundamental to this type of place-based change.

As illustrated in the following diagram, work in this area links macro-economic change -shifting the incentives, economic behaviours and decisions of employers, workforce and educators- with micro-economic change- influencing the incentives and economic behaviours of people who live and work in place, such as in housing or in business start-ups.

The levers for change at the macro level are economic and social investment, improvements to physical infrastructure -transport, housing and enterprise space- fiscal incentives and education -skills, outlook and knowledge. At the micro level, levers include changes to social infrastructure and information that encourage reflection about economic behaviours and decisions.

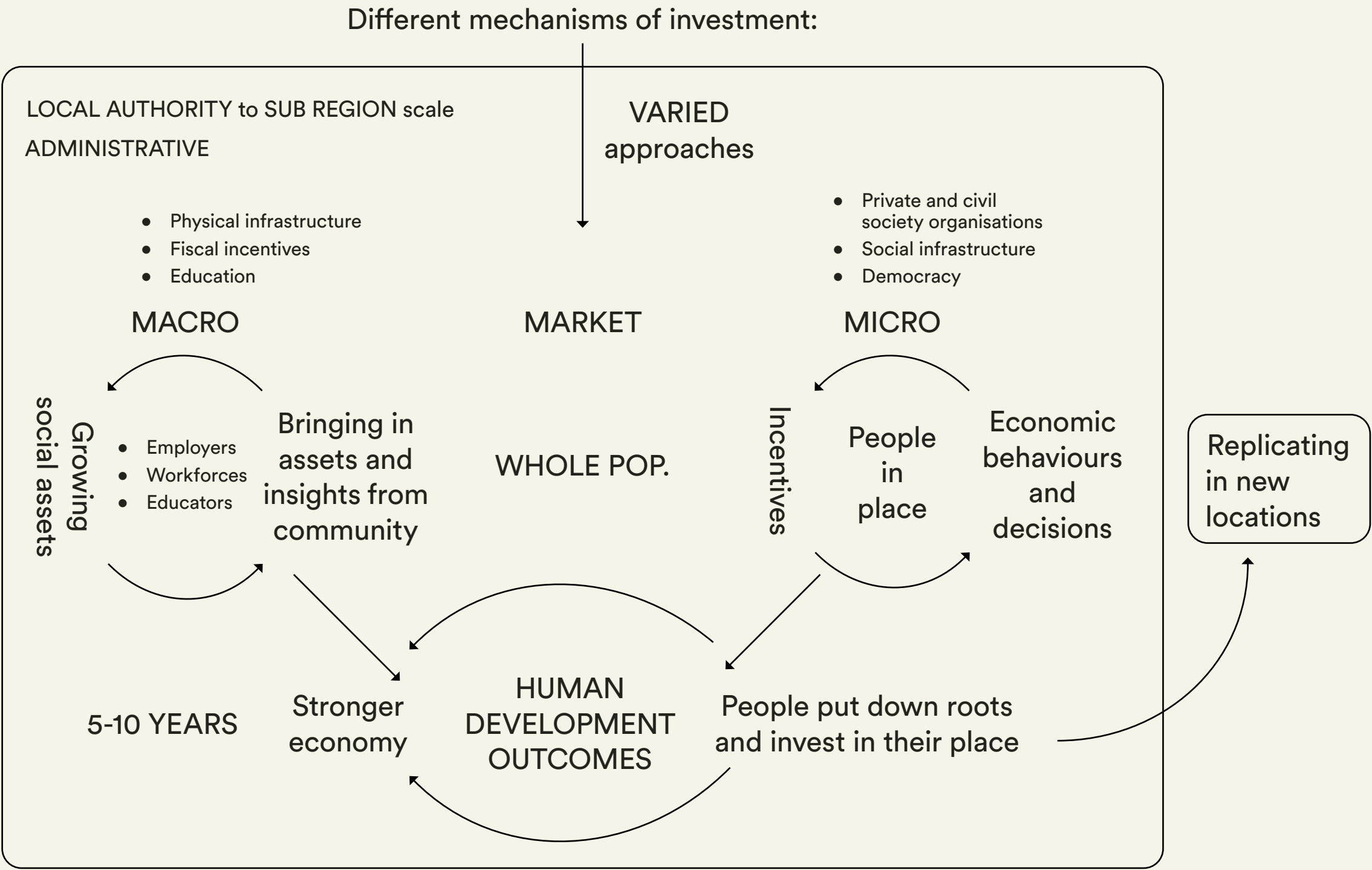
There have been radical and contrasting examples of place-based change in this category, for example incentivising residents to move from their home community to achieve better outcomes -as in Moving To Opportunity- and strengthening social capital to encourage people to put down roots and invest in a place.

In the UK, Power to Change invested in micro work through its Empowering Places programme, but it did not come with the commensurate wider economic strategy for bigger geographies. The approach of Power to Change to now work with combined authorities in ways that engage communities and social enterprises in questions of investment and high streets, suggests a movement towards approaches in this category.

Neighbourhood regeneration, partnership working between state, civil society and market, and stronger social, state or economic infrastructure are frequent components of work in this category, making small interventions part of bigger plans and strategies.

In the West, most place-based market interventions in category four operate though local government, whereas in the Global South most operate through Non-Governmental Organisations.

The significant risk of this category is that it can become controlled by the local or central government and not hand over any power or decision making to places. For this reason, many people's experiences of approaches like neighbourhood regeneration can be negative and understood through a lens of estate regeneration and gentrification. The possibility of this work is the genuine link between macro and micro levers of economic change, giving people a sense of connection to change through local leadership, approaches that drive behaviour change, and the ability for local people to experience positive incentives from these market shifts.



Evidencing category four

What are the priorities for evidencing this work?

As this work is designed for large-scale impact - generally in jurisdictions of between two to five million people - practitioners seek evidence that operates across large groups of people, and this can flatten hyperlocal nuance.

As such, language from the discipline of economics dominates category four. Change is understood to involve a combination of individual preferences, predictable patterns of decision making between people in place and macro incentives typically led by state or market actors.

What approaches are used to evidence this work?

Evidence in this area tends to benefit from high levels of precision and discipline, and strong, measurable models that hypothesise linear and non-linear patterns of place-based change. This necessitates data on social and economic well-being of people who live, work and study in place.

Progress in this category is measured using economic indicators, underpinned by well-evidenced assumptions about the impact of economic wellbeing on other human development outcomes. The work of [#BeeWell](#) in Manchester and beyond is interesting in how evidence can be collected at micro scales through surveys, to both understand places and drive change amongst partners who use the data to work in different ways with young people in communities. This sort of approach can be connected to other public health and economic data.

The key addition should also be the narrative examples of how communities shaped this work in their places, and as highlighted elsewhere, this can get lost.

What are the challenges to evidencing this work?

It can be challenging for local stakeholders in communities to grapple with the varied scale nature of this work, as the methods are often pointed at making sense of the change taking place at macro scale. It can make local work seem purely in the service of regional or national approaches, and the evidence weakens community and local narrative of change.

The exemplar in this work is perhaps that of Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo to synthesise evidence across spatial scales¹³. They put strong emphasis on shared lessons from multiple global trials of intervention, combined with survey data to understand the social, political and economic context in places, and subjective observation of relationships between people and institutions. This quality of work gives this category its robustness, but it can also distance it from the micro community.



Category 5:

Rebalancing civil society, state and market

In a nutshell:

Large scale, ambitious projects (often philanthropy-led) that use a combination of mechanisms to solve 'wicked problems' in places.

Overview

Place-based work at the intersection between state, civil society and market reflects the interest of big philanthropy and states in tackling so-called 'wicked problems' and using place as the primary change agent. Work in this area can be seen as reframing of social challenges, needs or opportunities to unlock something about how places work. It can appear highly ambitious and different to how programmes typical consider social change.



Some examples for work in this category include:

In our research we have not seen any clear examples of this category in the UK. It is interested in the whole system nature of how problems are held in place, which comes with different assumptions to other categories about how change can be understood and brought about, and examples we have seen reply on significant long-term philanthropy.

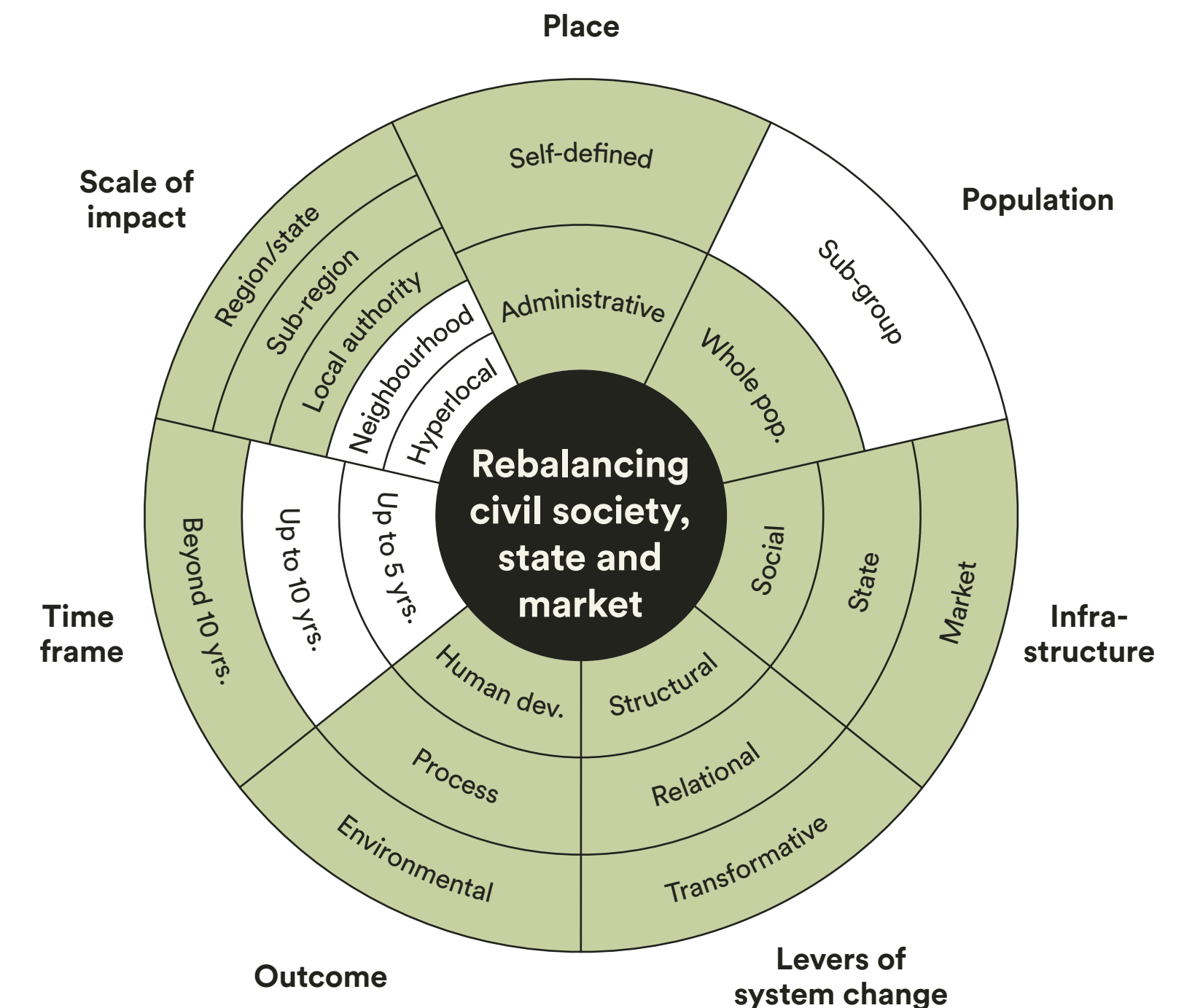
Non-UK examples include:

The California Endowment

Kerala work on death and dying

Which dimensions are relevant to this category?

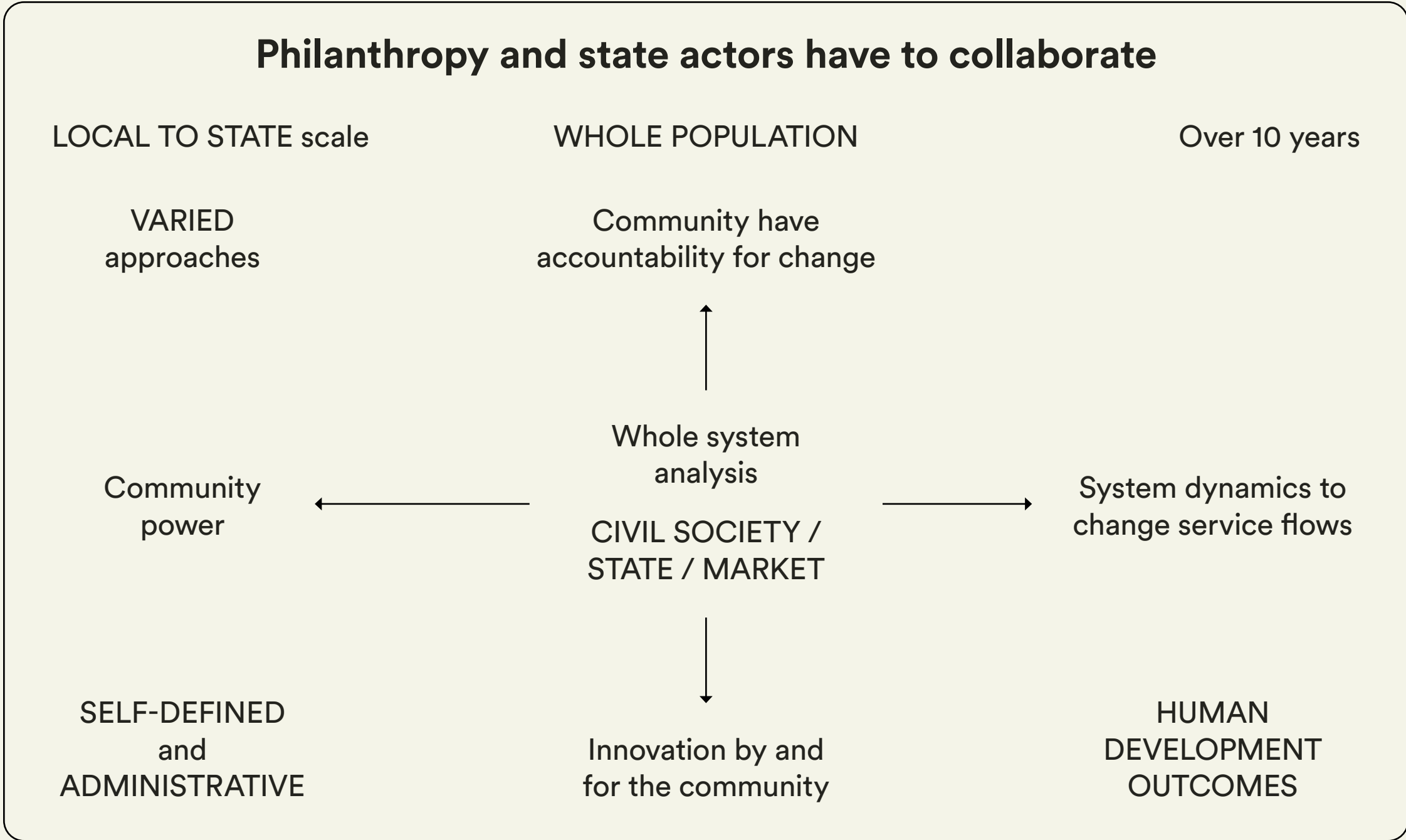
The diagram below shows which dimensions are relevant to this category:



What are the mechanisms of change in this category?

This category emerged in response to major inequalities in social, economic and health outcomes from place to place, factoring in failures of state intervention and the sense of powerlessness felt by people in economically disadvantaged places to determine their life trajectories. The potential of the work has been made apparent by the ambition and scope of US and international philanthropy.

Resetting the relationship between civil society, state and market in place is rooted in the systems theory paradigm and eschews linear and economic models. The work puts emphasis on the power of civil society. Accountability for progress and impact is placed with people and civil society in place. This work may intervene at neighbourhood levels, but it is interested in larger scales because of the nature of the wicked issues, and so it targets population level outcomes at that scale.



The change mechanism illustrated in the diagram to the left has five components. The work starts with civil society, state and market actors coming together to build a shared understanding of the system of relationships that explains a shared challenge. Second, all change agents are held to account by people living in place, not the funder or state, and collaborative governance models are important here. Third, this shift in accountability is underpinned by enhancing or building community power and focusing on macro issues that matter to local people. Fourth, the work leads to a fundamental shift in the relationship between civil society, state and market. Fifth, systems dynamics analysis is used to change unhealthy scripts in state laws or provision.

The variation in this work comes in the amount of power afforded to residents in a place. For example, the California Endowment has supported ‘good troublemakers’¹⁴ to lever change from resistant state government and courts. By contrast, the continuing work to re-balance power between civil society and health institutions over decisions regarding death and dying in Kerala, India, rests on shared accountability between civil society and state actors¹⁵.

These approaches have not been seen much in the UK. They are relevant to this report, because they help us learn from other contexts where ambitions and assumptions are different to ours. Global South examples are starting to influence health systems here, and the Kerala work on dying has a growing influence in death work in the UK. They are not part of the conversation on place here now, but we think they could and should be, to expand our assumptions about what is possible. We think this is because they often need sizeable philanthropic support to get started, because they can be seen as counter-cultural to many of the assumptions of the current assumptions of the state.

Evidencing category five



What are the priorities for evidencing this work?

What are the challenges to evidencing this work?

Evidence in the fifth category uses a different lens. Relationships between social, state and market infrastructure are generally viewed as non-linear and complex and so priorities will be for approaches to data and evidence that can bring to life a complex, systemic understanding of the work and issues.

What approaches are used to evidence this work?

Systems theory is used to identify patterns in relationships in place and intervention points that will generate a disproportionate amount of change across a system. Impact is assessed by evaluating what happens when each of the levers are pulled.

There is a diversity of evidence across multiple domains. Data is generated on social, state and market infrastructure. Hypothesis building often involves finding consensus from the contrasting views of residents, service leaders and the business community. Testing levers of change benefits as much from data on failure as data on success, because so much is about shifting an understanding of a system and not merely evidencing an outcome.

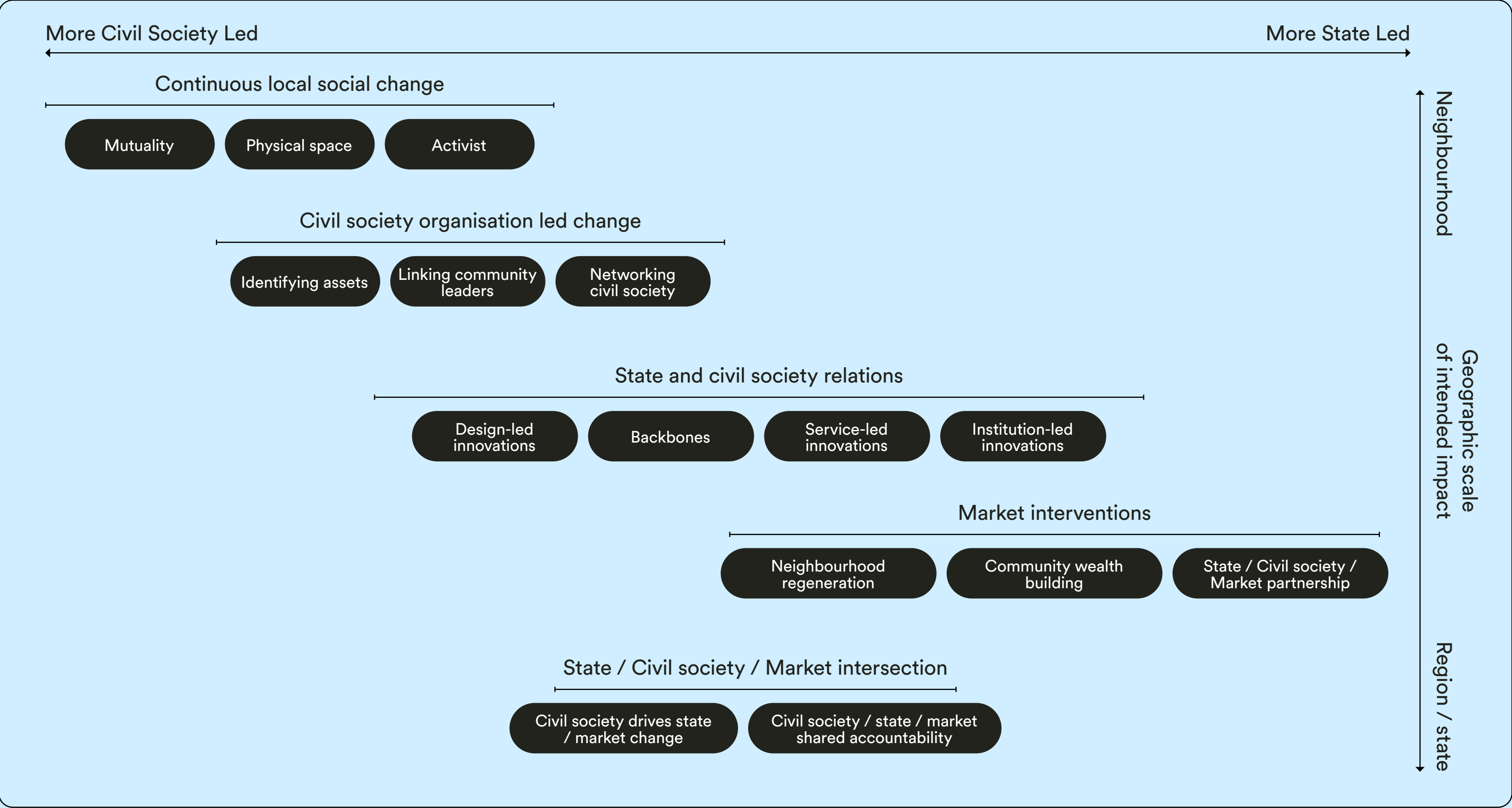
Evaluation must manage parallel inputs of data about small- and large-scale change, with each informing the other, which creates an analytical challenge.

Accountability for progress and impact is placed with people living in place, although, as mentioned above, the power they have varies between initiatives.

Sharing power and creating effective structures to support power sharing is extremely challenging. The best work in this category goes beyond democratising data and builds strong governance structures to locate power over the change process with people who live, work or learn in the place.

Reviewing the classification for place-based change

The following diagram summarises the five categories described in the previous section. Example mechanisms are listed below each category in black, but these are not exhaustive.



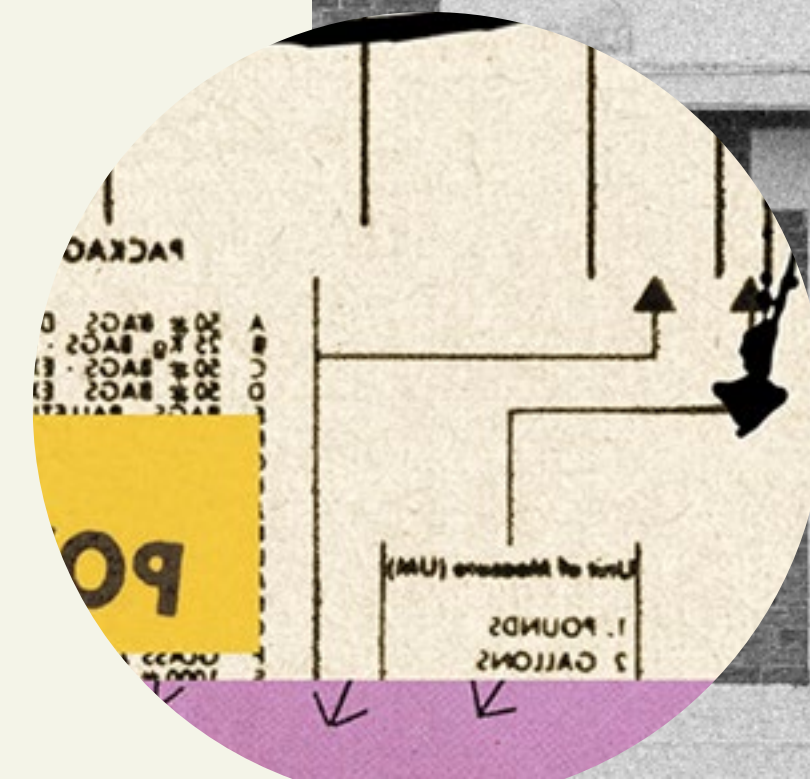
The entries to the left of the diagram are closer to community. The entries to the right are closer to state. The entries at the top are smaller in scale in terms of their intended impact, those at the bottom larger in scale in terms of intended impact. There are many exceptions, not least the work at the intersection between state, market and civil society that builds out from neighbourhoods to large jurisdictions, but the overall pattern holds true.

What is also clear is that more community led work is found more in categories one and two, more state led work in three and four, and more philanthropically instigated work in five. It is also clear that in the UK, as described above, we tend to understand place-based work in categories one, two and three.

Subsequent work will explore each category in more depth, potentially leading to new developments in the taxonomy. The current version has weaknesses as well as strengths, as summarised in the [Place & Evidence Substack](#).

04

Do Different Categories of
Place-based Change Use
Different Types of Evidence?



Do Different Categories of Place-based Change Use Different Types of Evidence?

The classification described in the previous chapter suggests that, although there are overlaps, each category is using different kinds of evidence.

We explored this proposition further by:

- Identifying the array of evidence used in place-based change
- And mapping this against the five categories in the classification.

A rapid review of the literature on place-based change identified three primary functions for evidence. The first is to *define* the problem that place-based work might solve, for example epidemiology to understand patterns of health or well-being. The second is to *monitor and learn* about progress towards the objective of the work, including reporting back to funders and commissioners. The third is to *evaluate* the extent to which objectives are met.

The literature showed that place-based change uses a wide variety of evidence. Data sources, for example, range from administrative information on service users to historical records of land use. The literature provides multiple examples of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Measurement of impact includes data on both individual and population level outcomes. Evaluation ranges from simple pre-post intervention metrics to trials with control groups. The fundamental role of relationships within place has drawn some practitioners to social network analysis.

There is also variation in how data are used. In the last five years there has been a greater use of learning partnerships where an external person or organisation facilitates conversations to inform course correction throughout the change process. This approach fits more with the values and assumptions of place-based work, and whilst not without its challenges, can allow for engagement in essential elements of place-based work: relationships, power and collaboration. This contrasts with the traditional reporting back of an external researcher or research team. The literature reveals an increasing interest in the democratisation of data, putting decisions about methods or analysis or use of findings into the hands of people who live, work or learn in place.

Some place-based change is suited to analysis of linear relationships, for example between inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact. But increasingly practitioners are turning to non-linear models that attempt to take account of the complexity and impact of feedback loops in place.

What were some of the evidentiary approaches used?

The table to the right shows a non-exhaustive list of the types of evidence that came up.

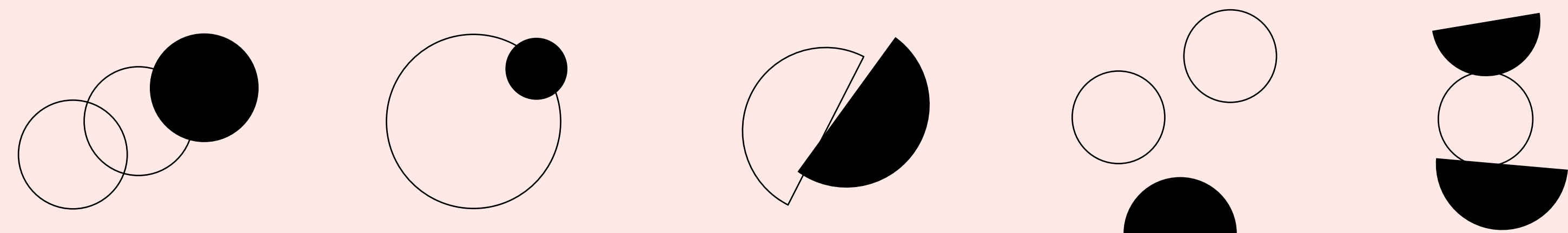
Evidentiary approach	Types	Brief overview
Data sources used and analysed	Historical data	Information already held/ collected over time used for analysis and decision-making
	Administrative data	Information collected by governments and organisations for operational purposes
	Socio-legal data	Information collected to understand how legal systems function within society, which may encompass a wide range of data types, including generated data, observations and <u>analyses of legal documents in their social context</u>
	Real time process/ outcome data	Data that is processed and analysed immediately after it is generated. This type of processing is crucial for enabling fast decision-making.
	Combining and reanalysing existing data	Use of multiple data sets to identify new and emerging trends
Mapping methods	Spatial analysis	The process of examining and interpreting geographic data to uncover patterns, relationships, and trends
	Social network analysis	An approach used to study and visualize relationships and interactions within a network. It focuses on understanding how networks are connected and how influence, information, or resources flow between them
Generated and qualitative methods	Survey data	Information collected from a sample of respondents through structured questionnaires or surveys
	Interviews, focus groups	Face to face or virtual approaches that are structured to gain information from individuals or groups in consistent ways.
	Ethnography	A qualitative research method which uses 'participant observation' as an approach whereby the researcher immerses themselves in their community or place of study
	Peer to peer research	Typically involves individuals with shared experiences conducting research within their communities
Quantitative methods for establishing evidence	Economic modelling/ econometrics	The use of statistical and mathematical models to test hypotheses and predict future trends
	Population demography/ epidemiology	Fields that study the dynamics of human populations and the impact of diseases on these populations
	Propensity score matching	A statistical technique used in observational studies to estimate the effect of a treatment, policy, or intervention
Specific approaches to evaluation and learning	Learning partnerships	A collaborative relationship, often one in which one partner is commissioned to be a 'critical friend' to another to support mutual growth and development.
	Realist methods	Commonly used in complex environments, realist methodologies treat the social context as significant and seek to answer ' “what works, for whom, under what circumstances and how” with a focus on causation and attribution.
	Pre and post methods	Tools that collect information before and after an intervention to measure the impact the intervention may have made.
	Randomised control trials, use of control groups	Trials in which places are randomly allocated to receive a certain intervention (experimental group) or a different intervention (comparison group), or no treatment at all (control or placebo group). Randomisation is designed to safeguard against biases

Patterns of evidence use in place-based work

How does this non-exhaustive list of types of evidence map against the five categories of place-based change?

The following table summarises the pattern. It shows that different types of place-based change use different types of evidence when it comes to defining, monitoring and evaluating the progress of their work.

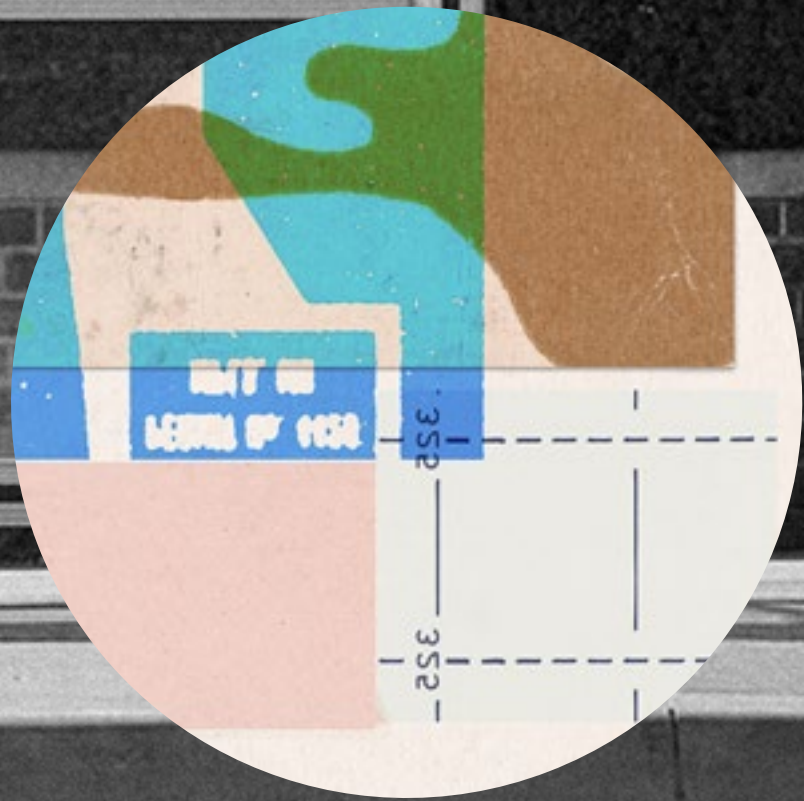
More work will be needed to further understand and test these emerging patterns.



	Continuous local social change	Civil society organisation led change	State and civil society relations	Market interventions	Rebalancing civil society, state and market
Define	Historical data, much of which is highly contextual	Historical data Socio-legal data	Administrative data	Spatial analysis Combining and reanalysing existing data	Population demography/epidemiology
Monitor and learn	Peer to peer research	Social network analysis Learning partnerships	Pre and post tools Real time process/outcome data Learning partnerships	Pre and post tools Economic modelling/econometrics	Realist, qualitative methods Real time process/outcome data Economic models
Evaluate	Administrative data Ethnography	Peer to peer research Administrative data Social network analysis Realist methods	Peer to peer research Administrative data Surveys Propensity score matching	Combining and reanalysing existing data Population demography/epidemiology Survey data	Spatial analysis Economic models Population demography/epidemiology

05

A new definition for
Place-based Change



A new definition for Place-based Change

There are multiple definitions of place-based change. As suggested above, most look down on the field and describe shared features. This work has worked from the bottom-up. It has looked at the way in which place is used as a mechanism for change. There isn't one mechanism, there are several. Five categories of place-based change have helped identify the kinds of evidence funders and practitioners need.

The analysis also suggests a new definition of place-based change, one that helps funders and practitioners understand the core qualities of the approach.

A definition of place-based change

Place-based change is a set of approaches to social change that focus on the geographic context around people.

Place is defined, either by people who live, work, or learn in a shared context, or by the state (an administrative geography). Place can be hyperlocal or large.

Context comprises social, state, and economic infrastructure of place, requiring a collaborative approach between these different forms of infrastructure.

The change can be a process -for example relationships between people and between institutions/organisations in place- and/ or human development outcomes.

Since relationships in place are complex, the analysis seeks leverage points that have disproportionate impact on the system of relationships within place.

Place-based change takes time, generally between five and 15 years, although some work is continuous.

When work in place is not place-based change

All work to change society for the better is situated in a place or places. Most of the work to change society does not fit the definition of place-based change.

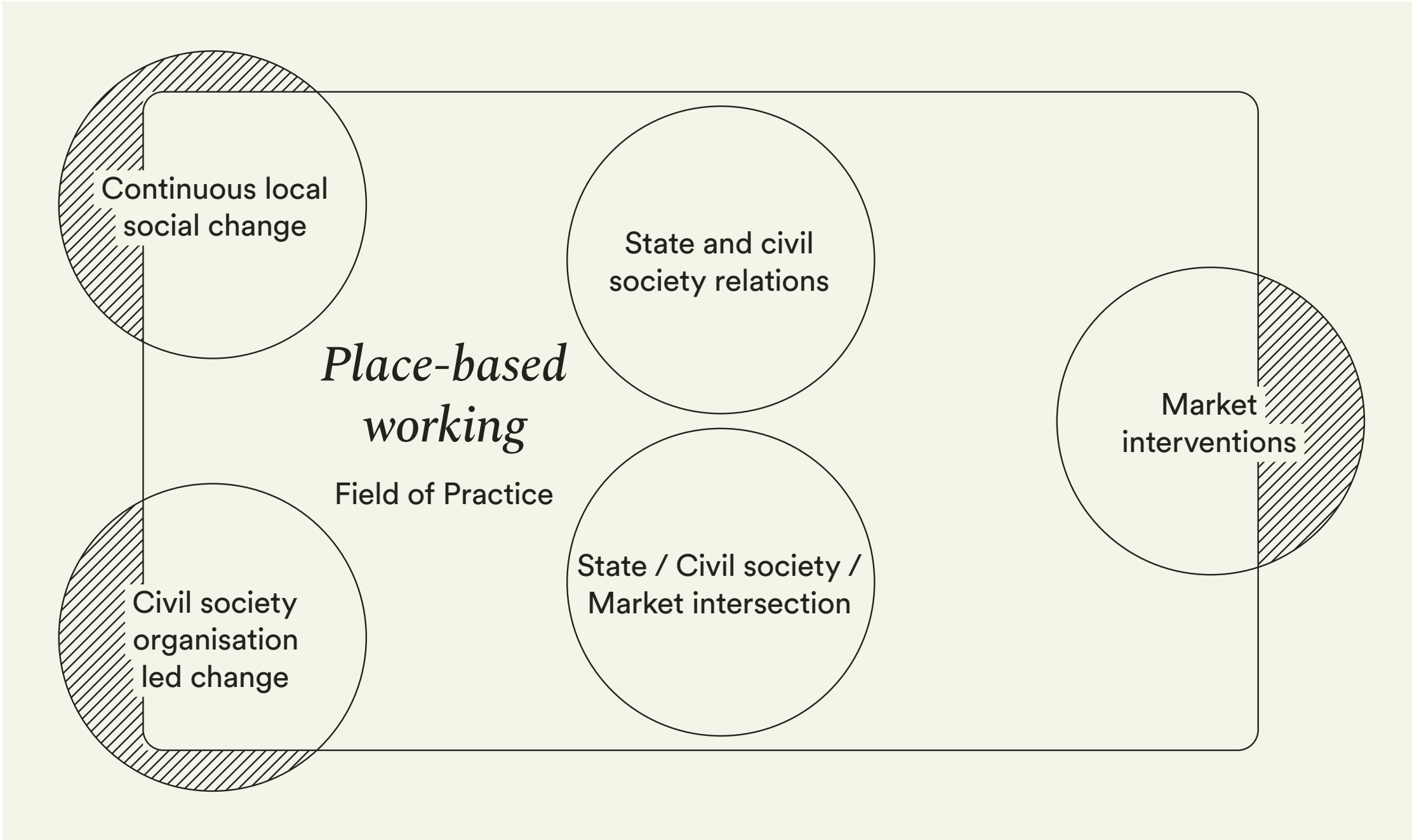
As illustrated in the diagram to the right, the review of the literature revealed that for three of the categories in the taxonomy, there was work that fitted within the above definition, and work that lay outside of the definition. Continuous local social change can be about the conditions of a place, but it can also lead to campaigns or organising about very different issues. Civil society organisations may lead or anchor place-based change but also develop methods that can anchor lots of other approaches to change and so could build practice around communities of interest or need. Market interventions can use the place, for example working with the skills or under-employment of people living in a geography, but they can also apply mechanisms of change that operate in multiple geographies, such as preparing schoolchildren for the A.I. revolution.

More specifically, work that does not:

- focus on a single or related set of geographies,
- have a clear idea about how people in place will benefit from the proposed change,
- use relationships within or between social, market or state infrastructure in the place,
- give significant time -generally five to 10 years- to achieve change,

will generally fall outside the definition of place-based change.

Over time, as we further develop this categorisation, it will be important to better understand where the boundaries are between work that is and isn't place-based, and what that tells us about the evidence base and the approach to change.



Smarter use of Evidence



The taxonomy has shed light on the evidence base for different kinds of place-based change. It also indicates future trends in evidence use by the field.

Some of these trends are already apparent. For example, the benefits of local people deciding what data to collect, and how it should be analysed and applied are widely acknowledged. There is a growing distrust of data used in reporting for funders, and a recognition of the dangers of collecting too much information. The technology to bring together and re-analyse existing data sets is rapidly improving. The limitations of linear models (that focus on inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact) are more widely acknowledged, and the use of non-linear models, systems analysis for example, is growing. The field is beginning to benefit from feedback loops to inform learning, promote behaviour change, and keep residents informed about progress towards shared objectives.

The A.I. revolution will transform how data are collected, analysed, reported and synthesised. This terrain is changing fast, but the following developments can be seen as opportunities to explore and engage with for this work.

First, there will be a greater use of natural language processing¹⁶ across all categories of place-based change. The greater processing capability that accompanies A.I. will likely shift systems analysis from primarily descriptive work to empirical measures of the strength of relationships between parts of any system. But there will continue to be a value in storytelling in many if not all categories of work, and that value may well increase alongside and in response to the A.I revolution.

Natural language processing will also afford more analysis of conversations and digital interaction. For example, it is now possible to estimate the impact of social capital on income and job prospects using social media feeds¹⁷. These types of data will become routinely available to all places, and to all place-based practitioners.

Randomised controlled trials, especially the nested models needed for much place-based work, might become redundant as A.I. maximises the potential of more data-led estimation models. If this prediction is born out, the potential to compare the impact of place-based change across geographies will be greatly enhanced.

The potential to link existing data sets should put high quality quantitative data into the hands of people working in even small civil society organisations, democratising methods.

Conclusions

This has been a report about place-based change. It has set out a classification based on the mechanism by which change is achieved. There are several mechanisms, not one. The analysis showed the types of evidence used by each category of place-based change, and suggested future directions in evidence use, especially considering the A.I. revolution. It was then possible to arrive at a new definition of place-based change, one built bottom up from the ways in which change is engineered.

This research is contingent. If resources can be secured, the work will develop to make a deeper exploration of the literature in each of the five categories of place-based change. We would test the categorisation and definitions in the field, with a wide range of practitioners to explore application of the work and identify areas for further exploration.

Starting areas for further work might include:

- **Building out each of the five categories** to better refine them and understand the nuance and variation within each one. This would include exploring and learn around best practice and innovation in each category, to inform the funding and practitioner community in the UK
- Unpick more about evidence practice, identify and test the assumptions laid out in this document about how different evidentiary practices are used to define, monitor and evaluate different types of place-based work.
- A more thorough and rigorous review of international examples in category 4 and 5 to identify learnings from this evidence base that can be brought into a UK context.

The emerging community of interest around the Place and Evidence Substack might have wider utility. There is potential for communities (plural) of interest, ideally organised around the categories of place-based change identified in this report, and for improved sharing of evidence and practice knowledge. Place Matters, who co-commissioned this report, are already acting as a convenor for the field.

Our initial question was: **what kind of evidence do people who lead, fund, or participate in place-based change need to do their work?**

Our recurring answer that is implied throughout this report can be made explicitly as:

Evidence that aligns with how the change takes place.

The point of the research leading to this report is to improve the quality of evidence used in UK place-based change. The opening pages charted the barriers to effective place-based practice, and several lead back to the variable and often poor use of evidence in the UK Too little is known about the effectiveness of place-based change, and there is hardly any reporting of ineffective work, meaning that mistakes are often repeated. Better evidence means thinking about how change will occur and selecting methods accordingly, whether it is from those who lead, fund or participate in that work. It is hoped that this report will lay the foundations for progress on this front.



Endnotes

1

[*Collective Impact*](#)

2

[*What Works Network - GOV.UK*](#)

3

[*Partnerships for People and Place: Guidance and advice for officials working on place-based policymaking - GOV.UK*](#)

4

[*From place-based to place-led | NHS Confederation*](#)

5

[*Neighbourhood reference in English Devolution Bill*](#)

6

[*Communities across the country to benefit from ‘innovation squads’ to re-build public services - GOV.UK*](#)

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[*A Brief Introduction to Realist Evaluation*](#)

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[*Asset Based Community Development \(ABCD\) - Nurture Development*](#)

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13

[*Esther Duflo & Abhijit Banerjee rethink poverty | LGT*](#)

14

[*“The Good Troublemakers”*](#)

15

[*Is the Kerala Model of Community-Based Palliative Care Operations Sustainable? Evidence from the Field - PMC*](#)

16

[*Natural Language Processing \(NLP\) \[A Complete Guide\]*](#)

17

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Appendix A: Methodology

Our broad approach was structured as follows:

Build up a body of evidence and literature bringing together sources on place-based working from the UK and internationally

We did this by using our own literature logs and reaching out to partners to identify wider sources that should be included. Once we compiled this list, we identified the publications and built this into a structured data bank using an excel file. The total number of sources reviewed for this work were 105.

They included: sources that report specifically about an instance of place-based work, theory and analysis about place-based working generally, evaluation and learning methods suitable for or applied to place-based working.

Develop a system for coding and analysing this evidence base

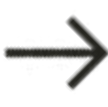
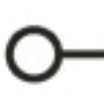
We used the AI tool Notebook LM to support ongoing analysis and hypothesis testing throughout this work. This tool allowed us to keep the evidence base 'live' while we developed a coding framework.

The key questions we used to interrogate the data included the following:

- How can we define place-based working?
- How can we differentiate between different ‘types’ of place-based work?

- Who is invested in/involved in place-based working?
- What is the impact of place-based work and how is this achieved?
- What is considered ‘good’ / ‘meaningful’ place-based working?
- How is place-based working evaluated?

The coding framework we developed was built on the seven dimensions outlined in our report. This framework is outlined in the table below:



Place	Population	Infrastructure	Levers of systems change	Outcome	Time frame	Scale of impact
Administrative	Whole population	Social	Structural leverage - numbers and feedback	Human development	Up to 5 years	Hyperlocal
Self-defined	Sub-group	State	Relational leverage - materials, information, rules	Process	Up to 10	Neighbourhood
		Market	Transformative leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Environmental	Beyond 10	Local authority
						Sub-region
						Region/ State

Appendix A: Methodology

Three people coded a selection of sources. These were then swapped and cross-coded which allowed for researchers to surface and discuss assumptions and difficulties in categorisation. This allowed us to streamline and develop the coding process and framework. An example of the coded sources is below:

Concept of place	Scale of place	Infrastructure	Outcome	Sub outcome	Approach to outcome	Leverage point	Notes on leverage/mechanisms
Administrative	Part LA	Social and State	Human development	Young people	I approach	Lower leverage - numbers and feedback	Linking and connecting, tipping point of need
Administrative	Neighbourhood	Social and State	Process	Young people	We approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Backbone team, collective direction
Administrative	LA	State	Process	Young people	I approach	Lower leverage - numbers and feedback	Institutional leadership
Administrative	Neighbourhood	Social and State	Human development	Early years	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Stewardship, engagement, co-design, innovation
Administrative	Part LA	Social and State	Human development	Child abuse	I approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Backbone team, collective direction
Administrative	Part LA	Social and State	Human development	Physical activity	We approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Backbone team, collaboration, shift in understanding value of PE
Administrative	Part LA	State	Human development	Early years	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Backbone team but focussing on implementation
Administrative	LA	Social and State	Human development	Homelessness	I approach	Lower leverage - numbers and feedback	By-name-list
Self-defined	Neighbourhood	Market	Process	Community business	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Anchor institutions to develop capacity of others
Administrative	LA	Social and State	Human development	Early years	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Investment, connections, system,
Administrative	LA	Social and State	Human development	Criminal justice	We approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Paradigm shift, self organising, rules and information flows
Administrative	LA	Social and State	Human development	Young people	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Explicit system approach, community, storytelling
Administrative	LA	Social and State	Process	Early years	We approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Collective impact plus equity
Administrative	Neighbourhood	Social and State	Human development	Voice, Agency, Power	We approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Linear community power to prevention coverage to schools to neighbourhood
Self-defined	LA	Social and State	Human development	Voice, Agency, Power	We approach	Higher leverage - power, goals, mindsets	Linking and connecting, community organising
Administrative	Sub region	Market	Process	Social economy	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Investment, weighting certain communities
Administrative	Neighbourhood	Market	Process	Asset ownership	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Local partnership for community asset development
Administrative	Part LA	Social and State	Process	Mixed	I approach	Lower leverage - numbers and feedback	Uses civil society organisations to engage with civil society more broadly, with objective of reducing pressure on public services
Administrative	Part LA	Social	Process	Mixed	I approach	Lower leverage - numbers and feedback	Not developed.
Self-defined	Neighbourhood	Social and State	Human development	Children and YP	I approach	Medium leverage - materials, information, rules	Implementation of comprehensive services

Appendix A: Methodology

Interview stakeholders to test and validate our assumptions

The following stakeholders were either interviewed for this work or discussed and gave feedback on ideas and concepts as the work evolved. The authors are incredibly grateful to them for their time, and any misapplication of their work and ideas is entirely the fault of the authors:

- Louise Armstrong, Thirty Percy
 - Rich Bell, We’re Right Here
 - Aida Cable, Thrive at Five
 - Gina Ciccerone, Fair Education Alliance
 - Samantha Crème, Collective Futures
 - Andrew Crosbie, Collective Impact Agency
 - Sharon Davies, Good Place Co.
 - Graeme Duncan, Right to Succeed
 - Ellen Dunlevy, National Lottery Community Fund
 - Atara Fridler, Crisis
 - Esther Foreman, Social Change Agency
 - Lewis Haines, Collaborate CIC
 - Sarah Handley, Impact for Urban Health
 - Annie Hinton, Right to Succeed
 - Tim Hobbs, Dartington Service Design Lab
 - Samantha Jones, National Lottery Community Fund
- Jane Lewis, Centre for Evidence and Implementation
 - Jenni Lloyd, Collaborate CIC
 - Avril McIntyre, Community Resources
 - Louisa Mitchell, AllChild
 - Lily O’Flynn, Renaisi
 - Sarah Payne, UBS Optimus
 - Peter Richards, Save the Children UK
 - Seth Reynolds, Independent Consultant
 - David Robinson, The Relationship Project
 - Naomi Rubbra, Footwork Foundation
 - Jeremy Spafford, The Old Firestation
 - Jessica Studdert, New Local
 - Rosa Sulley, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
 - Simon Tanner, London Sport
 - Melanie Waters, The Royal Foundation

Test and iterate the work in conversation with *Place Matters* and their stewardship group

This group provided valuable support for shaping and developing the work. We were also able to test the categorisation and underlying hypotheses at a workshop with funders and practitioners from UK, Australia and Canada in summer 2025.

Finally, we published initial findings from the work on the Place & Evidence Substack to invite further feedback as the work evolved.

Appendix B: Other definitions of place-based work

This small selection of definitions was identified in this research and highlight both the usefulness of them all in helping to understand practice, and the ways in which they do not focus on mechanisms of change, as in this work.

Renaissi

Place-based change is a long-term approach to identifying, understanding, and addressing social issues rooted in the experiences, expertise and relationships that exist within a recognised geographic area.

British Academy

Defines place-based policy as aligning the design and resourcing of policy at the most appropriate scale of place, to develop meaningful solutions, which improve people’s lives

**Our Place
(Scotland)**

A place-based approach is about understanding the issues, interconnections and relationships in a place and coordinating action and investment to improve the quality of life for that community.

YEF

Place-based approaches (PBAs): Collaborative, long-term approaches to addressing a social issue (e.g. youth violence). They operate in a defined geographical location, focus on local needs and the attributes of the locality, involve multiple agencies and engage local communities.

PBSC

Place-based systemic change (PBSC) is defined as an approach to social change, rather than an outcome of it. It is characterised by being long term in ambition and practice, having a collective and interrelated practice, not limited to a single organisation or service, and focused on geographies that are coherent and understood by those who live in them. This approach is engaged in building and developing relationships between people and organisations, is flexible and responsive, and explicitly engages with questions of complexity.

**Victorian Public
Service (Australia)**

The term ‘place-based approaches’ describes a diverse range of activities that target a place or location, to build on local strengths or respond to a complex social problem.

While there is no agreed definition of a place-based approach, the following definitions outline the main characteristics:

“A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.” (Dart, 2019).

“An approach that targets the specific circumstances of a place and engages local people as active participants in development and implementation, requiring government to share decision-making.” (Victorian Government, 2020).

**Centre for Just
Places (Australia)**

Place-based approaches (sometimes called ‘community-led’ approaches) are ways of working to address social, economic and ecological disadvantage. They are community-led, strengths-based responses that empower local people to respond to complex, interrelated issues in a local place. These approaches bring stakeholders from different communities and sectors together to strengthen collaboration and knowledge sharing. They value First Nations and local expertise and ownership. Local people usually lead design and implementation and hold decision-making power and accountability.

**Canadian CED
Network**

Collaborative place-based approaches (PBAs) have emerged as a means of addressing “wickedly” complex issues: those that have many interacting causes and are seen to require multiple actors to develop a co-ordinated response (Shugart and Townsend, 2010). Some wicked issues commonly associated with PBAs include climate change, poverty, obesity, crime, indigenous disadvantage, and natural resource management (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007).

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