



# Youth leadership for urban wellbeing

Supporting youth leaders to shape urban  
wellbeing: place-based approaches

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This briefing is the result of a collaboration between the Centre for Urban Wellbeing, The Young Foundation, and the University of Birmingham's Institute for Mental Health Youth participation leads and Youth Advisory Group. We are also grateful to Dr Carol Jacklin-Jarvis, Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, The Open University and Dr James Rees, Institute for Community Research and Development, University of Wolverhampton for opportunities to participate in their place-based voluntary sector leadership events in 2022.



## About The Centre for Urban Wellbeing

The Centre for Urban Wellbeing at The University of Birmingham was established in 2020 to support interdisciplinary and community-engaged research informed by the best global evidence and insights to address urban wellbeing inequalities.



## About The Institute for Mental Health

The Institute for Mental Health works to improve the outcomes and care for young people with mental health problems. We will do this by working together to understand the causes of poor mental health, prevent mental health problems from developing, and respond to established illness by developing new treatments and services.



## About The Young Foundation

The Young Foundation is the UK's home for community research and social innovation. We bring communities, organisations and policymakers together to shape a fairer future. We are a not-for-profit, driving positive change and supporting collective action to improve people's lives.

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## Why youth leadership matters



**Youth leadership is like tinted glasses – a different lens through which to see the world.**

The places we live shape our lives – despite the rapid growth in our digital worlds, communities and activities, the physical villages, towns, cities and regions where we live (and the relationships between those places) continue to determine our opportunities and prospects. The services and infrastructure which enable everyday life -- such as education, health, policing, local transport, cultural and leisure assets, housing and employment – are all shaped to a greater or lesser extent by decisions taken at the local or regional level. These are critical to our community (collective) and individual wellbeing. This is even more acute for young people who typically lack the independence, power or resources to simply relocate to a place that offers them more of what they seek.

Community wellbeing is also shaped by how power and relationships are experienced in a place. Put simply, we thrive more in places where we have positive, trusting relationships with those around us, where there is greater equality, and where we feel a sense of agency and ability to contribute to the decisions that affect us. You can explore community wellbeing in your own area here: <https://communitywellbeing.coop.co.uk/> and compare how different local places are working towards more sustainable, equitable wellbeing: <https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/>.

Place has been viewed as playing an essential role in developing civic leaders. It shapes a person's sense of belonging and commitments, their values, interests and concerns. Cultivating a sense of place can mean diverging from national curricula and instead adopting locally-relevant learning embedded in the local civic sphere and civil society organisations (Corboy et al 2019).

Young people are often overlooked as leaders in their local places, yet they have significant capabilities, local knowledge and influence. Urban and regional policies for young people are frequently focused on youth 'problems', are limited to formal skills, achievements and education, or on young people's potential. There is a need to look beyond formal mechanisms of youth representation to the ways in which young people are already shaping places, innovating and influencing others within their communities and local organisations.

This briefing introduces findings from recent research on agency, voice and activism among young people aged 14-25, and considers the factors which shape how young people can become leaders in places. It introduces ideas around place-based leadership and considers how these could inform youth involvement in promoting urban wellbeing. It is aimed at community and voluntary sector organisations, regional and local policymakers and social enterprises who are youth focussed. We share research evidence, young people's perspectives and ideas for action for these organisations to support place-based youth leadership.



## What is place-based leadership?

Place-based leadership has been defined as “a product of relationships between a range of potential actors, including those from local or regional authorities, but also varied public, private, community, voluntary or civic organizations.” (Vallance et al 2018: 1723).

Place-based leadership has become a watchword for urban and regional policy and governance since the early 2010s. For local government, it has provided a lens through which to view the success or otherwise of urban regeneration projects and regional devolution in a globalised world, as well as a way of assessing the democratic credentials of local governance systems (Ayres 2014; Hambleton 2015).

At the same time, place-based leadership has influenced health planning, such as the reform of integrated care systems and involvement of citizens in decision-making (NHS Confederation 2020), and approaches to address inequalities produced through the social determinants of health (Marmot et al 2020).

All too often, however, place-based leadership is associated with ideas of a ‘heroic leader’, who drives change and transformation, and with hierarchical structures where the leader is an individual at the apex of power – whether that be a in the political, business or civic sphere.

Community leadership, however, recognises that there is great power within communities and that people are stepping up, taking action, and creating change together – showing leadership – in myriad ways. Many people taking on leadership roles within their community may have no formal title or position and are often unpaid; many also reject the label of ‘leader’, reflecting a rejection of the typical power dynamics and hierarchies it invokes. It has been said that “the traits and characteristics of a community leader are entirely contingent on being able to build a collective, communitarian approach to creating change” (Goulden, 2022). This view aligns more closely with models of distributed and collective leadership which harness the power of relationships and networks.

### Recent research has examined:

- **the role of agency and creative approaches to place leadership** from the ground up (Ayres 2013)
- **how collaborative and community-informed forms of governance and knowledge production are the most effective** in shaping successful and strategic urban futures (Vallance et al 2018; Beer and Clower 2014: 12)
- **how successful place-based leadership mobilizes local knowledge**, particularly of small voluntary sector organisations, works collectively within a “web of dense local relationships” and is characterized by deep “rootedness and commitment to place” (Rees et al 2021: 103)
- **the importance of co-creation in developing opportunities for radical and visionary forms of innovation** to tackle health and wellbeing and build more sustainable and resilient cities (Hambleton 2015).



## What is youth leadership?

It is not hard to find young people taking on leadership roles and engaging in civic and social action. Youth leadership and activities designed to motivate, identify and support young leaders of the future are diverse: there are young people who are self-organising to create change through activism and entrepreneurship; formal opportunities to represent youth voice in a range of fora; civic engagement through traditional volunteering or fundraising; and for those of age, via traditional political processes.

Like many community leaders, however, young people also tend to shy away from the term “leadership” and its connotations of power imbalances and need to be situated in formal roles. Instead, they too tend to focus on attributes and behaviours which reflect the principles of distributed and collective leadership.

In June 2022 we consulted with a group of young people who sit on a Youth Advisory Group at the University of Birmingham’s Institute for Mental Health, an activity which would typically be seen as an example of youth leadership. From those discussions (see box), one young person developed a definition of youth leadership that we have adopted here:



**Leadership means the drive or ability to promote a set of ideas, a movement or a particular agenda.**



The University of Birmingham’s Institute of Mental Health Youth Advisory Board, on tour in Copenhagen.



## Youth leadership: Views of the IMH Youth Advisory Group

In June 2022 the University of Birmingham's Institute of Mental Health Youth Advisory Group met with researchers from the Centre for Urban Wellbeing and The Young Foundation to share their views and experiences of place-based leadership. We are a team of youth advisors with lived experience of mental ill-health and from our experience, we think the following are important factors to consider in building place-based leadership qualities and capacities among young people:

**“I would not use the word ‘leader’ to describe myself. It implies a power imbalance between myself and other youth. I do not believe myself to be different to others because I believe that every young person has the potential to get to the position that I am in. I prefer the word ‘changemaker’.”**

- The **term ‘leaders’** doesn't accurately capture who is important in a community or local place. Instead, we think more about who has **influence**, including people who act as advocates, mentors, or ambassadors and those who provide opportunities for young people.
- More attention should be paid to the **qualities** of people with influence, rather than their formal roles. These qualities include empowering others, transforming opportunities, ‘pushing against’ issues or institutions that are problematic, and taking action to lead to real changes for marginalised groups. It helps if leaders have authentic personal experience of adversity, and leaders are humble, leading by example, and led their own passion and compassion.
- **Place** has multiple meanings - communities are not just place-based, and place may refer to someone's mental state which can shift over time, e.g. ‘being in a different place now’. However, ‘place’ is important – it is somewhere to connect over common ground, influence others and act on behalf of people marginalised in specific communities.
- **Images of place** are as important as the networks and conditions of a place – having a regional accent or identity can be a conflicting part of personal identity, evoking a range of emotions including pride, self-mockery and defensiveness. It is important to have organisations and individuals which portray their locality in a positive light as this can shape how diverse young people see themselves and their future opportunities. Institutions which represent a local area on the national and international stage need to be more inclusive for young people.
- People may become **‘accidental leaders’ through their social media influence** or popularity. This carries a weight of responsibility and can be equally positive or negative.
- **Everyday leadership** is as important as more visible kinds of leadership and influence and can sow the seeds for how people think about young people, user involvement and participation.
- Young people face **barriers** to becoming leaders, including a lack of self-confidence, fear of being disliked or of failure, and a lack of resources.
- **Community and voluntary sector organisations** are a key for involving young people in leadership activities in specific places – they can provide training, act as facilitators, make connections to business, public sector bodies, evaluators and research funders - supporting and boosting their reach, resources and confidence to take social action.



## Why youth leadership in place matters



**There is limited existing evidence on the pathways between co-production in local decision-making and community wellbeing**

In 2020, research into what matters to communities today found that young people aged 16 - 30 want routes to take action in their communities and pathways to shape positive change in society - but the majority feel they lacked the entry points, infrastructure, support and resources to do so (Morrison et al, 2020). The desire to provide young people with these opportunities is apparent in communities across the UK. In short, it should matter to policy makers and funders because it matters to the young people and adults hoping to create a better future for the places in which they live and work.

It is acknowledged that young people have often been politically excluded from local decision making and that community initiatives can often find it hard to engage them (Osborne et al 2021). Yet there is undoubtedly an appetite for a different future, with greater emphasis on environmental and social justice, and tackling deeply ingrained inequalities.

Research shows that there is an urban-rural divide in volunteering rates with young people in urban areas less likely to volunteer than those in rural areas. Likewise, higher rates of volunteering are reported in more affluent communities compared to more deprived places. Rates of participation also vary by ethnicity, gender, age, education, and family income. It has been found that young people who volunteer are more likely to be white, female, affluent and have access to significant resources and employment opportunities (Themimulle et al, 2022).

Evidence also suggests that young people have been shying away from traditional participation mechanisms in favour of more informal engagement (Crowley and Moxon, 2017). Therefore we should pay attention to the “implicit activism” which are practiced by young people as much as formalised mechanisms of youth leadership or more spectacular performances of youth influence. This involves recognising the constraints, lack of resource and opportunity that many marginalised young people face to even “imagine a ‘tomorrow’” let alone lead strategies towards improving their future wellbeing (Horton and Kraftl 2009 cited in Börner et al 2022: 277).

Participatory methods are important for conducting research which meets the authentic needs and priorities of communities (Walker et al 2022). They are increasingly used in the co-production of research priorities and design of urban health and wellbeing services. Public and Patient Involvement (PPI) in research panels have become commonplace in public health research, while training of community researchers and researchers in residence is expanding. This research approach is beginning to address an important gap identified by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which found limited existing evidence on the pathways between co-production in local decision-making and community wellbeing (Pennington et al 2017).



## Youth leadership for urban wellbeing

Youth inclusion is essential to developing effective health promotion and preventing inequalities in health. A central aspect of this is to highlight the importance of working with young people's own language, terms and perspectives with respect to health and wellbeing (Spencer 2013).

Researchers have for instance used the principles of co-production to empower young people in identifying the priorities of young people relating to public mental health (Taylor et al 2021), and to develop international urban planning initiatives informed by the voices of marginalized young people (Sletto and Vasudevan 2021).

Globally, the citiesRISE programme is focused on applying a "Mentally-Healthy Cities Framework" to transform mental health policy and practice through youth development, advocacy, networking and leadership. This is currently being put into practice in Nairobi, Chennai, Bogota, Seattle and Sacramento, and involves city-wide activities to reduce stigma, engage with young people through schools, sports and arts, and through work with youth mental health activists.

At the University of Birmingham, UK, young leader and member of the Institute for Mental Health Youth Advisory Group, ZeZe (Zaynab Sohawon) is turning her experiences into significant action to improve mental health care:

### Youth leadership in urban mental health: Emotion Dysregulation in Autism and The Co-Stars Project

Emotion Dysregulation in Autism is an autism and youth mental health charity for autistic young people leaving the psychiatric inpatient system. It was founded by ZeZe who has experience of CAMHS Low Secure and Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit over 4 years. ZeZe is a renowned mental health advocate, a TEDx speaker and a published author. She is part of the University of Birmingham's Institute for Mental Health Youth Advisory Group, having been recruited whilst she was still in a psychiatric unit. She advocates for the needs and rights of youth with severe and enduring mental illness in Birmingham.

The charity has already been funded by the Commonwealth Games 2022 in Birmingham and several other youth organisations. The main two charitable deliverables are social action workshops and psychologically informed peer support.

The social action project is The Co-Stars project, is a University of Birmingham funded research project to tackle mental health inequalities. The research will entail producing a lived-experience-led and youth-led training package to deliver to police, social care and places of worship. This project is aimed at reducing health inequalities and improving access to mental health care in support in under-served communities. The peer support is a pilot programme of delivering a youth mental health psychological model to autistic young people leaving the psychiatric inpatient system. There has already been agreement within NHS England to fund the next programme.

Reflecting her achievements, ZeZe is already the recipient of five prestigious awards including a Diana Award, a Parliamentary award and a Global Changemaker award. ZeZe is supported as founder of a youth mental health and autism charity by a trustee team.



Involving young people as leaders in urban wellbeing is often supported by co-production methods. While it is easy to see the potential benefits of these methods, it is important not to assume they always lead to empowerment. In relation to urban mental health, co-production can pose significant challenge for some institutional norms, since “transformative co-production is about dismantling institutions, changing their cultures and practices and rebalancing power” (Carr, 2016). For some, the term has become over-used, leading to a failure to achieve equal and practical outcomes for disadvantaged groups, in place of democratic processes, and in passing on the responsibility to those least able to effect change (Williams et al 2020; Bovaird et al 2019).

Good quality research studies are needed to be able to evaluate these co-production and leadership initiatives. Transparent protocols for evaluating the effectiveness, impacts and public value of youth place-based leadership programmes need to be further developed.

In the meantime, there is evidence of the potential positive impacts of engaging in youth leadership, action and participatory research. Young people involved as ‘experts by experience’ for instance have reported increased self-efficacy, self-esteem and a developing sense of professional identity in the course of their activities as co-researchers (Mayer 2017).



A youth leadership group in East London developing social action plans. © The Young Foundation

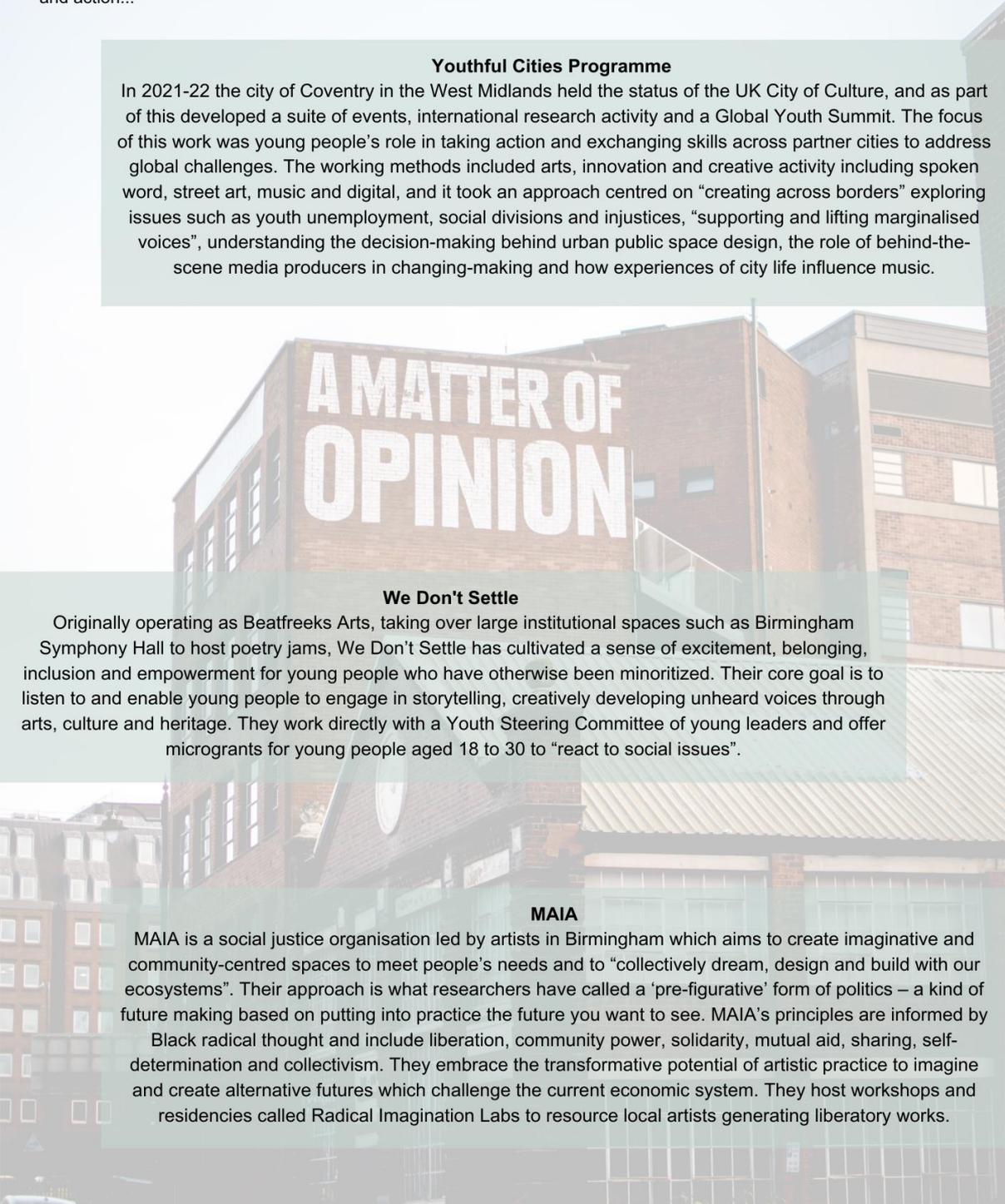


## Inspiration from a young region: leading urban wellbeing in Birmingham and the West Midlands

The West Midlands is known for its young and diverse population, with around 36% of the population currently under the age of 30 [ONS Census 2021]. A wide range of independent organisations in the region are focussed on leading thinking and action on people's relationship with place and many have been founded by or engage with young people. Here's just a handful to inspire you to reimagine the future of place-based youth advocacy and action...

### Youthful Cities Programme

In 2021-22 the city of Coventry in the West Midlands held the status of the UK City of Culture, and as part of this developed a suite of events, international research activity and a Global Youth Summit. The focus of this work was young people's role in taking action and exchanging skills across partner cities to address global challenges. The working methods included arts, innovation and creative activity including spoken word, street art, music and digital, and it took an approach centred on "creating across borders" exploring issues such as youth unemployment, social divisions and injustices, "supporting and lifting marginalised voices", understanding the decision-making behind urban public space design, the role of behind-the-scene media producers in changing-making and how experiences of city life influence music.



A MATTER OF  
OPINION

### We Don't Settle

Originally operating as Beatfreaks Arts, taking over large institutional spaces such as Birmingham Symphony Hall to host poetry jams, We Don't Settle has cultivated a sense of excitement, belonging, inclusion and empowerment for young people who have otherwise been minoritized. Their core goal is to listen to and enable young people to engage in storytelling, creatively developing unheard voices through arts, culture and heritage. They work directly with a Youth Steering Committee of young leaders and offer microgrants for young people aged 18 to 30 to "react to social issues".

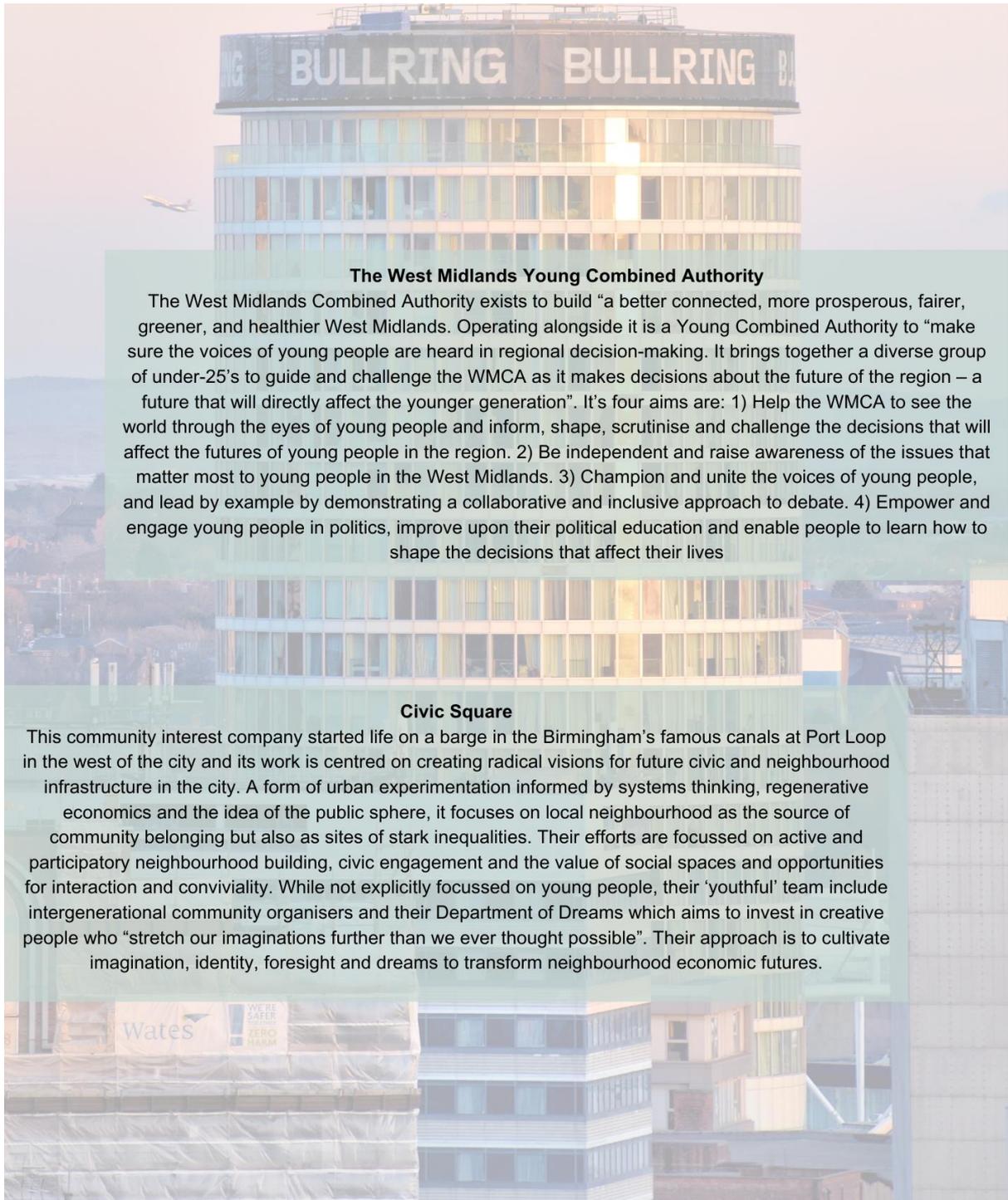
### MAIA

MAIA is a social justice organisation led by artists in Birmingham which aims to create imaginative and community-centred spaces to meet people's needs and to "collectively dream, design and build with our ecosystems". Their approach is what researchers have called a 'pre-figurative' form of politics – a kind of future making based on putting into practice the future you want to see. MAIA's principles are informed by

Black radical thought and include liberation, community power, solidarity, mutual aid, sharing, self-determination and collectivism. They embrace the transformative potential of artistic practice to imagine and create alternative futures which challenge the current economic system. They host workshops and residencies called Radical Imagination Labs to resource local artists generating liberatory works.

Photo: Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham - Joe Hepburn on Unsplash





### **The West Midlands Young Combined Authority**

The West Midlands Combined Authority exists to build “a better connected, more prosperous, fairer, greener, and healthier West Midlands. Operating alongside it is a Young Combined Authority to “make sure the voices of young people are heard in regional decision-making. It brings together a diverse group of under-25’s to guide and challenge the WMCA as it makes decisions about the future of the region – a future that will directly affect the younger generation”. It’s four aims are: 1) Help the WMCA to see the world through the eyes of young people and inform, shape, scrutinise and challenge the decisions that will affect the futures of young people in the region. 2) Be independent and raise awareness of the issues that matter most to young people in the West Midlands. 3) Champion and unite the voices of young people, and lead by example by demonstrating a collaborative and inclusive approach to debate. 4) Empower and engage young people in politics, improve upon their political education and enable people to learn how to shape the decisions that affect their lives

### **Civic Square**

This community interest company started life on a barge in the Birmingham’s famous canals at Port Loop in the west of the city and its work is centred on creating radical visions for future civic and neighbourhood infrastructure in the city. A form of urban experimentation informed by systems thinking, regenerative economics and the idea of the public sphere, it focuses on local neighbourhood as the source of community belonging but also as sites of stark inequalities. Their efforts are focussed on active and participatory neighbourhood building, civic engagement and the value of social spaces and opportunities for interaction and conviviality. While not explicitly focussed on young people, their ‘youthful’ team include intergenerational community organisers and their Department of Dreams which aims to invest in creative people who “stretch our imaginations further than we ever thought possible”. Their approach is to cultivate imagination, identity, foresight and dreams to transform neighbourhood economic futures.

Photo: The Bullring Rotunda, Birmingham – Adam Jones on Unsplash



## Routes to youth leadership

Young people can be supported in multiple ways to develop their leadership skills and shape decision-making on issues that matter to them and which affect their lives and communities. These can range from programmes with a specific emphasis on developing leadership skills and giving cohorts of young people the opportunity to ‘learn by doing’. Other opportunities can be created by changing the way in which traditional decision-making processes are designed and structured, giving young people greater power and say of the work of existing institutions.

Examples of this shaping urban policies and place-making abound – from those with an explicit focus on shaping place (such as the Paris participatory budgeting scheme and participatory policy-making experiments across Europe), to those which have a thematic focus which translates into impact on everything from environmental protection and enhancement, to social cohesion.

Table 1: Examples of youth leadership programmes and opportunities across the UK and Europe.

Type of programme	In action
<b>Leadership skills development</b>	<a href="#">Youth Scotland</a> has developed the iLead journey which engages, inspires and empowers young people to get involved in “everyday leadership” with potential progression through to roles as peer mentors and young leaders on the programme itself.
	<a href="#">Uprising</a> runs leadership programmes in several locations across the UK, along with an online Environmental Leadership programme open to all. Their mission is to open up pathways and “change the face of power” and support young people from underrepresented groups, including those from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds.
	The “ <a href="#">Gender Justice Beyond Borders Leadership Program</a> ” is an initiative by WoW (With or Without) and the Center for Migration, Gender, and Justice (CMGJ) based in Stuttgart. It equips migrant youth across Europe with the skills and knowledge to advocate for migrant rights and gender justice in Europe, via a six-month online programme.
<b>Design and delivery of services</b>	<a href="#">Pupil Power</a> is “a student-led movement aiming to educate and engage young people on educational policy that affects them and their experience of school”. From its origins in East London, it now engages students of all ages from across the UK.
	<a href="#">Young Social Innovators</a> in Ireland empowers and supports young people to put their innovative ideas into action to bring about positive social change for the benefit of people, communities and the environment.
<b>Shaping research</b>	The James Lind Alliance promotes the setting of health research priorities in partnership with those affected. Young people across the UK have been involved in Priority Setting in Partnership on issues including <a href="#">teenage cancer</a> , and <a href="#">mental health</a> in children and young people.
	The University of Birmingham’s <a href="#">Institute of Mental Health Youth Advisory Group</a> involves 18-25 year olds in research on adolescent mental health that matters to young people. They have contributed to and co-authored academic publications, teaching activities, shaped research priorities, presented their own perspectives at regional, national and international research forums and have launched new mental health initiatives.



<p><b>Funding decisions</b></p>	<p>The National Lottery Community Fund is the largest funder of children and young people activity across the UK. In <a href="#">England</a> and <a href="#">Wales</a>, they commissioned youth-led research to help inform their funding decisions and place youth voice at the heart of their work.</p>
<p><b>Polycymaking</b></p>	<p>The city of Paris runs one of the world’s largest <a href="#">Participatory Budgeting</a> programmes. It places 5% of its annual budget (equivalent to €82m in 2022) in the hands of residents each year to design and vote on projects to improve city life. As part of the programme, there is a strand of funding reserved for young people’s initiatives – in 2022, 73,425 children and young people voted through their schools and colleges.</p> <p>Belfast is one of the youngest cities in Europe and so the <a href="#">Belfast City Youth Council</a> gives them a say in how the city is run. They meet with Elected Members from the People and Communities Committee three times a year and have led their own research and campaigns, and piloted projects to improve youth provision.</p> <p>In four European cities – Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn - young people have been involved in local <a href="#">participatory, reflexive policy making processes</a>, working alongside local stakeholders and policy makers on issues including housing and education.</p>



## Ideas for Action

Based on the evidence, engagement with young people and case studies collated in this briefing, we recommend that Community and Voluntary Sector organisations, national and local funders, regional and local policy makers should:

- **Address** barriers faced by young people becoming advocates, mentors and ambassadors.
- **Identify** institutional practices and resources needed for effective urban co-creation.
- **Invest** in relationships between young people and Community and Voluntary Sector organisations to shape both leadership and community wellbeing and health inequalities.
- **Provide** opportunities for shaping places, representing others, taking action.
- **Spot** opportunities and impacts of ‘small acts’ of leadership which change the lives of others.
- **Develop** intergenerational advisory and advocacy networks to better involve young people and ensure they’re not solely defined by their age.
- **Provide** young people with opportunities to take on leadership roles in a range of ways which reflect a broad and holistic understanding of leadership, and ideas of distributed leadership.
- **Look** for tangible and meaningful opportunities to engage young people in the development, design, delivery and evaluation of services and policies which affect them at the local level.
- **Go beyond** existing consultative processes – these can provide a starting point, but participatory approaches can lead to improved outcomes for urban wellbeing by being more responsive to local need.



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