

Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure

The British Academy | power to change

Contents

Preface		03
Foreword		04
Executive summary		06
1	**Introduction**	08
2	**Using social infrastructure to support the social fabric of places**	11
3	**Treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure**	14
4	**Defining the purpose of social infrastructure**	18
5	**What is the future policy and research agenda?**	20
6	**References**	22
About		23
Acknowledgements		24

Preface

In 2020, the British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, was asked by the Government Office for Science to produce an independent review addressing the question: *What are the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19?* The subsequent report drew together evidence from a wide range of disciplines on the long-term societal, economic and cultural impact of the pandemic. It identified nine areas of long-term societal impact, including the increased importance of local communities, widening geographic inequalities and worsened health outcomes, and growing health inequalities. Included amongst the recommendations made in the *Covid Decade* report was the need to "*strengthen and expand* [the] *community-led social infrastructure that underpins the vital services and support structures needed to enhance local resilience, particularly in the most deprived areas*".[1]

This recommendation resonated with the findings and experiences of Power to Change, the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. In *Backing our Neighbourhoods*[2], Power to Change argued that any policy efforts to address inequality and boost resilience need to focus on social infrastructure at the neighbourhood level.

To engage with the debate around these recommendations and contribute to the evidence base to support their implementation, the British Academy and Power to Change came together to collectively explore questions relating to understanding social infrastructure. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Community Studies were commissioned to undertake two related research projects. The first explored examples of international policy interventions that aim to strengthen social infrastructure to draw out learning for UK policymakers. The second involved peer research into community definitions and understandings of social infrastructure in England.

Separate evidence reports for each of these projects are being published at the same time as this report and provide further detail and analysis on both of these areas.

This collaborative research programme forms a crucial first step in both organisations' efforts to contribute to this essential policy area. We hope it provides an essential foundation of policy considerations and insights which allow policymakers, civil society leaders and communities themselves to identify what social infrastructure is, to understand what it looks like in different contexts, and how we need to start thinking about policies to support and strengthen it.

Hetan Shah
Chief Executive Officer, The British Academy

Tim Davies-Pugh
Chief Executive, Power to Change

1 The British Academy, (2021), *Shaping the Covid Decade: addressing the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19*, p. 8.
2 Power to Change (2021), *Backing Our Neighbourhoods: making levelling up work by putting communities in the lead.*

Foreword

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that place and geography matter to people in times of uncertainty. People placed great value on local green spaces and open spaces during Covid lockdowns for recreation and socialising. People maintained connections both physically and online. Throughout the pandemic, online spaces such as neighbourhood WhatsApp groups and community Facebook pages helped to connect streets, communities and people who were otherwise cut off from each other. For all of us, 'neighbourhood' and 'very local' came to mean something both personal and powerful.

But the pandemic also showed us that the impact of crises – and the policy response to them – certainly does not affect all places and communities equally. The distribution of excess deaths in the United Kingdom by location provides vivid evidence of the unequal impact of the virus. People's experience of the pandemic was also very unequal. Some households in some places suffered major economic hardship. Others found it a time to save and prosper. In some places, significant numbers of people worked from home. In others, many people were going out to work in vital services. The pandemic exposed the inequalities of place, while also making the local much more important to us all.

We are entering a time of *permacrisis* where wave after wave of different crises – social, economic, health and climatic – are affecting us globally and locally. These crises do not occur in isolation. The impact of one crisis is heightened by the emergence of the next crisis. Attempts to understand the 'new normal', let alone return to how things were, are continually thwarted by a series of interconnected events that only seem to increase at pace.

Since the start of the pandemic in 2019, we have also seen an attack on Ukraine by Russia that has caused a series of international shocks, a 'cost of living' crisis with prices in the UK increasing by 10.1 per cent in the 12 months to September 2022[3], the long-term impact of Brexit continues to be felt, and there is a sense of fragility in the political governance of the country. And all of this as the climate catastrophe starts to affect profoundly the way in which we live. The risk of flooding, and the highest summer temperatures on record, are having a huge impact on communities, with the poorest communities and people suffering most. As the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General said at the start of COP27 in Egypt, the world is on the "*highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator.*"[4]

In times like these where do people turn? What is the glue that binds people in difficult and desperate times? And how do we help communities provide vital support?

This collaborative research programme has looked to address these questions both internationally and locally across different communities in England.

From our international review we have seen examples of the importance of social infrastructure. From communities in Mexico being energised through

3 Office for National Statistics, 'Consumer Price Inflation, UK: September 2022'. Release date: 19 October 2022.
4 Sky News, 'We are on highway to climate hell', says UN Secretary General', Youtube [accessed 13 December 2022].

resisting challenges to urban wetlands, to participative approaches being used in remote Australian communities to balance the needs of both the people of the Australian First Nations and the mining communities working on their land, social infrastructure has been essential.

This peer research in England has taken us to venues that provide vital support and leadership for their communities. Places like the Black South West Network in Bristol, the Rotunda in north Liverpool, the Barking Enterprise Centre, and the West End Women and Girls Centre in Elswick, Newcastle.

At each of these places we have heard of their importance to their communities. From providing business support services to community education and childcare, each of them acting as beacons of hope and support for their communities.

Built on a deep understanding of what makes their communities work, and generally led by people, often women, who have grown up in their communities, these types of spaces have found practical ways in which problems can be solved.

At the heart of our research findings is the need to understand the importance of listening and responding to community voices, the importance of connection, and perhaps above all, the role that our connections with the natural world can play in bringing us together.

This collaborative research programme has sought to understand how these types of spaces can be supported in these challenging times, and in particular, how policymakers can provide support and engage with these vital spaces.

Dame Julia Unwin DBE
Chair of the Advisory Group

Executive summary

The British Academy and Power to Change came together in early 2022 to collectively explore questions relating to social infrastructure and its value to different communities. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Community Studies were commissioned to undertake two related research projects. The first of these explored examples of international policy interventions that aim to strengthen social infrastructure to draw out learning for UK policymakers. The second involved peer research into community definitions and understandings of social infrastructure in England.

This report brings together the findings of these two research projects. It aims to deepen our understanding of social infrastructure, and so give policymakers (national, regional and local), civil society leaders, and communities themselves the insights needed to strengthen this infrastructure and help meet current and future challenges.

The research findings emphasise the need to understand the value of listening and responding to community voices, and the importance of considering accessibility and inclusion. The research has shown, in particular, the importance of social infrastructure as a 'seed-bed' for the creation, enhancement and maintenance of social capital, a vital element of the social fabric of our communities. It has also shown the importance of 'accidental' social infrastructure – those places which are intended to serve a different purpose, but which nevertheless act as social infrastructure.

This report explores three aspects of social infrastructure: 1) the use of social infrastructure to support the social fabric of places, 2) treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure, and 3) defining the purpose of social infrastructure. For each of these three aspects, policy considerations arising from the findings of the research have been drawn out. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of policy considerations

Using social infrastructure to support the social fabric	**Social infrastructure should be seen as an asset that contributes to the creation and maintenance of the social fabric** Considering social infrastructure as an asset promotes approaches that build on what communities already have as well as identifying gaps in their social fabric. **Social infrastructure in places needs to be mapped and recorded** The existence of examples of social infrastructure in different places – such as the local library, faith centres and community centres, or museums, sites of heritage interest and private-public spaces – can all be identified and plotted. Such an exercise can harness the support and knowledge of local communities.

Treating social infrastructure as infrastructure	**Social infrastructure should be open, accessible and inclusive** Social infrastructure should be able to be used by different people for a range of different activities. Spaces should be welcoming to different parts of the community and the costs of accessing spaces should be considered. The barriers to accessing spaces, whether physical, such as transport connectivity, or psychological, such as feelings of safety, should also be understood and managed. **National, regional and local policymakers should consider social infrastructure at a community scale** Many different types of spaces, both tangible and intangible, are used as social infrastructure by different members of the community. Social infrastructure needs to be seen as a combination of the different assets – including organisations, places and spaces – that enable communities to function. This can include both public sector and private sector organisations. **The importance and costs of maintaining social infrastructure need to be understood** As with other types of infrastructure, there are ongoing maintenance costs associated with social infrastructure. These different costs should be accounted for and managed. **The role that the private sector plays in the provision of spaces that can be used as social infrastructure needs to be recognised and reflected in future strategic planning and policymaking** The social fabric of places is made up of more than just spaces provided by the public and voluntary sectors. Private sector actors play a key role in the social fabric of places, whether through anchor institutions such as supermarkets and shopping centres, or through the development and regeneration of spaces.
Defining the purpose of social infrastructure	**National, regional and local policymakers should include and understand community voices when designing and maintaining social infrastructure** Without the active involvement of communities, other actors, such as national, regional and local government, the private sector, or the voluntary sector, may not understand the range of different purposes that people ascribe to social infrastructure. **National, regional and local policymakers should work with communities to develop approaches that manage competing purposes** An understanding of the different purposes that people use social infrastructure for requires policymakers and providers to work with communities to try and develop solutions that meet the needs of the widest range of people, whilst simultaneously addressing questions of power.

We hope the policy considerations stimulate further engagement and discussion with policymakers and within communities about how social infrastructure is best understood, strengthened and supported. This work will become all the more important as the UK seeks to address current and future crises; robust social infrastructure will have a critical role to play in this effort. The British Academy and Power to Change will continue to work to further debate, generate evidence, and connect policymakers with research on what matters to communities.



1. Introduction

> *"Before I would just think of places, whereas now I've got more of a sense of what they represent. They represent accessibility, they represent inclusion, they represent connection"* - Participant in Bristol peer research

Social infrastructure is a concept that has become embedded in the languages of policymaking and academia over the last few years. The government's Levelling Up White Paper alone contains nearly 50 mentions of the phrase, either used on its own or alongside the phrase *social capital*.

The importance of social infrastructure to people and communities is well understood both internationally and within communities across England, even if 'social infrastructure' is not necessarily a concept or expression commonly used among the general public. The purpose of this collaborative research programme is to support policymakers as they consider how best to develop, maintain and support social infrastructure.

With these two projects, we have contributed to the evidence base by assessing examples of social infrastructure from a range of different countries and deepening our understanding of how people view the assets of the places where they live. Whilst the conditions in which the examples of social infrastructure operate differ from country-to-country, we believe that policymakers can learn some important lessons by looking beyond the UK, particularly at how different types of social infrastructure are used to build community cohesion. Moreover, our research can help policymakers to better understand how more traditional types of social infrastructure are bolstered by alternative spaces that can offer similar benefits to communities.

Table 2: Overview of research projects

The first two projects of this collaborative research programme consisted of an international review of social infrastructure, and a peer research project to understand community perspectives of social infrastructure in England.

The objective of the **international review** was to develop a broader evidence base of different examples of, and approaches to, social infrastructure developments through a literature review and a series of 'deep-dive' interviews with participants from a selection of different countries.

The findings of the international review are grouped into six themes:

Openness of purpose – Spaces with a degree of flexibility of use were found to promote diversity of use and inclusivity.

Connectivity – Social infrastructure is a key part of the web of connections that link us to one another.

Community voice – The inclusion of community voices is essential for enabling different communities to adopt and use infrastructure for social purposes.

Connecting with the natural world – Green and blue spaces that people could use for social purposes were seen as social infrastructure. Social infrastructure also plays a key role in establishing and protecting green and blue spaces.

Social infrastructure as resistance – Inadequate social infrastructure was seen as a motivating factor for social protest. Social infrastructure is also used by communities in responding to and opposing externally driven change.

Inclusion of some is exclusion of others – There is a tension between who is included and who is excluded from any social infrastructure to which there is no simple solution.

The purpose of the **community-focussed** research project was to develop an understanding of how communities relate to social infrastructure. Evidence was gathered by peer researchers, people with lived experience of the issues being studied,[5] who carried out a series of interviews in the places that they live, work and socialise.

Different themes emerged from across the different fieldwork sites and have been grouped into the following four headings.

Inclusivity and diversity – Peer researchers noted the importance that participants placed on spaces that promoted inclusivity and diversity.

Accessibility – Spaces needed to be easily accessible for people. Accessibility encompassed cost, physical connectivity as well as feelings of safety.

Ownership and belonging – Feeling that spaces could be made 'their own' was important to participants.

Green spaces – The availability and importance of green spaces for physical and mental health was frequently mentioned by participants.

A number of different definitions of social infrastructure have emerged throughout the existing literature, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and some of this literature is explored further in our underpinning evidence reports.[6] The Bennett Institute for Public Policy, for example, has suggested that policymakers should understand social infrastructure as 'those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of a community, and where meaningful relationships, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity are inculcated among local people.'[7] The purpose of this paper, however, is not to further discuss these definitions, but rather to draw on the first two projects of this collaborative research programme to develop a shared narrative of the importance of social infrastructure to people and communities.

5 Institute for Community Studies (2022), 'About Us', Institute for Community Studies [accessed 13 December 2022].
6 See, for example, Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021), *Townscapes: the value of social infrastructure*, Bennett Institute for Public Policy [accessed 14 December 2022].
7 Kelsey and Kenny, *Townscapes*, p. 11.

Our research has shown, in particular, the importance of social infrastructure as a 'seed-bed' for the creation, enhancement and maintenance of social capital, a vital element of the social fabric of our communities.

As could be expected, those places designed to bring people together – such as libraries, schools, and community centres – feature strongly throughout our research. They are often well-respected and trusted spaces where the public sector and civil society organisations are able to interact with communities.

But our research has also shown the importance of 'accidental' social infrastructure – those places which may be intended to serve a different purpose, but which for particular communities also provide the types of service associated with more traditional types of social infrastructure. Supermarkets, for example, can serve as vital spaces for people to connect with each other to stave off loneliness.

The remainder of this report addresses three questions.

First, **how does social infrastructure contribute to the social fabric of places?** We argue that social infrastructure – in its widest conception – plays an important role in the warp and weft of the social fabric of communities. Those spaces where people can come together with others who are similar to them, and with those who are different, play an important role in building the different types of social capital that are so important for the economic and social success of places.

Secondly, we ask **why should these spaces be thought of as infrastructure?** Rather than focusing on a specific definition of social infrastructure, we argue that considering the three characteristics that contribute to places functioning as infrastructure enables us to think more broadly about the types of social infrastructure that are available to communities and include the 'accidental' infrastructure mentioned above.

Finally, we ask **how can questions of purpose help make sense of how social infrastructure is used?** Purpose is something that is assigned by people to the social infrastructures that they make use of in their daily lives. Sometimes these different uses come into conflict with each other, when different groups use the same social infrastructure for different purposes. Deepening our understanding of purpose will help to develop ways in which these tensions can be resolved by bringing different parts of communities together rather than through imposing further barriers between them.



2. Using social infrastructure to support the social fabric of places

> *"Economic policies alone – from new infrastructure to inward foreign and direct investment – are always welcome but not always sufficient to fix social problems; nor will community revival offset more precarious housing tenure or declines in job security. It is the interplay between economic and social factors that drives the improvement, or deterioration, of the social fabric of a place."* - Tanner et al., 2020[8]

The 'social fabric' of places is of paramount importance to communities globally. As the government's Levelling Up White Paper[9] notes in relation to the UK:

> *"People's lives are shaped by the social and physical fabric of their communities. The local mix of social and physical capital – from universities to good quality green spaces, and from libraries to local football clubs – gives areas their unique character and vibrancy, and makes residents proud to live there."*

Social fabric is often coupled with social infrastructure and social capital and sometimes the expressions are used synonymously. We would argue that they are three distinct, but linked concepts.

8 Tanner, W., O'Shaughnessy, J., Krasniqi, F. and Blagden, J. (2020), *The State of our Social Fabric: Measuring the changing nature of community over time and geography* [accessed 13 December 2022].

9 HM Government (2022), *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*, White Paper.

The connection between social infrastructure and social capital – "the glue that binds communities together"[10] in the words of Andy Haldane – is one that is well established, with social infrastructure playing an important role in the creation and maintenance of social capital, as well as a key role in maintaining social cohesion.[11] Work by authors such as Robert Putnam and Eric Klinenberg have provided examples of where social infrastructure, or its lack, has profoundly affected how different communities have coped with the challenges that they have faced. Social infrastructure plays a role in ensuring wider social inclusion as well as providing the capacity to sustain, refresh and create a sense of community and belonging; all vital elements of the social fabric of places.

The pandemic has also shown the importance of social infrastructure as a key part of our social fabric. For example, civic centres became hubs to support their communities, Mutual Aid Groups were more likely to be established in areas with existing social infrastructure, while intangible infrastructure, such as platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, helped sustain online communities by connecting people locally.[12]

There is a common narrative that emphasises the weakening of the social fabric of communities over time. Alongside this there is often a desire to look back to a time when the social fabric of places was stronger, when churches, working men's clubs, and traditional community centres were at the centre of communities. This strand of thinking is evident in the Levelling Up White Paper with its call for feelings of community, local pride and belonging to be "*restored*."

The decline of community

Feelings of the decline of community are nothing new. Family and Kinship in East London – the seminal book published by Michael Young and Peter Willmott in 1957 – contended that the traditional sense of community, which had thrived on the slum streets of Bethnal Green, was at risk of disappearing as communities were broken up into new suburbs, where individualism was replacing the former kinship models which had flourished between working-class residents living in close quarters.

However, this reading of the changes in society experienced through the post-war period has been questioned. By re-analysing archived interview transcripts and notes from these studies, historians such as Lise Butler and Jon Lawrence have highlighted how researchers cherry-picked and deployed material selectively to depict an idealised, rosy vision of life in the slums, glossing over the more diffuse and ambivalent responses offered by interviewees.

These more 'traditional' examples of social infrastructure will continue to play an important role for some communities. However, on their own, they are not the answer to the challenges faced by communities today.

10 Haldane, A., (2021), 'Social capital is the glue that binds communities together', Community Fund [accessed 13 December 2022].
11 Donoghue, M., and Bourke, S., (2019), *British Academy Commission: Cohesive Societies Policy Review,* University of Oxford and the British Academy Cohesive Societies Review.
12 Institute for Community Studies, 'People Shaping Places, Places Shaping People: The Role of Community Asset Ownership (2022)'.

Our research has provided many examples of where people and communities have stepped outside of what may usually be seen as social infrastructure to put other spaces and places to innovative uses.[13] What connects all these examples is the way in which these spaces have contributed to the warp and weft of communities' social fabric.

Whilst we would encourage policymakers to continue to pay attention to those more traditional examples of social infrastructure, we believe that these other spaces functioning as social infrastructure also need to be considered as being of equal importance. As our research has shown, it is the whole range of assets that are available to a community that is important.

Policy considerations: Using social infrastructure to support the social fabric

Social infrastructure should be seen as an asset that contributes to the creation and maintenance of the social fabric

Considering social infrastructure as an asset promotes approaches[14] building on what communities already have, rather than seeing them as bundles of needs to be met. As our research shows, communities will find innovative ways in which existing spaces can be re-used to meet their own purposes. However, consideration needs to be given to those communities, particularly deprived ones, which lack development and investment in terms of their current social infrastructure, and so may require focused support in order to strengthen their social infrastructure.

Equally, considering social infrastructure as an asset can shape how it is measured and understood.

Social infrastructure in places needs to be mapped and recorded by national, regional and local government

Like any asset, the existence of examples of social infrastructure in different places can be mapped and recorded. Whether it is the local library, faith centres and community centres, or museums, sites of heritage interest and private-public spaces, these can all be identified and plotted by harnessing the support and knowledge of local communities.

This mapping can then form the basis of further measurement to understand both the condition of the infrastructure, but also its role as a catalyst for further 'downstream' outcomes of importance to policymakers and communities, such as wellbeing, feelings of belonging, and pride in place.

13 Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2023), *International Review of Social Infrastructure: state of the issue;* Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2023), *International Review of Social Infrastructure: regional review.*

14 Social Care Institute for Excellence (2018), 'Asset-Based Places'. Social Care Institute for Excellence website [accessed 13 December 2022].



3. Treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure

There are many different types of infrastructure, both tangible and intangible. We often think of different categories of infrastructure such as road infrastructure, rail infrastructure or communications infrastructure, each of which is made up of different interconnected elements. Rail infrastructure, for example, includes the lines that trains run on, the trains themselves, stations to enable people to embark on their journeys, online timetables and ticket purchasing sites, as well as all of the necessary elements required to manage and co-ordinate the networks of activity. Communications infrastructure crosses both the digital and physical worlds, with intangible infrastructure such as websites and apps supported by networks of wired infrastructure from routers to junction boxes to warehouse-like data centres.

Likewise, 'social infrastructure' is sometimes seen as forming a particular category of infrastructure. For example, those spaces and places provided by the public sector and civil society that exist to perform particular social functions, such as libraries and learning; community centres and cohesion; and public parks and mental and physical wellbeing.

Our research has shown that social infrastructure is a particularly anglophone expression, featuring, for example, throughout the UK government's Levelling Up White Paper. In Australia, social infrastructure features as a specific section of the federal Australian Infrastructure Plan (AIP) setting out proposed government infrastructure investments at a federal, state, and local level. In the USA, the sociologist Eric Klinenberg has popularised the phrase, particularly through his book *Palaces for the People* and his work on the Chicago heatwave of 1995.

Elsewhere, what we might consider as social infrastructure is present, even if it is not always described in those terms. For example, in France and Germany, what may be seen as social infrastructure in the UK is generally seen through the lens of social cohesion policies.

So, if the phrase social infrastructure is relatively rarely used outside of particular academic and policy circles, is there any value in using the concept and the language of infrastructure?

We believe that there is, particularly if the focus is on the *infrastructural elements* of social infrastructure. Frischmann (2012)[15] argues that it is the specific characteristics of assets that matter:

- *"The resource may be consumed in a non-rivalrous way.*
- *Demand for the resource is driven primarily by downstream productive activity that requires the resource as an input.*
- *The resource may be used as an input into a wide range of goods and services, which may include private goods, public goods, and social goods."*

If an asset displays all of these characteristics, then for Frischmann, this characterises them as "*functionally infrastructural.*" For *social* infrastructure, we would take this one stage further. If an asset meets these characteristics and is used primarily as an input into goods and services that support the creation and maintenance of public and social goods then that asset is operating as social infrastructure.

This approach provides policymakers with a means of understanding how different assets can function as social infrastructure. The following table gives some examples of the types of questions policymakers might ask when considering whether something is social infrastructure.

Table 3: Example questions for policymakers

Question	Examples
Accessibility Is the asset generally easily accessible for people?	• Parks and green spaces are generally free to access. • Areas such as high streets and town centres of towns with strong transport links and places to connect.
Contribution Does the asset contribute in some way to achieving social goals, such as stronger, more cohesive communities?	• Parks and green spaces can contribute to people's mental health. • Cultural and heritage assets can contribute to people's feelings of belonging. • Sporting events can lead to a sense of cohesion.
Openness Can the asset be used for a range of different activities by different people?	• Village halls and community centres put on a wide range of different events. • Some people may use supermarkets purely for shopping whilst for others they are a place for socialising.

15 Frischmann, B. (2012) *Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

This approach moves beyond the sometimes narrow definitions of social infrastructure as a specific asset category, to one that can incorporate the types of spaces beyond those owned and managed by the public and voluntary sectors that were identified in both research projects.[16] But it also avoids seeing everything as social infrastructure, which would risk making the term meaningless for the purposes of policymaking. If a piece of infrastructure does not contribute towards achieving social goals, such as a stronger sense of community, then it should probably not be considered as social infrastructure.

Policy considerations: Treating social infrastructure as infrastructure

Social infrastructure should be open, accessible and inclusive

The characteristics of infrastructure and the results of our research projects place particular emphasis on the importance of openness, accessibility and inclusivity.

Spaces should be welcoming to different parts of the community and the costs of accessing spaces should be considered. Our research has shown, in particular, the importance people place on the ability to access green and outdoor spaces for free.

The barriers to accessing spaces, whether physical, such as transport connectivity, or psychological, such as feelings of safety, should also be understood and managed.

Social infrastructure should be able to be used by different people for a range of different activities. Think, for example, of the variety of uses that a village or community hall can be put to.

National, regional and local policymakers should consider social infrastructure at a community scale

Our research shows that many different types of spaces, both tangible and intangible, are used as social infrastructure by different members of the community. In the same way that, for example, rail infrastructure should be understood as a combination of different assets that enable the rail network to function, social infrastructure also needs to be seen as a combination of the different assets – including organisations, places and spaces – that enable communities to function. This can include both public sector and private sector organisations.

The importance and costs of maintaining social infrastructure need to be understood

Like any infrastructure there can be relatively high costs – whether financial or in terms of other measures such as time or trust – in establishing social infrastructure. As with other types of infrastructure, there are also ongoing maintenance costs associated with social infrastructure. In some cases, this may relate to the maintenance of a physical asset - fixing the roof of a community centre is as important as filling potholes. But they may also relate to the capacity of people to continue volunteering in times of stress, or the capabilities and skills of communities to take on responsibility for maintaining assets themselves. These different costs should be accounted for and managed.

16 Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2023), *International Review of Social Infrastructure: state of the issue;* Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2023), *International Review of Social Infrastructure: regional review.*

The role that the private sector plays in the provision of spaces that can be used as social infrastructure should be considered further

The social fabric of places is made up of more than just spaces provided by the public and voluntary sectors. Private sector actors play a key role in the social fabric of places, whether through anchor institutions such as supermarkets and shopping centres, or through the development and regeneration of spaces.

As well as a focus on development, an understanding of how investors are looking to benefit local communities and meet their wider environmental, social and governance (ESG) objectives is also an area for further work.



4. Defining the purpose of social infrastructure

Our research has shown the importance of understanding purpose in relation to social infrastructure.

There are assets often thought of as social infrastructure, which have a defined purpose to meet social or civic outcomes. This includes spaces such as libraries, community centres and youth clubs. Their purpose is often 'assigned' by the public sector or civic society organisation responsible for their delivery, either through statutory requirements or social obligations. These assets play an important role in people's lives.

But people also ascribe their own purpose to the different social infrastructures that they engage with. A library may be a source of companionship leading to friendship for some people, while others may find friendship in a place of faith such as a church or mosque; others may find a sense of belonging in a more secular space such as the stadium of a local football club, or the nearest bar of a nationwide pub chain.

Equally, different groups of people may see a different purpose for a common space. Think how a local park may serve a purpose for older people to meet and socialize, whereas for a group of local young people it may provide a space for exercise and recreation.

Our international research has also shown the importance of social infrastructure as places of resistance and protest as well as 'neutral spaces' that can act as places of safety or "*corridors of conflict suspension.*"[17]

17 University of Cambridge (2016), 'Living on the Edge: succeeding in the slums', Medium [accessed 13 December 2022].

A focus on purpose is important for a number of reasons. First, it broadens the scope of what can be thought of as social infrastructure. Rather than just considering those traditional and still important types of social infrastructure, the key consideration is how people use different assets to meet their civic and social outcomes rather than the categorisation of types of infrastructure. This means that greater emphasis should be placed on the role of the private sector when considering social infrastructure. It is often private sector spaces, such as supermarkets, shopping malls and privately-owned public spaces that form this 'accidental' social infrastructure.

Considering purpose also requires policymakers to develop an understanding of *how* people use the spaces that are important to them. We would argue that approaches such as peer research, co-production of plans and collective mapping approaches are all ways in which this knowledge can be gained.

Second, a focus on purpose helps us to understand the myriad different ways in which people use social infrastructure. Rather than thinking of social infrastructure purely as a question of supply, considering purpose encourages policymakers to think of questions of demand. Most importantly, this provides the opportunity to highlight any tensions between the different purposes assigned to social infrastructure by different social groups, such as the example of the park given above.

There is a natural desire to play a part in resolving these tensions. But as purpose is defined largely by the different users of spaces, rather than the owners of the spaces, approaches that aim to resolve these conflicts in collaboration with the involved parties should be the focus of policymakers.

Policy considerations: The purpose of social infrastructure

National, regional and local government should include and understand community voices when designing and maintaining social infrastructure

Without the active involvement of communities, other actors, such as national, regional or local government, the private sector, or the voluntary sector, may not understand the range of different purposes that people see for social infrastructure.

National, regional and local government should work with communities to develop approaches that manage competing purposes

An understanding of purpose calls for approaches that can work with communities to try and develop solutions that meet the needs of the widest range of people and address questions of power. Examples of managing common goods, such as the work of Elinor Ostrom, may prove of particular interest.



5. What is the future policy and research agenda?

Social infrastructure will continue to be an urgent and important area of policy development, as the UK seeks to address current and future crises. The British Academy and Power to Change will continue to work with academia and civil society to further debate, generate evidence, and connect policymakers with research on what matters to communities.

This programme forms a first step in the British Academy's work exploring the importance of social and cultural infrastructures for policymaking, investigating how social infrastructure policy interventions can address deepening spatial inequalities and contribute to recovery from COVID-19. We will continue to mobilise insights from our fellowship and wider research in the humanities and social sciences to address questions on how social infrastructure can contribute solutions to key policy challenges and crises. Questions relating to measuring and valuing social infrastructure will be considered alongside how different groups within a community (for example children and young people or those with a disability) experience social infrastructure.

The Academy also recognises that future work should focus on the importance of cultural infrastructure across the UK, and the interplay between social and cultural infrastructures. This includes the importance of stories, local history and creative expression as well as the role of identities, norms and cultural practices. This is likely to take the form of exploring definitions of cultural infrastructure, the role of cultural infrastructure in key policy challenges, and also considering how its value could be measured.

Similarly, Power to Change plans to build on this work, as part of its core mission to support communities through community business. Community businesses are a

part of the local social infrastructure. This research has highlighted the importance of community voice in the development of any policy or funding approaches to strengthening social infrastructure. Power to Change will continue to work to strengthen social infrastructure, through direct support to community businesses and through research and policy development work that puts communities at the centre. Power to Change is interested in further exploring how policymakers can strengthen social infrastructure in places, and what roles different partners – including funders, investors and private sector organisations - can play in a local area, to create a greater understanding of the interventions and approaches that work.

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About

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

About Power to Change

Power to Change is the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We use our experience to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community business to make places thrive.

We know community business works to create thriving places when local people take ownership of spaces that matter and deliver services that communities need. Our 2021-25 strategy sets out how, using strategic funding, trusted partnerships, rigorous research, policy insight, and a strong network of remarkable community businesses we will back the sector, creating the ideas, evidence, and exemplars that make the case for others to back them too. Ultimately, we will amplify the efforts of community businesses and put them at the heart of a fair economy.

About the Bennett Institute for Public Policy

Launched in 2018, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge, is committed to interdisciplinary academic and policy research into the major challenges facing the world, and to high-quality teaching of the knowledge and skills required in public service.

Our goal is to rethink public policy in an era of turbulence and inequality. Our research connects the world-leading work in technology and science at Cambridge with the economic and political dimensions of policymaking. We are committed to outstanding teaching, policy engagement, and to devising sustainable and long-lasting solutions.

About the Institute for Community Studies

The Institute for Community Studies is powered by and part of the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation. It's a new kind of research institute, with people at its heart. The Institute gives increasing weight to the stories, experience and evidence created in communities, supported through its national network of researchers. It provokes direct engagement with business and those influencing change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence and policymaking.

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