Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure

The British Academy

Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge

Contents

Bennett Institute for Public Policy

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Executive Summary

This report brings together the results of our year-long exploration, funded by the British Academy as part of their Social and Cultural Infrastructure policy theme, on how best to measure social and cultural infrastructure. It starts by considering how social and cultural infrastructure can be identified in relation to some of the characteristics associated with all kinds of infrastructure. It then explores the challenge of measuring social and cultural infrastructure, and subsequently develops a framework for measuring the critical, yet often overlooked, assets, facilities and spaces of which it is formed. We hope that this work will be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders, from policymakers to funders to those people involved in the provision and maintenance of these key assets.

Two broad themes emerge out of our research. The first is that those assets classed as social and cultural infrastructure **demonstrate the same core characteristics as other types of infrastructure**, while also making particular contributions to the social and cultural lives of communities. The second is that **measurement should be seen as a process** that at each stage considers how choices and decisions about what is measured and how reflects the needs of all involved.

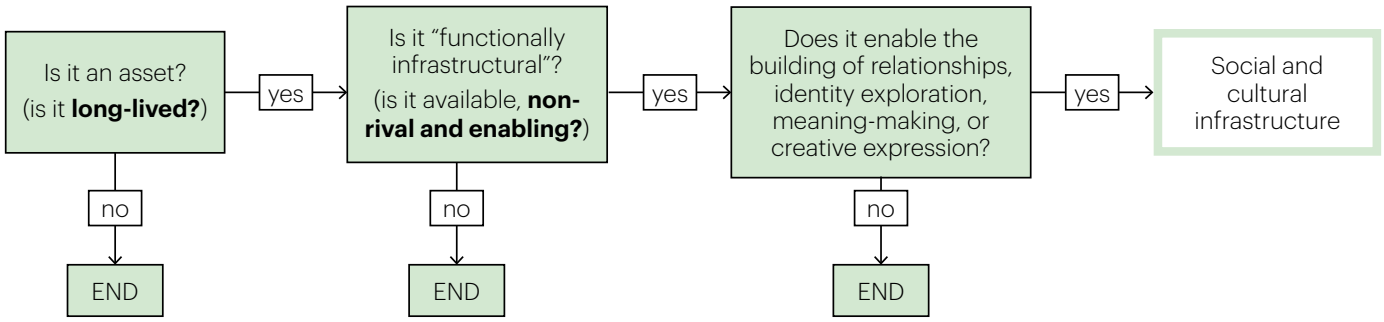
Social and cultural infrastructure as infrastructure

Over recent years, there has been considerable debate in academic and policy circles about the role that social and cultural infrastructure plays in supporting communities. However, not only is there little consensus around how to define this phenomenon, but the definitions that have emerged tend to be overly static and agenda-driven, overlooking the context-specific nature of social and cultural infrastructure. These definitional challenges concerning a complex type of infrastructure have posed problems for attempts to measure these assets and understand their roles.

In response, we advance a different approach to definition that uses a set of characteristics to define social and cultural infrastructure, rather than defining it in terms of a limited set of specific asset types, such as libraries or community groups. This approach is grounded in the definition of infrastructure while also considering the distinctive properties of social and cultural forms of provision and networks. To distinguish social and cultural infrastructure from general infrastructure and avoid rigid definitions that may overlook emerging or unconventional forms, we ask:

- First, **is the entity being measured an asset?** Does it hold accumulated value over time through investment (financial, human, or otherwise) and is it expected to serve a role in society for the long term?
- Second, **does it function as infrastructure?** Does it enable downstream activities, is it open to many people, and can it be shared by multiple users simultaneously?
- Finally, **is it social and cultural in character?** Does it play a direct role in the building of relationships, identity exploration, meaning-making, or enabling creative expression?

Diagram 1: Questions to define social and cultural infrastructure



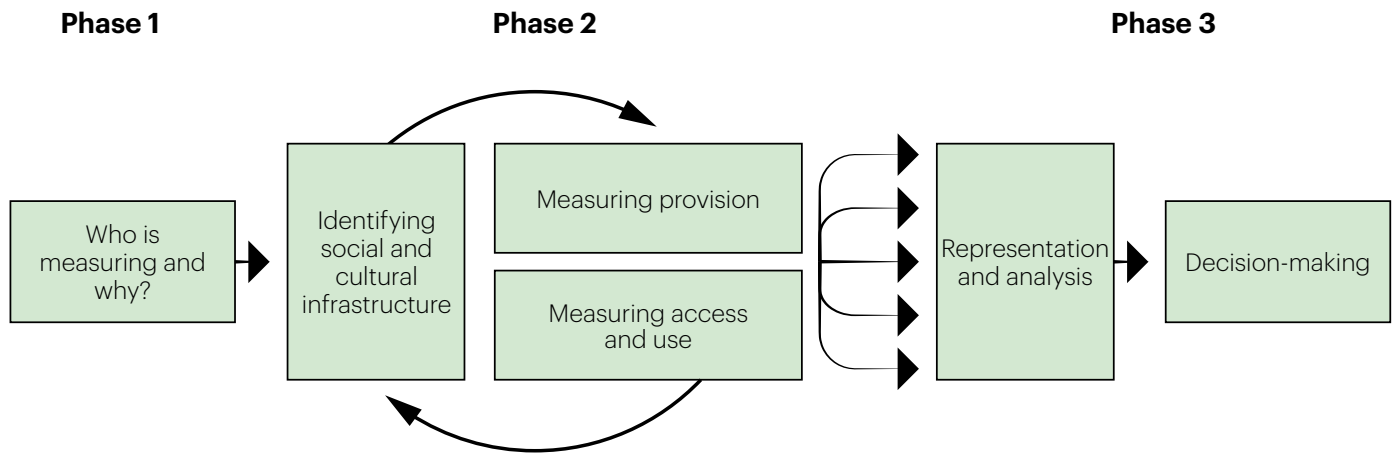
Rooting social and cultural infrastructure within the characteristics of infrastructure is important for three key reasons. First, it enables the flexibility and inclusivity necessary to accommodate the many different forms which social and cultural infrastructure assumes in different communities. Second, it enables an understanding of social and cultural infrastructure as elements within the wider infrastructural landscape of a place. And third, this approach challenges the distinctions commonly made between 'hard' physical and 'soft' social infrastructure or 'tangible' and 'intangible' infrastructure.

Measurement as a process

We are not the first to consider how social and cultural infrastructure should be measured. Indeed, there are a number of measures that either focus on specific types of assets or that include social and cultural infrastructure within a wider suite of measures as part of place-based social research projects. These approaches have been informed by a range of objectives, from identifying unequal provision to aiding place-based policymaking. Yet often the choices that have been made in order to arrive at these measures are not clear.

The measurement framework that we propose opens up the process so that it is clear to all stakeholders what they are measuring, why particular measures have been selected, and how they will be used. The framework involves three distinct phases, which, though laid out sequentially, may be undertaken iteratively as new information and insights become available.

Diagram 2: Phases of the framework



The first phase of the framework involves asking why we are measuring and what we will do with the results as **measurement succeeds only when its purpose is warranted, clear, and specific.** Defining the reasons for measuring will help determine which assets and geographical area to consider. The process then moves to **identifying and measuring both the 'stock' of social and cultural infrastructure and its usage.** This brings together 'top-down' approaches to measurement, such as reviewing national quantitative datasets, with 'bottom-up' approaches, like peer research with local communities. Finally, **measurement should be presented in a way that facilitates action.** Rather than relying solely on reports and statistical summaries, we encourage more dynamic ways of presenting findings, such as interactive maps and visual storytelling, to make insights accessible and engaging for all stakeholders.

We encourage a wide range of evidence to be used in the measurement process. While evidence and data are often seen hierarchically, with certain types being seen as 'better' than others, starting with the question of 'why measure?' and considering who should be involved in the measurement process encourages decision-makers to critically engage with the value and utility of different types of evidence. For example, asking young people to complete a paper survey about their use of a local skate park may not be the most effective form of engagement. Asking (and funding) them to produce a short film exploring the importance of the park to them may elicit a deeper understanding of social and cultural spaces and their value to local people.

Both hyper-local and broader national data can play a role in understanding social and cultural infrastructure, with each offering distinct insights. While national data provides an essential overview, more granular, qualitative evidence is often necessary to capture how communities value particular spaces. Rather than viewing these as competing forms of evidence, a balanced approach ensures that measurement is fit for purpose, responding to the specific questions being asked.

That being said, incorporating a broad mix of evidence and methodologies may not always be possible. There are costs associated with measurement, particularly in gathering detailed evidence from communities, and different types of data may be more available at different geographic scales. For example, it will be easier for a community group to gather evidence on how people use their community centre than it would be for a civil servant in Whitehall to collect similar data for all community centres across the country. By making the process of measurement as open as possible, our approach highlights these unavoidable trade-offs. So, while a civil servant in Whitehall may primarily use available data on the location of community centres, she will be aware that for a more fine-grained understanding of how communities value these spaces, she may need to gather relevant information at a smaller spatial scale.

Overall, we believe this approach possesses a number of strengths in relation to its predecessors.

- It encourages stakeholders to think about how social and cultural assets **interact with other types of infrastructure**, such as roads or broadband provision, thereby enabling a focus on maintenance and support for existing assets rather than building new ones.
- It ensures **greater transparency** with regards to who is undertaking the measurement process, what their objectives are, what data they are using, and how this contributes to decisions taken.
- It is **flexible** both in the sense that it enables any stakeholder to use it, regardless of their purpose, and in that it does not prescribe a rigid definition of social and cultural infrastructure, instead allowing its users to determine the assets under consideration in an evidentially informed manner.
- It encourages a **wide range of views** to be taken into account: from national perspectives to community voices.

We have designed the framework to remain neutral about the assessment of social and cultural infrastructure. Rather than aligning with a particular philosophy, policy agenda, or measurement method, we have not adopted a specific normative stance nor listed the use of specific measures or types of data. This approach is important for a number of reasons.

- By emphasising flexibility and transparency, the framework makes it **easier to determine what to measure, what data to use, and who to involve** in the process. This is important to those using the framework and those affected by the decisions made following its use.
- **New sources and collections methods for data are continually emerging**. Not tying the framework to particular datasets or approaches enables it to remain relevant.
- This approach makes the framework **appealing to a range of actors** including policymakers, civic society organisations, funders, institutions, the private sector, and researchers.
- Opening up the use of the framework to such a wide range of users will **encourage a comparison to be made between different use-cases**. This process of use, comparison, learning, and re-use should help to refine the model that we set out in the following pages.

Introduction

Social and cultural infrastructure plays a critical, yet often unnoticed, role in the lives of communities. From libraries and parks to markets and cultural festivals, these infrastructures provide, among other things, opportunities for interaction, participation, and the formation of local pride and identity. While the importance of social and cultural infrastructure has often been overlooked, the concept has gained traction in policy and research circles in recent years, with governments, funders, community organisations, and the private sector increasingly recognising that spaces for social interaction and cultural engagement are essential to support and enable thriving communities. However, up until now, no consistent approach to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure has been developed. Yet without appropriate tools to understand and evaluate these assets, their significance risks being neglected in decision-making. As a result, we have developed a novel approach to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure which we set out in this report.

Existing challenges with definition and measurement

Two critical challenges underpinned our research: defining social and cultural infrastructure and understanding how best to measure its impact and value. Despite the increasing prevalence of the terms social infrastructure and cultural infrastructure in policy discourse, there has been little consensus about what they mean in concrete terms and what kinds of value they provide. Existing definitions are often composed of lists of different assets, such as libraries, parks, and community centres, rather than focusing on their social and cultural importance. These static lists treat social and cultural infrastructure as fixed in character, neglecting change over time and between different places, and overlook those spaces – such as barber shops or supermarkets – whose primary purpose may not be to foster social and cultural connections, but which nevertheless do so in particular circumstances. Many of these definitions also tend to focus on physical spaces at the expense of important intangible assets, such as recurring events, networks, or organisations. While festivals and local markets may not leave a permanent physical footprint, they can play a crucial role in sustaining social life in a community.

Similarly, efforts to measure social and cultural infrastructure have often been fragmented and inconsistent, in part because of the absence of an agreed definition. These attempts have often been shaped by particular policy priorities or advocacy goals. Some assessments, for example, focus on economic contributions and investment strategies while others emphasise social value, including local and regional deprivation and unequal provision. The resulting evaluations tend to be unduly narrow and not always transferable across geographies, policy areas, or different governance arrangements.

Existing attempts to define and measure social and cultural infrastructure are often underpinned by implicit normative assumptions. Some interpretations emphasise the economic benefits of social and cultural provision, such as its contribution to high street regeneration and local employment. Others focus on its social and civic dimensions, how it strengthens networks of trust, supports public participation, and fosters a sense of belonging. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but reflect different priorities and policy framings.

A new approach to measurement

The approach to measurement set out in this report is not rooted in any particular philosophy, perspective, or objective. Measurement is not just a technical exercise, but a process inevitably shaped by decisions about what to include, how to assess impact, and what trade-offs are acceptable, all of which are underpinned by the stakeholders' normative assumptions and

reasons for measurement. We address this issue by avoiding prescriptive definitions and instead offering a framework for understanding and measuring social and cultural infrastructure in a way that is transparent, flexible, and reflexive. This enables the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure to be adapted to any particular policy priority or agenda, including tackling regional inequality, devolution, or community-led development, ensuring the framework remains relevant to contemporary debates without being restricted to any single policy environment.

Second, the framework we propose embeds social and cultural assets within broader discussions about infrastructure. Rather than providing a list of specified assets, we have developed an approach for identifying social and cultural infrastructure grounded in the characteristics of infrastructure. During the measurement process itself, stakeholders are encouraged to explore the relationship between social and cultural provision and other types of infrastructure, such as transport or digital networks, to better understand accessibility and sustainability. Not only does this approach to definition and measurement account for variation between places and over time, but also ensures stakeholders understand social and cultural provision to be part of an interconnected system of infrastructure rather than a collection of standalone assets. This is critical, as a failure to integrate social and cultural assets into mainstream infrastructure planning risks leading to substantial gaps in provision with long-term economic and social consequences.

Third, we recognise that different scales of governance and different stakeholders require distinct approaches to measurement. At the local and regional level, more granular insights, such as those highlighting communities' lived experience, are more likely to be used to capture the use and impact of social and cultural infrastructure on the ground whereas at the national level policymakers often require standardised, comparable data, such as visitor numbers or the density of assets. This points to a persistent challenge in measuring social and cultural infrastructure: comparability. While efforts to standardise assessment methods are valuable, rigid one-size-fits-all approaches risk misrepresenting the actual contributions of social and cultural assets. Our framework is designed to acknowledge this tension and provides a structured, yet adaptable, approach to assessing these assets in a way that accommodates the needs of a range of stakeholders, in part by allowing a broad range of data and methods to be used in the measurement process. The framework can be applied across multiple levels of decision-making while ensuring that local flexibility is not lost in the pursuit of national comparability. Rather than prescribing rigid criteria, we encourage stakeholders to consider the purpose, relevance, and practicalities of measurement when assessing what methodology to adopt and data to include.

Report Structure

We organise this report to build a comprehensive understanding of social and cultural infrastructure, moving from conceptual foundations to practical applications. **Chapter 1** lays out our approach to definition, in which social and cultural infrastructure is understood through its infrastructural characteristics rather than as a fixed list of assets. **Chapter 2** examines the challenge of measuring, reflecting on existing approaches and making the case for a more flexible, transparent methodology that can be used for a wide range of (policy) objectives. **Chapter 3** introduces the measurement framework, outlining the three-phase process that guides stakeholders through identifying and measuring social and cultural infrastructure. **Chapter 4** considers questions around evidence, highlighting the importance of diverse sources and methods of generating data to ensure a comprehensive evaluation. Finally, **Chapter 5** focuses on implementation, demonstrating how the framework can be applied across different levels of governance while aligning with broader policy agendas.

Chapter 1: What is social and cultural infrastructure?

A clear definition of boundaries is essential for effective measurement. This is particularly important here because the concepts of social and cultural infrastructure are elusive in several ways. They refer to assets that are often overlooked and whose failure is less immediately visible than that of other key infrastructures, such as railways and energy systems. A growing recognition of their often neglected value has made social and cultural infrastructure an object of considerable interest among researchers and policymakers in recent years. But that does not make them well-defined. And without greater clarity at the definitional stage, attempts to measure them risk becoming fragmented or unfocused. An approach grounded in the theory of measurement and of social and cultural infrastructure, we argue, can provide the basis for a more systematic and meaningful framework.

This chapter addresses the task of defining the concept of social and cultural infrastructure and situating it within wider debates about the role of infrastructure in the UK's economy and society. We show that defining social and cultural infrastructure in terms of the general characteristics of infrastructure enables us to consider them as valuable, locally based assets. They possess value that has accumulated over time and may be tangible or intangible in character. This approach places social and cultural infrastructure on an equal footing with more familiar forms of infrastructure such as roads and bridges and helps us appreciate the importance of investment and maintenance over time of these assets. We highlight how these social and cultural assets, despite their proven importance to goals such as well-being and social inclusion, are often overlooked in discussions about infrastructure's role in shaping thriving communities.

Understanding social and cultural infrastructure as a unified concept

This project considers the concepts of social infrastructure and cultural infrastructure together, while recognising their distinct origins and points of reference. The two concepts have emerged from different policy concerns and political contexts, with debates about 'social' infrastructure in the UK largely driven by concerns over regional inequalities and the decline of community spaces amid austerity measures and the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] By contrast, discussions around 'cultural' infrastructure emerged primarily in the 2000s from the work of scholars such as Richard Florida and Charles Landry who focused on the role of creativity in urban development, and how artistic creativity and cultural networks shape the social life and economic prospects of cities.[2] However, as set out below, there are meaningful overlaps between the assets typically associated with these concepts. Therefore, this project treats them as a single, interconnected category, recognising that a combined analysis is essential for understanding the broader systems that support social and cultural life.

1 The British Academy. (2021) *The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19.*

2 Landry, C. (2008) *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge; Florida, R. L. (2002) *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life.* New York: Basic Books; Markusen, A. (2014) 'Creative Cities: A 10-Year Research Agenda'. *Journal of Urban Affairs,* 36(sup2): pp. 567–589.

1. Social infrastructure

The term social infrastructure has been increasingly used over the past decade by policymakers and academics to describe those places and facilities that help to bring communities together and build meaningful relationships, trust, and reciprocity, which in turn help build social capital.[3] This is a concept that encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, including physical spaces and the social networks that are created between people and within communities.[4] In our previous work, we have used the term to refer to "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."[5]

Recent studies have significantly advanced our understanding of social infrastructure by illustrating its role in fostering social cohesion, resilience, and place-based identity. The British Academy's 2021 study of the societal impacts of COVID-19, recognises social infrastructure as a critical tool for addressing spatial inequalities and better connecting policymakers with the issues that matter most to communities.[6] Latham and Layton explore the concept as a means of enabling urban sociality, highlighting the importance of spaces like libraries, parks, and leisure centres to sustaining public life.[7] Tomaney et al. extend this discussion to 'left-behind places', demonstrating how the making, unmaking, and remaking of social infrastructure shape emotional attachments and feelings of hope within a community.[8] Similarly, Garling et al. underscore the importance of listening to community voices as a way of strengthening local networks, while Coyle et al. make the case for a Universal Basic Infrastructure, which stresses the importance of social infrastructure as a foundation for equitable regional development.[9]

2. Cultural infrastructure

Recent years have also seen increasing use of the term cultural infrastructure in academic and public policy circles to describe the spaces that support cultural activities and expression, such as theatres, museums, art galleries, music venues, and other places where cultural experiences are created and shared. The concept emerged in the last 30 years in urban studies, particularly in debates about urban cultural development. This field emphasised the role of creativity in urban growth and drew attention to the ways in which infrastructure shapes the social life of cities.[10] A key focus of this sub-field was the idea of the 'creative city', and how cultural policy might enable cities to develop advantages in a globalised competition to attract human capital and creative firms.[11]

Thinking infrastructurally about culture requires an analysis of how cultural resources and amenities interact with other forms of infrastructure, such as transport, energy, and housing.[12] This integrated approach moves beyond viewing cultural infrastructure as a collection of

3 Klinenberg, E. (2020) *Palaces for the People. How to Build a More Equal and United Society*. London: Vintage; Tomaney, J. et al. (2023) *Social infrastructure and left behind places*. London: Routledge.

4 Simone, A. (2004) 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg'. *Public Culture*, 16(3): pp. 407-429.

5 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) *Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy.

6 The British Academy. (2021) *The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19*.

7 Latham, A. and Layton, J. (2019) 'Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces'. *Geography Compass*, 13(7): e12444.

8 Tomaney et al. (2023) *Social infrastructure and left behind places*.

9 Garling, O. et al. (2023) *Space for Community: strengthening our social infrastructure*. The British Academy and Power to Change; Coyle, D., Erker, S., and Westwood, A. (2023) *Townscapes: A Universal Basic Infrastructure for the UK*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy.

10 Landry, (2008) *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators;* Florida, (2002) *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*; Graham, S. and Marvin, S. (2001) *Splintering urbanism: networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*. London: Routledge; Podmore, J. and Bain, A. (2020) '"No queers out there"? Metronormativity and the queer suburban'. *Geography Compass*, 14(9): e12505.

11 Markusen, (2014) 'Creative Cities: A 10-Year Research Agenda'.

12 Graham and Marvin, (2001) *Splintering urbanism: networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition*. London: Routledge; Podmore and Bain (2020) '"No queers out there"? Metronormativity and the queer suburban'.

discrete physical spaces, examining instead how the wider cultural ecosystem functions within a specific place. From a policy perspective, the concept is valuable as it allows for a more comprehensive assessment of cultural value and moves beyond the discrete assessment of the impacts of specific amenities to a recognition of the interconnected nature of cultural assets. Additionally, it refocuses attention on culture's role in collective 'meaning-making' and symbolic representation, which are fundamental to the ways in which communities, from the local to the national, communicate and contest their feelings of collective identity and shared values.[13] In this regard, current UK policy initiatives, such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council/Department for Culture, Media and Sport Culture and Heritage Capital programme, illustrate ongoing efforts to improve the assessment of the value of cultural and heritage assets and to develop a taxonomy of these assets as part of a wider attempt to create a more sophisticated framework for cultural valuation.[14]

3. Considering social and cultural infrastructure together

The boundary between social and cultural infrastructure is less distinct than may initially appear, despite their emergence from different academic and policy standpoints.

The respective literatures often refer to similar types of places, such as cinemas, museums, art galleries, music venues, libraries, and pubs. Social and cultural infrastructure also frequently overlap in their roles and functions, with much of the literature on cultural infrastructure highlighting the social benefits that cultural spaces engender, such as community cohesion, local pride, and inclusion. A library, for instance, might serve as a source of educational resources (cultural) as well as a community meeting point (social). A local pub hosting weekly quiz nights can act as a space both for entertainment (cultural) and for fostering community bonds (social). There are, of course, instances where this overlap does not occur. A site of cultural production, such as a music studio, may not have a social function. Nevertheless, the significant overlap between social and cultural infrastructure indicates the value of treating them as closely interconnected, without diminishing a sense of the different kinds of entity to which these terms typically refer and the different types of value they create. For this reason, throughout this research we treat them as a single category while recognising the multifaceted and context-specific roles that they play in different places.

Approaching social and cultural infrastructure as a unified category will enable improved policymaking in this area. Spaces, places and facilities that fall under these headings face similar policy challenges and pressures, including diminishing public sector funding and the risk of disappearing altogether. For instance, a community centre offering English language classes (cultural) and functioning as a food bank on weekends (social) may struggle to secure sufficient funding to sustain its dual roles. A starker example is the plight of grassroots music venues in London. According to the Music Venue Trust, 125 grassroots music venues closed in the UK in 2023, and the Mayor of London's "Rescue Plan for London's Grassroots Music Venues" highlighted the severe risks they face. Despite their centrality to the city's music heritage and emerging talent, these spaces are threatened by rising business rates, redevelopment pressures, and a lack of recognition of their cultural value. All of these challenges are mirrored across numerous social and cultural assets. Addressing these issues equitably and sustainably, while ensuring such spaces continue to meet the diverse and evolving needs of communities, remains a persistent challenge, particularly in the context of regional inequalities and resource constraints.

[13] Kaszynska, P. (2024) 'Cultural value as meaning-making'. *Cultural Trends*, 1–15.; Kaszynska, P. (2024). 'Why cultural infrastructure deserves public funding'. The RSA. Available at: https://www.thersa.org/comment/2024/03/why-cultural-infrastructure-deserves-public-funding.

[14] Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2024) *AHRC/DCMS Culture and Heritage Capital Research Call - bid recipients*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ahrcdcms-culture-and-heritage-capital-research-call-bid-recipients.

This report addresses these gaps by offering a more inclusive framework to measure social and cultural infrastructure. This will enable users of this framework to take better informed decisions that are equitable, sustainable, and reflective of actual needs. In doing so, this project aims to provide much-needed clarity in an area where aspirations for better policy are evident, but pathways to achieve it remain undefined.

An infrastructural approach to social and cultural infrastructure

We propose that stakeholders view social and cultural infrastructure as a core component of broader infrastructural systems. Previous attempts to define them have been inhibited by treating them as separate from other forms of infrastructure. Community centres, libraries, music venues, and public parks are frequently listed, but such lists often lack a robust theoretical basis, making it unclear what unites these assets or why some are prioritised over others. Moreover, earlier approaches tend to treat infrastructure as fixed, overlooking its evolving nature and emerging forms such as board game cafes, maker spaces, or hybrid venues that combine coworking with cultural and creative activities.

The absence of a clear definition, and the breadth of assets that can plausibly be considered as social and cultural infrastructure, have led us to develop an approach grounded in the characteristics common to infrastructure. In considering those assets that contribute to the social and cultural lives of communities as forms of infrastructure helps to cast a useful light on how they function, how they should be managed, and how their impact can be measured. For example, understanding a library to be not just a local institution but also infrastructure supporting a range of other activities highlights its role as a fundamental resource connecting people with knowledge, supporting digital access, and providing a space for community interaction, much like transport or energy infrastructure enables mobility or power.

Infrastructure of all kinds is indispensable for citizens' quality of life and for the creation of healthy local economies. Without the physical assets that make up the traditional 'foundational' types of infrastructures, such as energy networks, transport, water, waste treatment, and communications, there can be no modern economy or society. This is equally true of social and cultural infrastructure, without which all aspects of life are greatly impoverished. This becomes evident when we observe the decay of social and cultural infrastructure and the failure of the networks that these different assets support.[15] Eric Klinenberg's work on the 1995 Chicago heat wave vividly illustrates this point.[16] His research revealed that neighbourhoods with robust social infrastructure, such as active libraries, walkable sidewalks, and vibrant public spaces, experienced significantly lower mortality rates during the crisis compared to areas with degraded social assets, underscoring how the absence or deterioration of social infrastructure can have profound, even life-threatening, consequences.

Our approach therefore acknowledges that social and cultural infrastructure will vary across different contexts and stakeholder groups but maintains that it is possible to identify the general characteristics they exhibit as pieces of infrastructure. This approach avoids the common extremes of either reducing infrastructure to hard physical assets, like roads, bridges, and water treatment facilities, or sequestering social and cultural infrastructure as 'soft', and hence only referencing community programmes, arts initiatives, or social care. Instead, it avoids narrowing the scope of social and cultural infrastructure to predefined categories (hard or soft) and provides a flexible framework that focuses on the shared characteristics of infrastructure. By focusing on generic characteristics, it ensures that all types of infrastructures are equally considered and leaves space for geographic variation in terms of which kinds of asset exhibit these characteristics in different situations. This flexibility empowers stakeholders to assess whether and how these characteristics are being fulfilled, fostering a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the assets that make up the social and cultural infrastructure of a place.

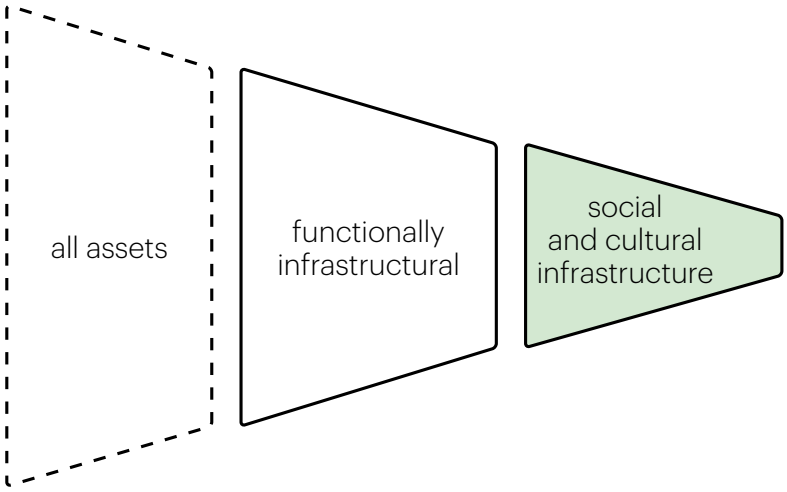
15 Tomaney et al. (2023) *Social infrastructure and left behind places.*

16 Klinenberg, E. (2015). *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Identifying and defining social and cultural infrastructure

As a starting point, it is necessary to determine whether the item in question is an **asset**. That is, is it something (tangible or intangible) that accumulates value over time, reflecting some initial or ongoing investment (monetary, human, time-based, or other), and is expected to function as part of society over an extended period? **If something is not an asset, then according to our definition, it is not a type of infrastructure.**

Diagram 3: Identifying assets



Once we have determined whether something is an asset, it is then necessary to ask whether it functions as infrastructure. To do so, we have built on Brett Frischmann's approach to understanding the characteristics of infrastructure, which he defines as:

> "Managed in an openly accessible manner whereby all members of a community who wish to use the resources may do so on equal and nondiscriminatory terms. [...] In short, the resource is accessible to all within a community regardless of the identity of the end-user or end-use—that is, without regard to who you are or what you are planning to do. [...] Traditional infrastructures generate significant spillovers (positive externalities) that result in large social gains. [They] facilitate the generation of positive externalities by permitting downstream production of public and social goods." [17]

We build on this core understanding by adding:

- Infrastructure needs to be **available** to many people regardless of their individual status or characteristics. While use of infrastructure may be restricted to particular groups (such as women or older people) or require some kind of payment or fee, it is not based primarily on personal connections or individual status.[18] For example, any individual who purchases a ticket for a public bus can use the service, irrespective of their social status, networks, or individual characteristics.

17 Frischmann, B. (2012) *Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

18 We use "available" to indicate that infrastructure can be used by many people regardless of their individual status, though access may be subject to conditions such as eligibility requirements or fees. This differs from "accessible," which Brett Frischmann defined as infrastructure being managed in a way that ensures equal and nondiscriminatory use. Availability in this case speaks to the structural openness of infrastructure. Availability does not, on its own, imply non-rivalry; rather, both characteristics must be present for something to be considered infrastructure in our definition.

19 What activities a community should value is a question for political theory. One natural way of grounding these valuable activities is in their ability to promote positive freedoms that the community believes its citizens ought to possess. Using Martha Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach, social and cultural infrastructure is particularly related to the capabilities of affiliation, emotions, senses, imaginations, and thought. See Wells, T. *Sen's Capability Approach*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/.

- All infrastructure should **enable** many activities that are valued by people and have uses in a wide range of downstream activities.[19] The primary function of the power grid, for example, is to distribute electricity, which is not wanted for its own sake but because it supports various downstream activities like running homes, businesses, and public services.
- Finally, multiple users can use infrastructure simultaneously without competing for a share of it - what in economics is called **non-rivalry**. For instance, many users of the Internet can access it simultaneously without diminishing the access of others.

Infrastructural Assets		
Available	**Enabling**	**Non-rival**
The asset must be available, in that its use should not be determined primarily by personal connections or wealth (e.g. roads or libraries).	The asset facilitates a wide range of activities valued by people (e.g. the internet supports education, commerce and connectivity).	The asset is open to whoever the infrastructure is relevant to and can be used by multiple users without competition or significant depletion (e.g. electricity grids).

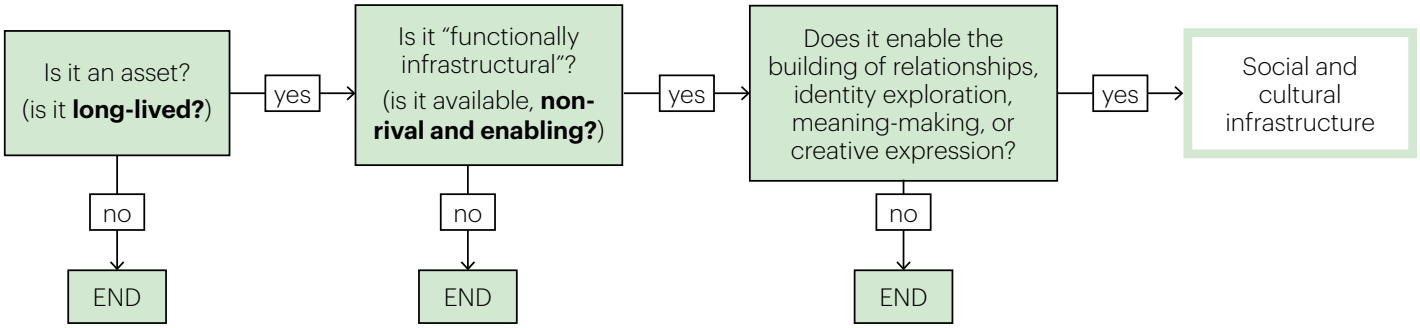
Once an asset has been identified as being functionally infrastructural, we need to consider whether it can be included in the category of social and cultural infrastructure. The test that we have identified to determine this is whether the asset, through its available and enabling characteristics, plays a direct role in at least one of the following:

- **The building of relationships** (such as youth organisations or faith spaces);
- **Identity exploration** (for example, sport stadiums or LGBTQ+ venues that help individuals situate themselves within or feel part of their wider community);
- **Meaning-making** (such as museums that help reflect on history and identity, or arts centres showcasing work exploring societal issues);
- **Enabling creative expression** (such as community arts organisations or performance venues).

Each of these aspects underscore the pivotal role that social and cultural infrastructure play in fostering a variety of connections that enrich community life and linking people with their wider community and society. A public park, for example, can play a direct role in fostering creative expression through community art installations or outdoor performances, in meaning-making through commemorative spaces or cultural festivals, and in identity exploration by hosting events that celebrate diverse cultures and traditions. Furthermore, parks build relationships by providing spaces where people gather, interact, and strengthen their connections with others in the community.

The diagram below illustrates this definitional process:

Diagram 4: Definitional Process



This characteristics-based approach encompasses the broad span of amenities that tend to be cited as social and cultural infrastructure in both academic and policy discourse, including community centres, libraries, cafes, car boot sales, festivals, night-time venues, places of worship, universities, restaurants, pubs, playgrounds, parks, and theatres. It also captures those assets that may not be readily identifiable, but that at times and in some places effectively function as social and cultural infrastructure. For instance, Bold Tendencies, a not-for-profit organisation operating in a former multi-storey car park in Peckham, shows how infrastructure that may not initially appear social or cultural can, through innovative use, become a hub for community and creativity.[20] The organisation has transformed a local car park into a celebrated cultural venue hosting an annual programme of visual arts, live performances, and creative learning initiatives. This nuanced view of infrastructure is further evidence in our work with Power to Change on privately-owned social infrastructure, which demonstrated how supermarkets often support social mixing and interactions between community members.[21] These examples illustrate the need to move away from a fixed, 'a priori' list of what should be considered as social and cultural infrastructure in different places. Equally we should not necessarily restrict our conception and measurement to tangible assets. The characteristics that we set out for defining social and cultural infrastructure can be similarly applied to intangible assets such as neighbourhood support networks or community groups that help connect people and strengthen social ties.

The table below demonstrates how particular examples of social and cultural infrastructure match each characteristic.

Table 1: Examples illustrating the characteristics of social and cultural infrastructure

Characteristic	Examples
Is it an asset?	
An asset is something that has accumulated value over time, reflecting some initial or ongoing investment, and is expected to function as part of society over an extended period.	• A **market** is a long-lived asset due to the regularity of the activity in a specified location regardless of whether stalls within it change over time. • **Universities** are long-lived institutions that can engage with their local communities through meaningful social and cultural initiatives. • **Neighbourhood support networks** are intangible assets that embody accumulated social capital through years of relationship-building and shared knowledge. They function as critical support systems, reinforcing their long-term value to society.
Is it "functionally infrastructural"?	
Available The asset must be available to many in that access to it is not determined primarily by personal connections or individual characteristics.	• A **library** is open to everyone, with access not determined by personal relationships, identity, or ability. • With access limited to men, **men's sheds** offer their users the opportunity to connect with other men and learn new skills; but they are open to all men not specific individuals. • A **café** provides a shared space where entry and use are open to all, though the purchase of food and drink may be required to use it.

20 Bold Tendencies. *About*. Available at: https://boldtendencies.com/about/.

21 Marks, R., Craig, J., and Garling, O. (2024) *Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure.* Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Power to Change.

Enabling The asset facilitates a wide range of activities valued by communities.	• A **community centre** is a space for multiple activities, such as parent and toddler groups, dance classes, or reading clubs. • **Places of worship** enable communities of a particular religion to come together in prayer but are also used to host other community activities, such as Sunday School.
Non-rival The asset can be used simultaneously by multiple users without competition or significant depletion. It does not depend on personal relationships and is open to whoever the infrastructure is relevant to.	• A **park** is available to everyone simultaneously without users needing to compete for space. • A **cinema** is available to any number of users up to its capacity, with no limits or competition between users until that capacity is reached.
Is it social and cultural infrastructure?	
The asset enables the building of relationships, identity exploration, meaning-making, or creative expression.	• **Community groups** and **arts organisations** enable people to connect with one another as well as with their heritage and culture. • **Allotments** provide spaces for collaboration, learning, and fostering shared social connections over a common interest. • **Hairdressers** and **barbers** facilitate social interactions, preserve cultural traditions, and foster a sense of belonging within local communities.

Conclusion

Adopting this characteristics-based approach enables the flexibility and inclusivity necessary to accommodate the diverse forms of social and cultural assets that exist, and might be developed, in very different contexts. This approach can accommodate both their tangible and intangible nature and draws attention to their role in fostering creative expression and community connections. It also enables policymakers to consider them within the context of other kinds of infrastructure.

Chapter 2: How is social and cultural infrastructure measured?

Measurement, now commonly regarded as core to any evidence-based practice, is not just a technical exercise. It is an investment of resources that can influence how people perceive local buildings, amenities, and spaces. It also shapes the incentives of those involved in the assessment process, in part because quantifying something makes it easier to be assigned economic value and monetised. We therefore believe that measurement should be thought of more explicitly as a process with a particular purpose and potential consequences.

In this chapter, we critically examine the various approaches that have been advanced to measure social and cultural infrastructure and the range of objectives, from guiding investment decisions to identifying unequal provision of assets, that have informed them. Each of these approaches is adapted to a unique context, scale, and purpose, and so has distinct methods, metrics, and processes. Though we recognise the efforts that have been invested in these approaches and the insights they contain, we also note their limitations, notably the lack of transparency about the reasons for using particular metrics. We make the case for a consistent, transparent, context-sensitive and flexible measurement process. Rather than being treated as an end in itself, measurement should be responsive to the needs of diverse stakeholders and should be grounded in their concerns relating to infrastructure investment and maintenance.

Why does social and cultural infrastructure get measured?

Measurement does not happen in a vacuum. The abiding objectives of national policymakers, local government, community organisations, and other stakeholders, and the contexts in which they are operating, are key to understanding the variety of metrics that have proliferated in this area. Having analysed existing approaches, we classify the most typical objectives associated with prior efforts to measure these forms of infrastructure under four broad headings:

- **To uncover unequal provision**
  In the UK, many attempts to measure social infrastructure on a national scale have sought to uncover inequality of provision and the consequences for societal outcomes such as educational attainment, community cohesion, and, notably, wellbeing, both on an individual and community level.[22] Often rooted within broader place-based social research projects, these attempts have sought to examine social disparities across the country.[23]
- **To understand the political consequences of deprivation**
  In a similar vein, some recent initiatives to measure social infrastructure at both national and local levels have aimed to understand the political consequences of deprivation in left-behind places. These attempts have emerged in the context of debates about Brexit and the so-called 'Red Wall' of seats that voted Conservative in the 2019 election. The consequences

[22] For examples, see Campkin, B. and Marshall, L. (2017) *LGBTQ+ Cultural Infrastructure in London: Night Venues, 2006-2017.* UCL Urban Laboratory; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. (2022) *Rapid evidence review of community initiatives;* Jarvis, S. (2017) *Understanding London's Markets.* Greater London Authority.

[23] Onward. *UK Social Fabric Index.* Available at: https://www.ukonward.com/data/social-fabric-index/; OCSI. *Community Needs Index – measuring social and cultural factors.* Available at: https://ocsi.uk/2019/10/21/community-needs-index-measuring-social-and-cultural-factors/.

of these political developments for both domestic and international politics have prompted attempts to understand the nature of deprivation, regional inequalities, and the fraying of traditional social and cultural ties.[24]

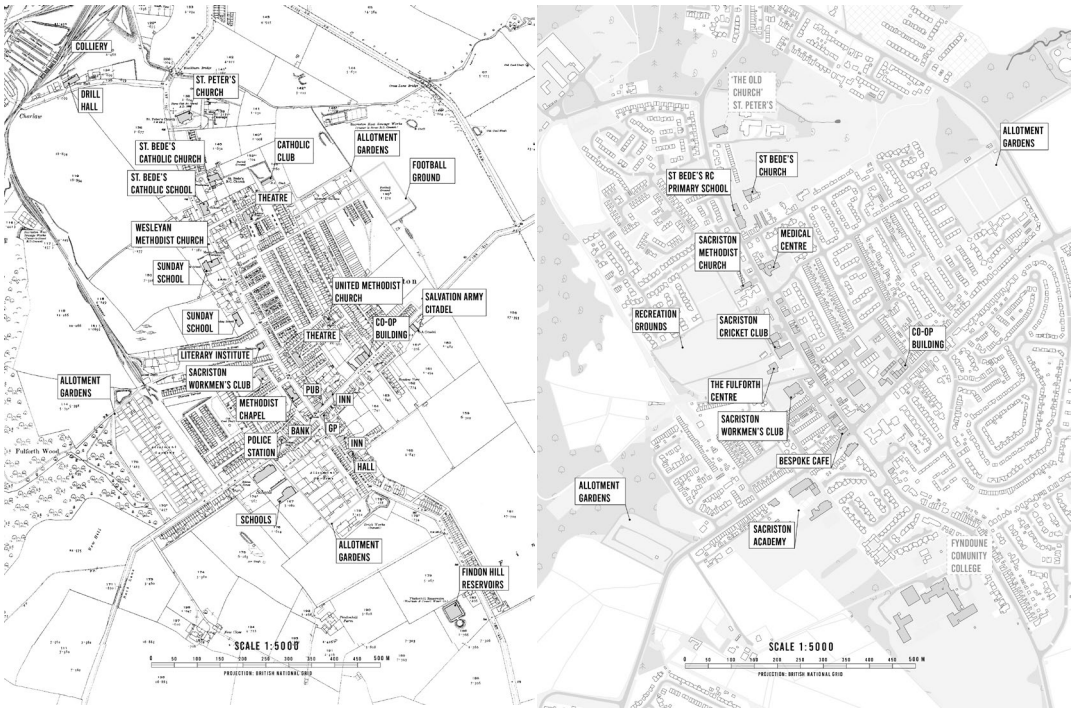


Figure 1: Example of maps highlighting the decline in the amount of social infrastructure in the town of Sacriston, County Durham in the UK from the 1910s to 2022 coinciding with the rapid increase of inequality and deprivation in the region. (Source: Tomaney, J. et al. (2023)) CC-BY-NC 4.0.

- **To guide or advocate for investment**
  With declining public and private investment in social and cultural provision in recent years, there has been a growing focus on measuring the value of specific types of social and cultural infrastructure, or even individual assets, for purposes such as social cost benefit analysis. These efforts tend to highlight their social and economic benefits, building a stronger case for renewed and targeted investment. For instance, museums and libraries have been hit by critical reductions in funding in recent years, prompting a number of studies attempting to quantify their value.[25] This reflects a broader recognition among stakeholders that they need to be better able to justify and articulate their investment needs to government, particularly in times of austerity.[26]
- **To aid place-based policymaking**
  Other research projects have sought to provide context-specific information to aid local policymaking. Several recently published indexes have been designed to enable local policymakers and other stakeholders to tailor information to specific local objectives and priorities.[27] These approaches have emerged amidst growing attempts to tackle regional inequality, an impetus towards devolution (as most recently illustrated by the government's

24 Tomaney et al. (2023) *Social infrastructure and left behind places*; Wallace, J. and Peachey, J. (2023) *Life in the UK 2023*. Carnegie UK; The New Britain Project. *Broken Britain*. Available at: https://www.newbritain.org.uk/broken-britain.

25 Gilpin, G. et al. (2024) 'The Returns to Library Investment'. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 16(2): pp. 79-109; Bhatt, R. (2010) 'The impact of public library use on reading, television, and academic outcomes'. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 68(2): pp. 148-166; Derby Museums. (2023) *The Impact of the Museum of Making: Social Return on Investment*; Thomson, L. et al. (2020) 'Art, nature and mental health: assessing the biopsychosocial effects of a "creative green prescription" museum programme involving horticulture, artmaking and collections'. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 140(5): pp. 277-285; Dragija, M. and Jelincic, D. (2022) 'Can Museums Help Visitors Thrive? Review of Studies on Psychological Wellbeing in Museums'. *Behavioural Sciences*, 12(11): p. 458.

26 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) *Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure*.

27 Ussher, K. et al. (2021) *Everyday Places: Creating Strong Locations to Support Daily Life in Britain*. Demos and Legal and General. Tauschisnki, J. et al. (2021) *A Civic Strength Index for London*. The Young Foundation; Centre for Thriving Places. *Thriving Places Dashboard*. Available at: https://www.centreforthrivingplaces.org/thriving-places-index/.

English Devolution White Paper), and greater recognition in policy debates of the need to engage local stakeholders to develop sustainable and context-specific policies.[28]

This discussion shows that to date, the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure has been inherently shaped by different political perspectives and is often employed as a tool for advocacy. This highlights the case for an approach to measurement that acknowledges and makes explicit the decisions that have been made throughout the process, which will shape the end results.

How is social and cultural infrastructure measured?

Measuring even more familiar forms of infrastructure, such as bridges or water pipelines, is challenging. Despite (or because of) this, a variety of methods have been developed to measure it, including counting physical assets, such as kilometres of paved roads or number of power plants, or assessing the level of monetary investment in infrastructure or its market value.[29] Alternatively, economists have sought to measure its performance by looking at a range of metrics, such as service delivery and utilisation rates. The National Infrastructure Commission, for instance, cites volume, resilience, quality, cost, environment, and efficiency as key metrics through which the value of national infrastructure should be assessed.[30] Others estimate its economic impact, such as its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or assess its social and environmental effects, though these are difficult to quantify.[31]

Motivated by a range of purposes, notably those discussed in the previous section, a number of methods have been developed to assess different types of social and cultural infrastructure more specifically. A common approach is to count the physical stock of assets, which is often followed by mapping their spatial distribution to examine density and regional variation. Examples of this include the Mapping Museums project, which created a database of all museums in the UK, and LibraryOn, an interactive online map of the UK's public libraries.[32] Other methods focus on quantifying investment in specific types of assets. For example, the Mendoza Review, an independent review of the museum sector, estimated the total public investment in museums in England to be £839 million between 2016 and 2017.[33] However, while these approaches provide a baseline understanding of the total stock of investment, they reveal little about the quality or usage of these assets.

Another approach has been to measure the value of specific types of social and cultural infrastructure or individual assets. This is often achieved through economic methods like calculations of "willingness to pay" (how much individuals are prepared to contribute to maintaining an asset) or "willingness to accept" (the compensation they would require if the asset were lost or degraded).[34] Contingent valuation methods such as these have been used to measure the value of cathedrals, theatres, and sporting events, museums and libraries.[35] Two

28 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2024) *English Devolution White Paper – Power and Partnerships: Foundation for Growth*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth.

29 World Bank. *Infrastructure*. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/topic/9; Office for National Statistics (2023). *Infrastructure in the UK, investment and net stocks: May 2023*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/productivitymeasures/articles/developingnewmeasuresofinfrastructureinvestment/may2023.

30 National Infrastructure Commission. (2018) *Technical annex: Measuring infrastructure performance.*

31 Esfahani, H. and Ramirez, M. (2003) 'Institutions, infrastructure, and economic growth'. *Journal of Development Economics*, 70(2): pp. 443-477; Canning, D. and Pedroni, P. (2008) 'Infrastructure, long-run economic growth, and causality tests for cointegrated panels'. *The Manchester School*, 76(5): pp. 504-527; Calderon, C. and Serven, L. (2004) 'The Effects of Infrastructure Development on Growth and Income Distribution'. *Policy Research Working Paper Series*, 3400.

32 Mapping Museums Lab. (2025) *Mapping Museums: the history and geography of the UK 1960-2020*. Available at: https://mapping-museums.bbk.ac.uk/about-mapping-museums/. Library On. *Map of UK public libraries: Find your nearest library.* Available at: https://libraryon.org/map.

33 Mendoza, N. (2017) *The Mendoza Review: an independent review of museums in England*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

34 Bakhshi, H. et al. (2023) *Issues in Valuing Cultural and Heritage Capital in the National Accounts*. ESCoE Discussion Paper No. DP 2023-04.

other methods are increasingly used to measure the value of non-market assets: wellbeing approaches, which assess how the usage of an asset affects subjective wellbeing; and social return on investment approaches, which assign monetary value to the social and environmental benefit created by an institution or organisation.[36] Some studies have sought to measure other downstream benefits of particular types of assets, such as the positive impact of green space on reducing obesity and childhood cognitive functioning.[37] While demonstrating a causal link between the usage of social and cultural assets and desired social and economic outcomes may help strengthen the business case for greater investment, proving causal impact is inherently fraught given the numerous inputs that may affect specific outcomes.

A handful of projects have sought to examine the social and/or cultural infrastructure of places in the round. In the last few years, there have been several attempts in the UK to map cultural provision, such as the Mayor of London's Cultural Infrastructure Map and the West Midlands Combined Authority's Cultural Infrastructure Map.[38] The Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, in partnership with its Arm's-length bodies, are also currently undertaking their Culture and Heritage Capital (CHC) programme, which aims to better define and understand cultural and heritage assets, services and outcomes.[39] Some elements of social and cultural infrastructure have been incorporated into broader social health indices, which seek to highlight unequal social conditions across the UK, with the OCSI's Community Needs Index considering 'civic assets', such as village halls, youth clubs, and leisure centres, and Onward's Social Fabric Index providing per capita assessments of assets such as libraries, leisure centres, pubs, and green spaces. However, reducing social and cultural provision to a single figure, as some of these indices do, runs the risk of oversimplification, and although this approach enables direct comparisons between places, it may not always be helpful to policymakers given that every place will require a unique portfolio of social and cultural assets.

The table below sets out some of the existing approaches to measuring social and cultural infrastructure, detailing what is being measured and their abiding normative purpose. These are not mutually exclusive, as many approaches may serve multiple purposes.

35 Barlow, A. and Forrest, D. (2015) 'Benefits to their Communities from Small Town Professional Football Clubs'. *National Institute Economic Review*, 232(1): R18-29; Willis, K. (1994) 'Paying for heritage: what price for Durham Cathedral?'. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 37(3): pp.267-278; Hansen, T. B. (1997) 'The Willingness-to-Pay for the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen as a Public Good'. *Journal of Cultural Economics,* 21(1): pp. 1-28; PricewaterhouseCoopers. (2005) *Olympic Games Impact Study: Final Report*. Department of Cultural, Media and Sport; Pung, C. et al. (2004) 'Measuring the economic impact of the British Library'. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 10(1): pp. 79-102.

36 The Happy Museum. (2010) *Museum of East Anglian Life – building social capital and promoting wellbeing*; Wilson, K. and Whelan, G. (2014) *Evaluation of* House of Memories *Dementia Training Programme: Midlands Model.* Institute of Cultural Capital and National Museums Liverpool. For a longer discussion of methods for capturing the value of social and cultural assets beyond the purely economic, see Davies, J. (2024) *Beyond Economics: How Can We Better Capture the Value of Cultural Activity.* University of Birmingham. Available at: https://blog.bham.ac.uk/lpip/2024/12/18/beyond-economics-how-can-we-better-capture-the-value-of-cultural-activity/.

37 Mitchell, R. and Popham, F. (2000) 'Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study'. *The Lancet*, 373(9650): pp. 1655-1660; Wells, N. (2000) 'At Home with Nature: Effects of "Greenness" on Children's Cognitive Functioning'. *Environment and Behaviour*, 32(6): pp. 775-795; Jia, P. et al. (2021) 'Green space access in the neighbourhood and childhood obesity'. *Obesity Reviews*, 22(S1): e13100.

38 Mayor of London. (2024) *Cultural Infrastructure Map*. Available at: https://apps.london.gov.uk/cim/index.html; West Midlands Combined Authority. (2025) *West Midlands Cultural Infrastructure Map*. Available at: https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/culture-and-digital/culture-creative-industries/west-midlands-cultural-sector-research-project/west-midlands-cultural-infrastructure-map/.

39 Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2024) *Embedding a Culture and Heritage Capital Approach*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/embedding-a-culture-and-heritage-capital-approach

Table 2: Some existing approaches to measuring social and cultural infrastructure and their purpose

Research Project/ Index	Geographic coverage and scale	Scoring scale	Sub-categories	Key data sources
To uncover inequality and/or unequal provision				
Onward. (2023) *Social Fabric Index*.	United Kingdom Local Authority Districts	1 – 10	Relationships, Economic value, Positive norms, Civic institutions, Physical infrastructure	Used over 50 different publicly available datasets from a range of sources e.g. ONS, Ofcom, Plunkett Foundation all dating from between 2020 and 2022.
Local Trust & Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion. (2019) *Community Needs Index*.	England Local council wards	Identification of 'left behind places'	Civic assets, Connectedness, Active and engaged community	Publicly available data from a range of sources, including ONS, Active Places Power, Historic England, and DfT. Most of the sources date from between 2016 and 2018, though some date back as far as 2004.
Fraser et al. (2022) *Trust but verify.*	Boston, United States 1km^2 city blocks	Average rate of social infrastructure per 1,000 residents.	Social infrastructure, specifically community spaces, places of worship, social businesses, open public spaces.	Google Maps Places Application Programming Interface and in-person site observations.
To understand the political consequences of deprivation				
Tomaney et al. (2023) *Social Infrastructure and Left Behind Places*.	Sacriston, County Durham	N/A	Social infrastructure e.g. religious institutions, co-operative societies.	Ethnographic research of Sacriston largely undertaken between 2020 and 2022.
The New Britain Project. (2023) *Broken Britain Index*.	England Lower Tier Local Authorities	Local authority ranking	'Healthcare emergency' (e.g. ambulance waiting times), 'forgotten generation' (e.g. percentage of pupils persistently absent), 'crumbling communities' (e.g. vacancy rates, levels of food insecurity).	18 key indicators, mostly national statistics from 2021 to 2023 from sources including the NHS, local authorities, and the police force.
Carnegie UK Trust and Ipsos. (2024) *Life in the UK*.	United Kingdom International Territorial Level Regions (ITL1)	0 – 100	'Social wellbeing', 'economic wellbeing', 'environmental wellbeing', 'democratic wellbeing'.	Based on a survey of over 6,700 people conducted by Ipsos in 2024.
To guide or advocate for investment				
Arts Council England. (2024) *Culture and Place Data Explorer*.	England Up to Lower Layer Super Output Areas	Depends on the indicator chosen e.g. percentage, number of assets etc.	Indicators include density of sport and leisure assets, levels of engagement with culture, health and wellbeing, local cultural infrastructure etc.	Range of data sources largely dating from 2018 to 2024 e.g. ACE funding by year, local authority cultural and heritage revenue spend, Participation Survey, Census, and IMD.
Heritage Lottery Fund. (2016) *State of Public Parks*.	United Kingdom	N/A	Public attitudes towards parks, frequency of use, user demographic, parks' sources of income.	Surveys, workshops, and interviews undertaken in 2016.

Research Project/ Index	Geographic coverage and scale	Scoring scale	Sub-categories	Key data sources
To aid place-based policymaking				
Demos and Legal & General. (2021) *Place Satisfaction Index*.	Great Britain Parliamentary constituency	-100 – +100	Housing, jobs, communities, shopping, going out, fresh air, exercise, transport, internet access	Survey of over 20,000 people commissioned by Demos undertaken in December 2020.
Centre for Thriving Places. (2024) *Thriving Places Index*.	England Local Authority Districts	1 – 10	Local conditions, equality, sustainability	Data collected from 'established national data agencies' e.g. the ONS, RSA, DfE, and Natural England. Most sources date from between 2019 and 2023.
Greater London Authority and The Young Foundation. (2021) *Civic Strength Index*.	London Local council wards	0 – 100	Relationships and social capital, democratic engagement, public and social infrastructure	Data collected from a variety of sources, such as the ONS, Charity Commission, 360Giving and the Community Life Survey. Most of the data is from 2019 to 2021 though some date back as far as 2014.

Several features of these studies deserve further comment. Each framework operates on a different geography, with some covering the United Kingdom (such as Carnegie UK Trust's 'Life in the UK' report) and others focussing on some combination of its constituent countries (as England in the case of the Centre for Thriving Places' 'Thriving Places Index'). The frameworks then sub-divide these geographies differently, with the 'Place Satisfaction Index' using parliamentary constituencies as their scale of measurement, for example, and others, including the 'Broken Britain Index' and the 'Civic Strength Index' focusing on local authorities or wards. Equally, the ways in which numerical measures are applied to these units also varies, as does the data that has been used to populate the measures, with some drawing on existing data sources and others, such as the 'Life in the UK' report, using bespoke survey data. The categories in which these measures have been grouped also differ across all frameworks.

Analysis of these approaches makes clear that the normative perspective of their architects invariably plays a role in decisions about what assets are included, the data considered, and at what scale they work. For example, the Civic Strength Index and Community Needs Index adopt forms of measurement that reflect an abiding interest in social capital and community cohesion, while the Thriving Places Index is rooted in a belief in the wellbeing economy and sustainable development. However, users of these approaches may not readily grasp these normative perspectives which are not made explicit.

Towards a broader, more consistent approach to measurement

Each of these approaches has emerged in relation to the pursuit of a particular objective and therefore cannot easily be transposed and adapted to new purposes or scales. Designed to aid local policymaking in London, the Civic Strength Index, for instance, would not be much use for policymakers working on social and cultural provision on a regional or national scale. Equally, Onward's Social Fabric Index, with its focus on uncovering inequality across the UK, could not be used by a local authority assessing whether local social and cultural assets meet the needs of a particular demographic or community.

Yet the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure is pertinent to a wider range of objectives than recent studies suggest. A number of policy areas would benefit from a more consistent approach to measurement, including the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Civil Society Covenant Framework, which seeks to help reset the relationship between government and civil society. It could also contribute to the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government's recent Plan for Neighbourhoods, which in part aims to bring back those 'institutions that tie communities together, like community centres…and cultural venues', as well as their upcoming community strategy. Large-scale housebuilding – another key priority for central and devolved government – also requires an understanding of what kinds of social and cultural asset exist in particular places and are needed to ensure the success of new developments.

Beyond the world of government, funders would also benefit from a more comprehensive and flexible approach to help them understand the impact of their investments and potential returns, while local anchor institutions, such as universities, may want to measure how they support various kinds of social and cultural entity to understand the value they provide to the local area. In addition, while existing approaches to measurement tend to overlook the experiences and priorities of communities by focusing on top-down metrics, an approach that also enables a bottom-up (hyper-)local perspective could be used, among other things, to help communities understand what social and cultural infrastructure is available to them, how it is used, and what kind of impacts it has. These examples demonstrate that in some cases, a more standardised approach to measurement is required to provide consistency, particularly when addressing broad national or regional (policy) concerns, while in others, a more tailored, context-specific approach will be more effective in meeting the unique needs and aspirations of communities. Policymakers and other stakeholders would therefore benefit from an approach to measurement that can be tailored to specific purposes but still enables its users to follow the same process.

An approach rooted in a broader understanding of infrastructure could also help to establish an appreciation of social and cultural assets as integral parts of the UK's national infrastructure. Currently, bodies like the National Infrastructure Commission (now the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority), the National Wealth Fund (formerly the UK Infrastructure Bank), and the Office for National Statistics, do not consider social and cultural assets in their typologies of critical infrastructure.[40] Nor do large academic projects considering infrastructure capacity in the UK, such as the (now defunct) UK Infrastructure Transitions Research Consortium, examine social and cultural infrastructure.[41] Measuring social and cultural infrastructure on different scales, and understanding how it interacts with other infrastructural systems would enable a more joined-up approach to policy strategy and development, and could help establish social and cultural infrastructure as a category that should be routinely analysed by national-level institutions. Yet the fragmented way in which measurement is currently approached precludes the possibility of this kind of joined-up policymaking.

40 UK Infrastructure Bank. (2022) *Strategic Plan;* National Infrastructure Commission. (2023) *The Second National Infrastructure Assessment*. Office for National Statistics. (2023) *Infrastructure in the UK, investment and net stocks: May 2023.*

41 UK Research and Innovation. *UK Infrastructure Transitions Research Consortium (ITRC): PROGRAMME GRANT: Long term dynamics of interdependent infrastructure systems.* Available at: https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=EP%2FI01344X%2F2.

Conclusion

A consensus about a better approach to measurement would be a big step forward for policymakers, communities and other stakeholders. Existing approaches use different metrics, focus on different assets, and are shaped by their designers' often hidden preconceptions and biases. Given the complexities associated with measuring social and cultural infrastructure, including the range of assets included, the views of a wide range of stakeholders involved, and its contribution to a number of different policy objectives, it may be difficult to develop a single set of measures to answer all questions. However, we believe that it is both desirable and possible to have an approach to measurement that enables the required flexibility if a more standardised and open process of measurement is followed.

To address these challenges, we propose an adaptable, step-by-step framework grounded in an understanding of the core characteristics of infrastructure. This framework is designed to build upon existing approaches while remaining accessible to a wide range of stakeholders. It ensures a consistent, transparent process for measuring social and cultural infrastructure, regardless of the purpose or context. The details of our proposed measurement framework are outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Measurement framework

In this chapter we set out a three-phase framework that is dynamic, flexible, and practical. It strikes a balance between grounding measurement in the best available theory of social and cultural infrastructure while being sensitive to the goals of users. Rather than prescribing a particular set of tools or datasets, the framework provides users with the opportunity to pick and choose the most appropriate and useful, depending on their priorities and expertise and the resources available.

At the heart of the framework is our contention that **the process of measurement is as important as the final representation of evidence**. The framework is designed so that users can follow the same approach regardless of their own normative or philosophical orientation, while also allowing for the context-specific character of social and cultural provision. Therefore, rather than purely presenting a dashboard of possible measures, our framework sets out a series of steps to be undertaken to develop an appropriate set of measures.

The process involves three connected phases:

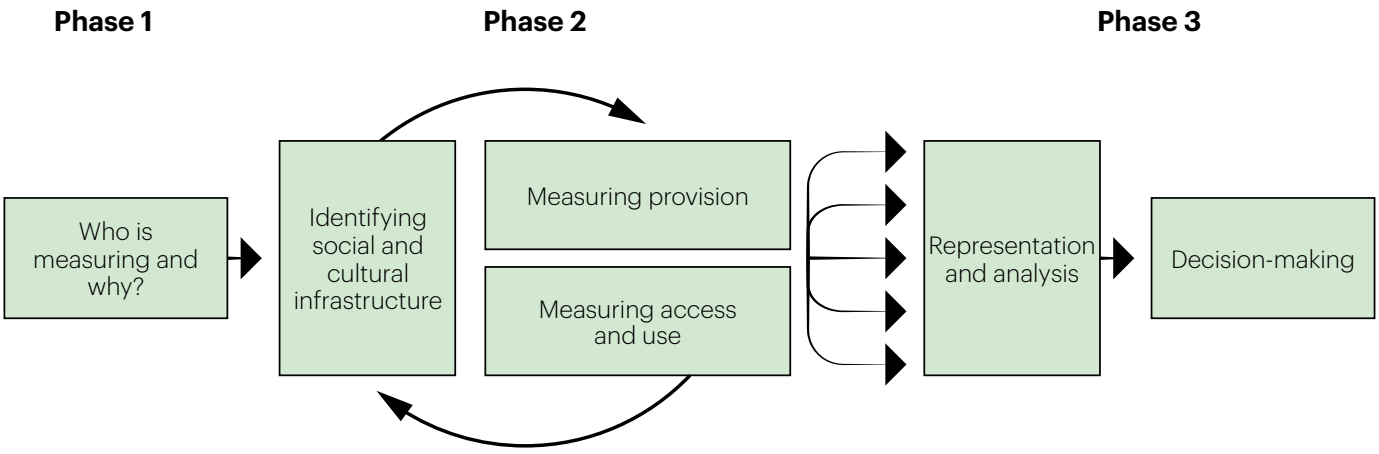
(1) establishing purpose;

(2) identifying and measuring social and cultural infrastructure; and

(3) analysis and decision-making.

It is important to note that although the phases are laid out in a sequential way, users may well take a more iterative approach as their knowledge and understanding increases.

Diagram 5: Phases of the framework



This chapter details each of these steps and considers two case studies that demonstrate what they would involve in practical terms.

Case Study 1	A **community organisation** wants to understand the social and cultural provision for young people in Anywhere Town.
Case Study 2	**Local Authority X** is exploring how to reinvigorate the local high street by supporting and creating social and cultural infrastructure in the area.

The framework

Phase 1: Who is measuring and why?

The first step in this framework requires its users to think about their reasons for measuring social and cultural infrastructure. Is it to inform investment decisions, to understand inequalities in provision, or advocate for particular initiatives or spaces? The expectations behind the measurement process will be reflective of the user's broader policy concerns and priorities, whether that is community well-being, tackling spatial inequality, or building more houses. At this stage, it is worth asking whether measurement is needed and necessary to achieve these goals. Being resource-intensive, burdensome, and sometimes gameable, measurement should not be automatically desirable. But if it is, then the user(s) should begin with the question of who is measuring and why.

Clarifying the reasons for measuring will help to identify what assets to include in the measurement process. In some cases, specific types of assets, such as libraries or green spaces, will be the focus, while in others, a broader perspective on what is included might be adopted. It may also be the case that the subsequent stages of assessment bring to light spaces or networks that were not initially considered, and this may require adjusting preconceived ideas of the assets in question. The best way to test preconceptions is to be aware of who the stakeholders of this particular exercise are. Who stands to benefit from (or indeed bear the costs for) measuring social and cultural infrastructure? Different stakeholders will have different types of expertise about the assets in question and different expectations about what can be achieved through measurement. Reconciling these different interests and views will require open dialogue, transparent decision-making, and ideally agreement on measurement methodologies among as many stakeholders as possible, so that the process is both credible and efficient to administer.

Users of the framework will also be operating across different jurisdictions and spatial scales, which could range from the ward to the national level. For example, a local parish council concerned with the mental health of young people may want to evaluate the availability of various kinds of social and cultural infrastructure for this demographic within the ward's boundaries. A Combined Authority responsible for the delivery of a large housing development, on the other hand, may be concerned with providing new social facilities and amenities for the development's growing community.

While our framework provides an opportunity for users to identify social and cultural needs in the areas in which they are working or communities with which they are concerned, this first phase encourages them to prioritise clarifying their goals and aligning these with broader policy concerns. The next phase of the framework will guide users in assessing existing social and cultural provision, and the extent to which it meets (local) needs.

Case Study Examples
1. Community organisation
A community organisation that works with young people wants to understand whether the social and cultural infrastructure in Anywhere Town is meeting the needs of local young people and how it can be improved. From their prior experience and consultation with young people and organisers, the organisation knows that parks, sports facilities, youth centres, and corner shops are key spaces used by young people to socialise, so they decide to focus on these assets in the measurement process.
2. Local Authority X
Reinvigorating the local high street is a key policy priority for Local Authority X. In recent years, vacancy rates have increased and footfall has fallen, leading to local economic stagnation and a sense of decline and neglect. The council recognises that the high street needs to diversify and one way to do this is through the provision of social and cultural infrastructure. It allocates a team to measure social and cultural provision along the high street to inform context-specific policies to support and create social and cultural infrastructure.

Phase 2: Identification and measurement

The second phase involves three main steps:

a. identifying social and cultural infrastructure;

b. measuring provision; and

c. measuring use and access.

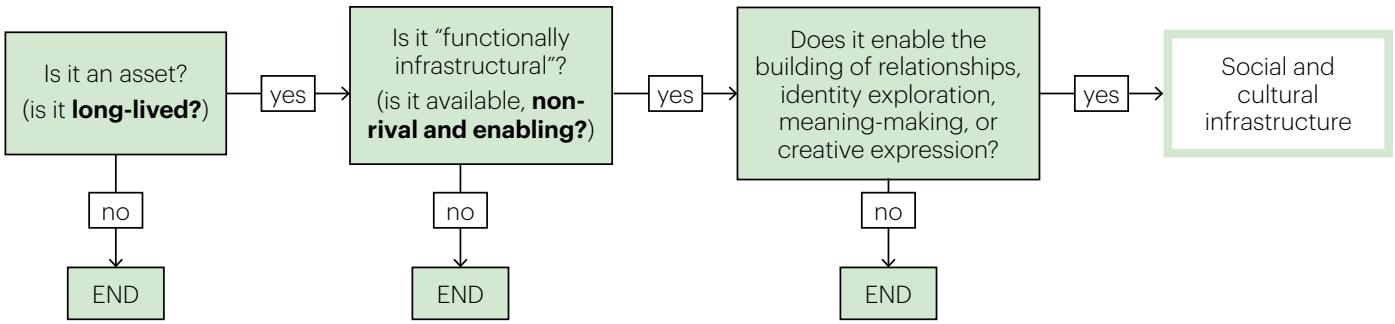
These are distinct elements within phase two, but they are not necessarily sequential. As with the three main phases of the framework, we suggest that the steps in phase two are undertaken iteratively. This is because users of the framework may have an initial understanding of what kinds of entity count as social and cultural infrastructure in relation to their own objective(s), but in taking these steps they may come to appreciate the relevance of amenities, spaces, and organisations that are not immediately obvious to them.

a. Identifying social and cultural infrastructure

This step involves determining what should be included in the process of measurement. In other words, which facilities, spaces, and networks should be considered in scope for measurement?

In order to determine whether an entity functions as a piece of social and cultural infrastructure, users of the framework should ask the following three questions. It should be noted, however, that the answers to them may not be clear cut and so there may well be a need for judgement calls on the part of the user of the framework.

Diagram 6: Definitional process



Question One: Is the entity in question an asset?

In other words, is it something

- tangible or intangible that has value accumulated over time?
- that required some initial investment (monetary, human, time-based, or other)?
- that is expected to function permanently or on a recurring basis over an extended period?

Question Two: Does the asset display the fundamental characteristics of infrastructure?

- Infrastructure must be **available** to many people both physically and socially. It is available for collective use and is not restricted by personal relationships.
- Infrastructure **enables** activities valued by communities and has many potential uses in a wide range of downstream activities.
- Infrastructure can be **shared by multiple users simultaneously** without the need for competition over a limited portion of it. It is 'non-rival' in the technical sense of a shared resource that, in principle, can be used by everyone.

Question Three: Can the infrastructural asset be characterised as social and cultural infrastructure?

These are assets that play a direct role in **enabling creative expression, meaning-making, identity exploration, and the building of relationships.** This final aspect underscores the pivotal role that social and cultural infrastructure plays in fostering a variety of connections that enrich community life and link people with their wider community and society.

Case Study Examples
1. Community organisation
While the organisation knows that sports facilities and corner shops are frequently used by young people, it wants to check that they count as social and cultural infrastructure given that, unlike parks and youth centres, they are not widely regarded as such. The organisation uses the three questions and decides that as well as being assets, they are available, enable multiple activities, are shared by multiple people, and help build relationships between young people. They therefore decide to incorporate sports facilities and corner shops into the measurement process.
2. Local Authority X
The project team decides to focus on all the assets along the designated high street that are (or could be) used for social and cultural activities. This includes the betting shop, the pub that hosts regular music and comedy nights, the supermarket, the local museums, independent retailers, and the weekly market that takes place on the high street. Given the high vacancy rates, the team includes in the measurement process those social and cultural assets that have closed in recent years.

b. Measuring provision

Once the relevant assets have been identified, it is possible to start measuring their level of provision. This would involve gaining access to the kinds of data which would enable the user to quantify them, whether they are physical (such as libraries, parks, and cafes) or intangible (such as the number and size of groups and networks).

There are some pre-existing datasets that could be employed at this stage (see *Chapter 4: Evidence, Data and Insights*). But, depending on the availability of time, expertise, and resources, decision-makers may also want to generate their own evidence base to gain a fuller and more accurate representation of the assets in their own locality by, for example, physically counting assets or running community mapping sessions.

Case Study Examples
1. Community organisation
The organisation uses several data sources to understand social and cultural provision for young people, including Google Maps and Sport England's Active Places Power dataset. Working with two secondary schools, the organisation also runs four mapping sessions, in which young people identify and discuss the spaces that they use to socialise. By doing this, it becomes apparent that young people also frequently socialise in fast food shops. They run this information back through 2.a *Identifying social and cultural infrastructure* and subsequently decide to incorporate these spaces into the data collection and analysis.

2. Local Authority X

The project team uses Google Maps to create a map of social and cultural assets along the high street to offer an indication as to what and how much social and cultural infrastructure there is in the area. This is accompanied by on-the-ground mapping, which involves the team walking the high street and surrounding roads to identify any assets they missed initially.

The local authority also owns an empty building on the high street, which it took over after M&S (the occupier) closed two years ago. The team turns a wing of the ground floor into a community-mapping space and encourages passers-by to come in and identify the social and cultural assets they use as well as those that have closed.

c. Measuring use and access

As well as understanding the provision of social and cultural infrastructure, it is important to understand how available it is, and how it is used. In other words, how well does existing provision serve the needs of the community or the particular demographic whose needs are under consideration? Measuring just the provision of assets without their use is undoubtedly easier, but it can create a misleading picture for decision-makers. Two assets that pass the test in step 2.a *Identifying social and cultural infrastructure* and included in 2.b *Measuring provision* can differ dramatically. For instance, one may be abandoned and dilapidated while the other beloved and cared for. This is the distinction that step 2.c *Measuring use and access* captures.

There are many ways in which the use of, and access to, social and cultural infrastructure can be understood, and we suggest choosing several different indicators to assess this. The indicators chosen will depend on factors like the scale at which the framework is being applied, the specific goals of the users of the framework, and the availability of relevant data. They will also depend on the ease with which new data can be generated and collected given that measuring use and access will largely depend on the creation of new data, which can be time- and resource-intensive.

The table below lists some indicators that could be chosen to measure use and access, and a range of data sources or methods that could be used to gather data about them. Although there is no direct link between a particular indicator and a specific source or method, some methods will be better suited to some indicators. (For a fuller discussion of data sources, methods and how to use them see *Chapter 4: Evidence, Data and Insights*.)

Table 3: Examples of indicators for measuring use and access alongside sources and methods for gathering data.

Potential indicators for measuring use and access	Sources/Methods
• Number of visitors	• Administrative data
• Number of events hosted	• Mobile phone data
• Demographic of visitors	• Surveys
• Public transport links	• Interviews
• Types of uses	• Focus groups
• Meaning of asset to community	• Peer research
• Psychological accessibility (e.g. feelings of safety)	• Observation

Some indicators, such as the number of visitors accessing a particular facility, may not require wider public consultation, but understanding the value that communities attribute to social and cultural assets, and people's experiences of them, will by their very nature require working with users and/or the wider community. This could be done through surveys, workshops, or interviews, for example. In many cases, it might be appropriate to work with a trusted community organisation or employ peer researchers with experience of qualitative methods.

Case Study Examples

1. Community organisation

The organisation explores how young people use the social and cultural assets in Anywhere Town and their accessibility through a range of methods, including:

- Using Google Maps and local transport information to examine accessibility
- Encouraging the young people at the mapping sessions to write down or visually depict their experiences of, and feelings towards, the spaces they use
- Using data from local youth centres to identify the numbers of activities they run and attendance levels
- Collaborating with other community groups to run focus groups with the wider community around attitudes towards social and cultural space for young people.

2. Local Authority X

While undertaking the on-the-ground mapping, the project team asks staff in local shops and other businesses about their experiences of the high street, the health of their businesses, who uses their businesses, and who they support.

The project team also builds on the community mapping to explore use and access. Those who initially participated in the mapping, including young people and attendees at the regular pensioners lunches, are asked to document their experiences of social and cultural provision, what and who (e.g. individuals and organisations) they value and why, and what they miss or want in the local area. They do this in a range of ways, including through keeping diaries and taking photographs.

Phase 3: Analysis and decision-making

The final phase of the framework brings together all the evidence gathered and feeds it into the decision-making process. In the scientific context measurement is sometimes identified with creation of numerical scales that possess certain metrological properties. While some quantitative aspects of infrastructure may be representable in this way, social and cultural infrastructure needs a more flexible conception of measurement. Assets that satisfy the four characteristics we identified need not necessarily be aggregated into a single numerical indicator. We should instead learn to live with representations that make room for more dimensions and multiple sources of evidence. Both quantitative data and qualitative testimonies can provide deep insights and should ideally be embraced as part and parcel of the overall measure. This might include creating maps of the distribution of social and cultural assets supplemented by visualisations of people's experiences of them or making a short film to develop a narrative around what spaces people value and how they could be improved.

There are multiple available examples of the use of such methods, such as the Mayor of London's Cultural Infrastructure Map, a digital, interactive map of social and cultural assets, which can be overlaid with variables including levels of deprivation and proximity to public transport.[42] As part of a research project exploring people's attachment to the Undercroft Skatepark in 2016, a short film was produced to enable sensorial engagement with the experience of the skatepark and convey the everyday practices that took place there.[43] In a recent study undertaken by the London Development Trust, commissioned by the British Academy, examining young people's relationship with social and cultural infrastructure, the researchers used audio recordings from their focus groups and the cards that the young people had created there of the spaces and networks they valued to undertake critical analysis. They were then able to make recommendations to policymakers to improve the social and cultural life of young people in London (see figure 3).[44]

42 Mayor of London. (2024) *Cultural Infrastructure Map*.

43 Madgin, R. et al. (2018) 'Resisting relocation and reconceptualising authenticity: the experiential and emotional values of the Southbank Undercroft, London, UK'. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24(6): pp. 585-598.

44 Harris, E. et al. (2024) *Investigating Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure*. The British Academy.

Our framework aims to ensure transparency with regards to the measurement and decision-making processes. At this stage, we therefore urge users to lay out and justify the reasoning which informs the decisions that are made in relation to social and cultural provision. This could be done, for example, through public value analysis, multi-criteria analysis (which assigns weights to the components of a public value assessment), or through the cost-benefit methods detailed in the Treasury's Green Book.[45] At the same time, conceptions of measurement common in economics should not determine representations of social and cultural infrastructure. The point of our insistence on the process is to show that the purpose of measuring and the needs of communities (and any others affected by the decisions taken) should shape how users of the framework represent social and cultural infrastructure in their analyses and decision-making.

The users of the framework will inevitably use a limited number of datasets when undertaking the measurement process. Making clear what sources they have used and why should be seen as an integral part of the decision-making process in phase three.

Case Study Examples

1. Community organisation

The organisation brings together data collected by creating a short film exploring the social and cultural opportunities for young people in the area. The organisation also produces a short report analysing the state of social and cultural infrastructure for young people in Anywhere Town. From their analysis, the organisation identifies that:

- **Young people are missing out on social and cultural activities due to a lack of information.** The organisation works with local corner shops to adapt the stores into information hubs to raise awareness among young people of local activities.
- **There is a gendered divide in the use of local sports facilities with many girls feeling unwelcome.** The organisation starts working with the local authority, which runs the facilities, to introduce women-only hours.

2. Local Authority X

The project team recognises that in order to be meaningful and sustainable, any decisions taken and the analysis behind them should be undertaken with the local community, so it runs two focus groups with participants from the locality to help analyse the data and design policy interventions. The team ensures that marginalised groups are well-represented by working with community organisations, charities, and statutory services (including child and family centres and social prescribing services) to find willing participants, who may be compensated financially. After the focus groups, the local authority decides to:

- **Subdivide space in the empty M&S building** and offer it free to charities and community organisations, who will run a range of services and events, from a book club to dementia support groups.
- Help local community organisations and businesses access space on the high street by **connecting them with landlords of vacant properties.**
- **Establish a working group** of asset owners, local businesses, community leaders, and the council, which will meet regularly and enable future cross-sector collaboration to implement change on the high street.

Several months later, the council uses the framework to measure how effectively the M&S functions as a social and cultural space and meets the needs of the local community.

45 For more detail on these methods of analysis, see HM Treasury. (2022) *The Green Book*; HM Treasury. (2019) *The Public Value Framework: with supplementary guidance*; Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. (2024) *Use of Multi-Criteria Analysis in options for appraisal of economic cases.*

The benefits of the framework

We believe our approach possesses a number of strengths in relation to previous efforts to measure social and cultural infrastructure.

1. Infrastructural approach

Our approach is rooted in the theory and language of infrastructure and encourages stakeholders to think about how social and cultural assets interact with other types of (local) infrastructure, such as roads, public transport, or broadband. This approach also enables us to move beyond the common distinction between hard, physical infrastructure (e.g. power stations or community centres) and soft, intangible infrastructure (e.g. institutions or networks); a binary that can falsely imply a greater importance for physical infrastructure, and the undervaluing of social and cultural assets. By focusing on the relationships between different types of infrastructure, stakeholders can appreciate how investment in, or improvements to, other types of infrastructure (such as transport or broadband) may improve the use of, and access to, social and cultural infrastructure. Access to an underused community centre might be improved through better public transport connectivity, for example. This approach therefore enables policymakers and other stakeholders to adopt a more integrated approach to infrastructure and to focus on maintenance and support for existing assets rather than necessarily committing to building new ones.

2. Transparency

Many previous attempts to measure social and cultural infrastructure do not make clear the process behind the results they produce, nor explain what evidence has been excluded. In addition, value judgements are invariably embedded within the measurement process, but these are unclear to those who use local amenities and often to the decision-makers themselves. Our framework is designed to ensure greater transparency with regards to the measurement process and the values implicit within it. It is not a decision-making mechanism but a diagnostic tool that prompts reflection and debate and helps stakeholders and decision-makers weigh up the evidence without ‘a priori’ determining which kind of data is most important. It makes transparent who is doing the measurement process and why, what data they are using, and how this contributes to the decisions taken.

3. Flexibility

The framework is designed to allow a range of stakeholders to use it - from civil servants in central government to local funders and community groups. It does not require them to hold a particular view about what is or is not valuable when it comes to social and cultural provision, and is therefore of use to stakeholders holding different political and ideological perspectives. It can also be used for many different policy goals, whether that be to help tackle a specific issue, like anti-social behaviour, or to evaluate the impact of a policy intervention or funding decision. Often those using the framework will not have the ability to make the key decisions themselves, and will therefore have a particular audience in mind whom they wish to influence. This will help determine what evidence is used and how it is represented.

The user's motivation will also shape decisions about the scale at which measurement is conducted. Yet, whether they are working at the local scale or the national level, all stakeholders are encouraged to follow the same steps. The data and methods used within each of these stages will of course vary according to the scale (and purpose) of measurement. Someone working on a hyper-local scale will seek to capture more granular information while a national or regional approach will likely sacrifice granularity to achieve a broader understanding of a larger geographic area.

Finally, the framework does not prescribe a rigid definition of what constitutes social and cultural infrastructure and indeed what counts as measurement, but instead allows the users of the framework to determine those assets that will be included in an evidentially-informed manner. By encouraging them to do so in collaboration with local people, the measurement process is more likely to encompass assets that are important to the social and cultural lives of communities.

The flexible and context-sensitive character of this framework means that its users can develop metrics that are tailored to a specific community or locality. These may well therefore be unique to the community in question and not generalisable. Comparisons between places are nevertheless possible using this framework, for example, by focusing on assets that they all share, rather than those unique to a particular community. Considering a large geographic area in order to compare places may also require a greater emphasis on (national) quantitative data, at least initially, though this can be enhanced by using a second iteration of the measurement process focused on gathering local insights. This would offer stakeholders a better comparative understanding of how well social and cultural infrastructures meets local needs in different areas. (See *Chapter 5: Putting the Framework into Action* for a more detailed discussion on how measuring on a national scale might work.)

4. A range of perspectives

In our previous work on wellbeing policy, we distinguished between the "social planner perspective" and the "citizen perspective".[46] While the former assumes the point of view of a technical expert providing a detached analysis of a policy problem, the latter centres the perspective of the stakeholder whose wellbeing is in question. Both perspectives are valuable and legitimate. In terms of the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure, we should not automatically adopt the social planner perspective alone. There is value too in considering the citizen's viewpoint and experience. And often it is important to mix both perspectives, thereby ensuring that the measurement process takes into account a wider range of views than is typically considered by policymakers.

This approach encourages those undertaking the measurement process to focus on what is already in a place, including some of its most neglected or overlooked assets. This may include, for instance, an underused, poorly-lit pocket park, or a beauty salon, which additionally functions as a social hub for local women. It also enables an understanding of what facilities and spaces work well, and what the barriers are to greater usage; for example, expensive entry prices or poor lighting, which has resulted in feelings of danger. Moreover, this approach paves the way to empower communities by making information about social and cultural provision more widely accessible and enabling more informed and meaningful public participation in the measurement and decision-making processes.

There are of course still challenges to be overcome. For example, it can be difficult to ensure that the views of a community are representative and that marginalised voices are not overlooked. It is also likely that competing or conflicting perspectives will emerge, particularly about spaces and facilities that are open to multiple uses. Interviews with a local community about their use of a park, for instance, might reveal that young people enjoy hanging out in the playground in large groups while parents of young children view this as antisocial behaviour that makes the space feel less safe. But capturing and understanding these divergent views forms a key part of the diverse evidence base around use and access in different communities. It is therefore important that there is sufficient room for debate and tension within the framework to enable a full and complex understanding of social and cultural infrastructure.

[46] Fabian, M. et al. (2022) 'Respecting the subject in wellbeing public policy: beyond the social planner perspective'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30(8): pp. 1494-1517.

Chapter 4: Evidence, data, and insight

We believe that a broad and plural approach to questions of evidence and data is required when it comes to measuring these phenomena. Rather than reducing the measurement of these phenomena to a single number, we take our cue from Leonelli, who proposes that anything can be considered as data as long as (a) "it is treated as potential evidence for one or more claims about phenomena"; and (b) "it is possible to circulate it among individuals."[47] Therefore, while the tendency for policymakers (and existing approaches to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure) may be to focus on numbers and figures, a wider range of data should be used.

A key feature of our measurement framework is that it requires its users to capture the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including those using the assets themselves, and is designed to consider social and cultural provision alongside its impact upon both individuals and communities. Such a task requires considering a broad range of evidence, which may include numerical data alongside other sources of insight, such as storytelling and peer research. While some evidence may have to be newly generated, fortunately there is already a rich stock of available, relevant data in the UK, providing a solid foundation for those undertaking this measurement process.

There are a number of important questions with regards to data and evidence that users of the framework need to reflect upon when undertaking the measurement process. What types of data do they need? What relevant datasets already exist and how up to date do they have to be to be useful? For example, is the necessary evidence historical, recent, or 'live,' and how does this impact how the data should be used? What capacity does the user have, whether with regards to time, resources, or skills, to generate new data? On a related note, can stakeholders provide any relevant information? If, using methods such as interviews or focus groups, what would an appropriate number or sample size be to ensure the results are representative of the wider community? We urge users of the framework to consider these questions in reference to their purpose and the scale at which they are working.

One benefit of our approach is that it makes the answers to these considerations and the trade-offs they require transparent. For example, at a national level, users of the framework may tend to focus on taking a social planner perspective and rely on data that captures the quantity of social and cultural infrastructure in a place. But it will also make clear the limited involvement of stakeholders in these assessments, suggesting the need for a second 'loop' at a more local scale to validate and refine the data. This iterative process would allow stakeholders to assess, evaluate, and if necessary, challenge the data that has been used. (For more information on measuring on a national level, see Chapter 5: Putting the Framework into Action.)

In this chapter, we explore some of the main existing datasets and identify additional methods that could be fruitfully employed to generate new evidence and insight in this area, focusing specifically on steps 2.b Measuring Provision and 2.c Measuring Use and Access. We demonstrate how this would work in practice through a case study of 'Combined Authority Y'.

[47] Leonelli, S. (2015) 'What Counts as Scientific Data? A Relational Framework'. *Philosophy of Science*, 82(5): pp. 810-821.

Case Study Example

Combined Authority Y is seeking a clearer picture of the social and cultural infrastructure in the region to advance its agenda of developing skills, improving well-being, and connecting communities. It reviews its current list of social and cultural assets and finds that beyond traditional hubs like libraries and theatres, many other spaces also play a key role in fostering social and cultural connections and community well-being, including allotments and the annual local art festival. Having created a new list of social and cultural infrastructure, Combined Authority Y proceeds to measure provision and use and access.

Step 2b. Measuring provision

There are a number of pre-existing datasets that could be employed to measure provision. Some provide information relating to the existence of different types of social and cultural infrastructure, such as Google Maps and Ordnance Survey (OS) data, though the latter requires payment for access.[48] The Office for National Statistics also publishes useful data, notably 'Access to sports facilities and other amenities in your local areas: March 2024' and 'Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024'.[49]

Other valuable datasets relate to particular types of assets. The Mapping Museums database, for example, includes a range of information, including location, of all the museums in the UK, while LibraryOn offers an interactive online map of the UK's library assets (see Figure 2).[50] Some datasets may relate specifically to green space, such as Field in Trust's 'Green Space Index', or sports facilities, for instance Sport England's 'Active Places Power'.[51]

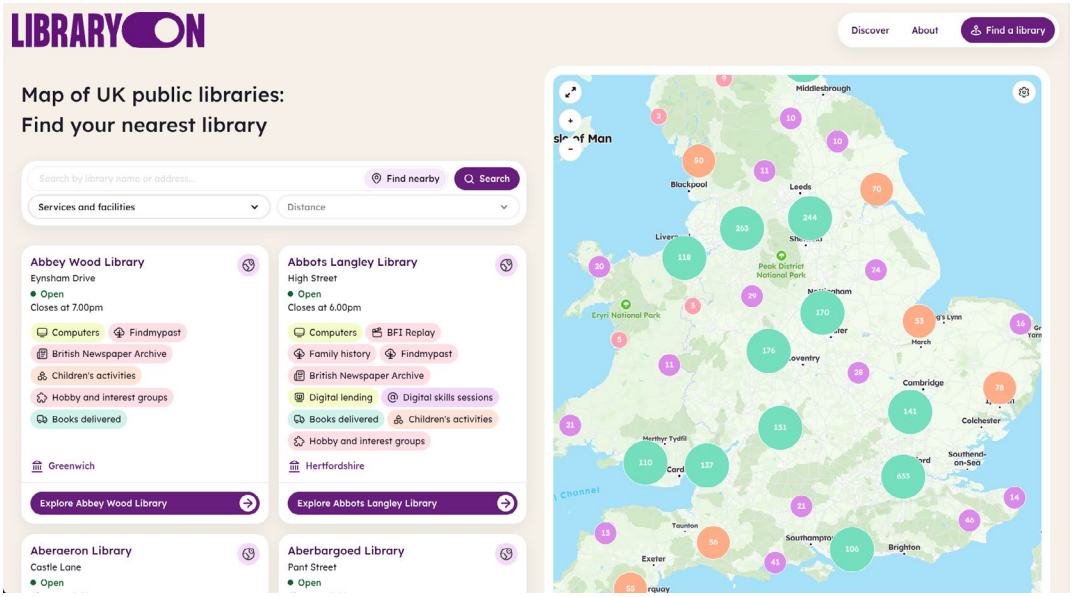


Figure 2: Screengrab from LibraryOn website showcasing visualisation efforts to map the concentration of libraries (Source: LibraryOn (2025). CC-BY-4.0 https://libraryon.org/libraries)

48 Google. (2025) *Google Maps*. Available at: http://www.maps.google.co.uk/; Ordnance Survey. (2025) About us. Available at: https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/about.

49 Office for National Statistics. (2024) *Access to sports facilities and other amenities in your local area*. Available at: https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/about; Office for National Statistics. (2024) *Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/accesstolocalamenitiesinenglandandwales/october2024.

50 Mapping Museums Lab. *Mapping Museums: the history and geography of the UK 1960-2020;* Library On. *Map of UK public libraries: Find your nearest library*.

51 Field in Trust. (2025) *Green Space Index*. Available at: https://fieldsintrust.org/insights/green-space-index; Sport England. (2025) *Active Places Power*. Available at: https://www.activeplacespower.com/.

Some datasets are tailored to particular geographic areas. These are the outputs from attempts to measure social and cultural infrastructure in a particular area. These include the Mayor of London's Cultural Infrastructure Map, the West Midlands Combined Authority's Cultural Infrastructure Map, and Glasgow City Council's register of community-based assets.[52]

The table below details several online datasets to provide examples of what evidence might be useful for measuring social and cultural infrastructure.

Table 4: Examples of online datasets for measuring social and cultural infrastructure.

Dataset	What assets does it refer to?	What is it?	Drawbacks
Google. (2025) *Google Maps*.	Many (tangible assets only).	Provides location of a range of physical assets.	May not always be accurate or up to date.
ONS. (2024) *Access to local amenities in England and Wales: Oct 2024*.	ATMs, community facilities, libraries, parks, GPs, post offices, pubs, and a handful of other assets.	Measures access to physical amenities. Map and raw data showing amenities by LA available. The data used comes from a range of sources e.g. Ordnance Survey, Arts Council England, and the NHS, and all dates from 2024.	Smallest breakdown is by LA so more micro-level analysis not possible.
Sport England. (2025) *Active Places Power*.	Sports facilities.	Interactive map of sports facilities in England, last updated in 2025. The data comes from ONS, GLA, Sport England and other sources.	Does not provide the name of the asset.
Plunkett UK. (2023) *Keep It in the Community*.	Assets of Community Value (ACV).	Database of all assets in England nominated or registered as an ACV. The data is sourced annually from every council in England, with the most recent update in 2024, and also gives members of the public the chance to update information about assets in their area.	
Mayor of London. (2023) *Cultural Infrastructure Map*.	Cultural (and social) infrastructure e.g. cinemas, galleries, pubs, libraries.	Interactive map of London showing location of SCI. Can superimpose other factors onto the map, including public transport links and level of deprivation. The latest iteration of the map includes data collected in 2022 and published in 2023.	Includes some assets that would not be categorised as SCI under our definition e.g. workspaces.
Glasgow City Council. (2023) *Community asset register properties*.	'Community-based assets' e.g. library, school.	Interactive map and list of assets owned by Glasgow City Council and associated bodies. The information and data was last updated in 2023.	Includes assets that are not SCI e.g. administrative buildings.

Users of the framework might find these pre-existing datasets useful as a starting point to assess provision. However, to gain a more accurate representation of assets in a particular area, especially if the user is working at a more granular level, they may also wish to generate their own evidence base. As indicated in the previous chapter, this may involve physically counting the number of assets or running community-mapping sessions. In Kingston Upon Thames, for example, researchers from Kingston University working with the council walked every public road in the borough to identify the community assets in each neighbourhood.[53]

[52] Mayor of London. (2024) *Cultural Infrastructure Map*; West Midlands Combined Authority. (2025) *West Midlands Cultural Infrastructure Map*; Glasgow Open Data. (2023) *Community asset register properties*. Glasgow City Council. Available at: https://data.glasgow.gov.uk/datasets/GlasgowGIS::community-asset-register-properties/about.

[53] Kingston University. *Community asset map*. Available at: https://www.kingston.ac.uk/collaborate/community-engagement/community-asset-map.

This was supplemented by four community-mapping sessions, in which local people identified the spaces they valued and shared their perspectives and experiences. Alternatively, users of the framework could use digital tools and follow the example of the Save Birmingham campaign, which set up a website for local people to identify the publicly owned community spaces they value in an attempt to preserve them in the wake of the city council's bankruptcy.[54]

These mapping approaches may also be particularly useful to gain a better understanding of the provision of intangible assets, such as organisations, groups, or networks, about which there are few (if any) pre-existing datasets. As part of Power to Change's Empowering Places programme, for example, the six anchor organisations involved mapped the associations and institutions in their local area and the networks between them in order to identify local needs and opportunities.[55] More recently, the social enterprise Onion Collective and design studio Free Ice Cream have come together to create a digital mapping tool that enables communities to map and understand the networks, connections, and relationships that underpin them.[56]

Case Study Example

Combined Authority Y wants to understand the reach and density of the assets on its updated list of social and cultural infrastructure. To do so it:

- uses Google Maps and Open Street Map to gain an idea of the distribution of these assets across the region;[57]
- aggregates population data from the ONS in order to map the density of assets per 100,000 people;
- sets up a website so local people can identify the spaces, facilities, and networks that they value.

Step 2c. Measuring use and access

A small number of datasets, including those listed above, also include information relevant to use and access. The Mayor of London's Cultural Infrastructure Map, for example, enables users to identify nearby public transport links to different assets as well as the location of assets in relation to levels of deprivation. Arts Council England's (ACE) Culture and Place Data Explorer allows users to see a range of indicators, including the distribution of ACE investment, levels of public engagement with heritage or libraries, and socioeconomic indicators such as levels of child poverty or average house prices.[58]

However, most existing datasets relating to use and access, such as those exploring people's experiences of social and cultural infrastructure or the value they attribute to it, apply exclusively to particular types of assets (such as libraries) and are very general, inhibiting meaningful place-based analysis. The Department of Culture, Media, and Sport's (DCMS) regular 'Participation Survey', for instance, is useful for understanding national-level engagement with cultural sectors but does not offer information about the use of particular assets nor local or regional variations.[59] Similarly, one can only infer a very broad-brush picture from the Heritage Lottery Fund's UK-wide research into public parks.[60]

54 Save Birmingham. *Home*. Available at: https://savebirmingham.org/.
55 O'Flynn, L. et al. (2023) *Five Years of Empowering Places: Evaluation Report*. Renaisi and Power to Change.
56 Understory. *Home*. Available at: https://understory.community/.
57 Open Street Map. *Welcome to OpenStreetMap!*. Available at: https://www.openstreetmap.org/.
58 Arts Council England. *Culture and Place Data Explorer*. Available at: https://culture.localinsight.org/#/map.
59 Department of Culture, Media and Sport. (2024) *Participation Survey*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/participation-survey.
60 Heritage Fund. (2024) *State of UK Public Parks 2016*. Available at: https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/about/insight/research/state-uk-public-parks-2016.

As with measuring provision (step 2.b), it is very likely therefore that users of the framework will have to collect or generate their own data around use and access. There are many ways in which this can be done, such as by using administrative data from the assets in question to ascertain visitor numbers or funding levels. Visitor numbers could also be measured by tracking Wi-Fi usage. As part of a project funded by Nesta, the University of Nottingham tested Wi-Fi tracking as a method for measuring activity in parks.[61] GPS data from mobile phones is also increasingly being used by researchers to measure how (many) people use public spaces of various kinds. Focusing on US cities, Massenkoff and Wilmers, for instance, recently estimated the number of visitors to places of interest and where they live using mobile phone location information, which enabled them to observe visitation patterns at a very granular level over an extended period of time.[62] Alternatively, users could consider complementary factors, such as the impact of social and cultural assets on local employment, skills development, or volunteering opportunities. For example, a survey commissioned by Power to Change in six hyperlocal areas in England found that clusters of community businesses have a statistically significant impact on communities across outcomes such as employment, personal wellbeing, health, and community pride. However, it should be noted that all these methods require a huge amount of time and resources and so may not be feasible for some stakeholders. In addition, data sharing and protection issues very often pose limitations on gathering these types of new data and its utility, such as in the case of the University of Nottingham, where data privacy concerns meant that the researchers were unable to see repeat visitors or the duration of visits.

Engaging with communities is essential when attempting to understand the use of, and access to, social and cultural assets. Common methods for engaging communities include surveys and polling, which can offer insights into people's experiences of, and attitudes towards, social and cultural infrastructure. This method has been used by a range of stakeholders from government departments like DCMS to academic researchers, funders, and advocacy organisations, such as the Carnegie Trust.[63] To gain a more in-depth understanding of people's experiences, users of the framework could use observation techniques, workshops, focus groups, and interviews. In 2023, for example, research commissioned by Libraries Connected East to evaluate the impact of social connections in libraries used several workshops and in-depth interviews.[64] In the aforementioned study by the London Development Trust, four focus groups with young people were held to encourage participants to engage with questions around social and cultural infrastructure through a card deck of images, which enabled them to identify what they felt they needed to thrive in social and cultural terms.[65]

61 Nesta. (2025) *University of Nottingham: WiseParks*. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/rethinking-parks/university-nottingham-wiseparks/.

62 Massenkoff, M. and Wilmers, N. (2023) *Rubbing Shoulders: Class Segregation in Daily Activities*. For more examples, see Athey, S. et al. (2021) 'Estimating experienced racial segregation in US cities using large-scale GPS data'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(46): e2026160118; Fraser, T. et al. (2024) 'The great equalizer? Mixed effects of social infrastructure on diverse encounters in cities'. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, 113: 102173.

63 Peachey, J. (2016) *Shining a light: The future of public libraries across the UK and Ireland*. Carnegie UK Trust.

64 Gordon, J. et al. (2023) *Libraries for living, and for living better*. Libraries Connected East.

65 Harris et al. (2024) *Investigating Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure*.

Figure 3: Images from the London Development Trust's focus groups with young people, where participants used a deck of visual prompt cards to articulate their priorities and needs regarding social and cultural infrastructure. (Source: Harris, E. et al. (2024)).

For some users of this framework, it may be helpful to work with a trusted community organisation or peer researcher when seeking to understand community perspectives. Our previous research, conducted in partnership with the *British Academy* and *Power to Change*, used peer research to understand community perceptions of social infrastructure. This method was chosen because it tends to redefine the distinction between "researcher" and the "subject of research" and can generate more insightful and locally informed analysis. Peer researchers, who have an important understanding of their own community, can also encourage people to participate in research who have not done so previously.[66]

Case Study Example

Concerned by the low levels of engagement with social and cultural infrastructure in its councils, Combined Authority Y puts together a survey to identify barriers to participation. It distributes the survey to a range of community groups (including those specifically for young and older people) to encourage their members to complete it.

The Combined Authority also organises a series of roundtables to explore strategies to make the assets more available. It runs separate roundtables for community representatives and councillors to capture distinct viewpoints without the influence or pressure of mixed-group dynamics. With the consent of participants, the conversations are recorded and transcribed for further analysis by the project team.

Alongside these strategies, the Combined Authority works with a number of publicly owned institutions, including the local libraries, museums, and community centres, to ascertain the number and demographic of users.

66 Zia, N. et al. (2023) *Community perceptions of social infrastructure*. The British Academy and Power to Change.

Chapter 5: Putting the framework into action

Social and cultural infrastructure is directly relevant to the UK government's current focus on economic growth as well as to related policy objectives around addressing economic and social inequalities.[67] This emphasis is echoed by other stakeholders, for instance *Power to Change*'s recent community strategy, which stresses the need for innovative approaches to community development and well-being, and their potential impact upon prosperity and local economic growth.[68]

For central, regional, and local governments, this means that there is a compelling argument to focus on building upon what is already valuable within communities. Investing in existing social and cultural infrastructure can offer significant and immediate returns, delivering better outcomes for citizens and enabling government objectives. It would strengthen what communities already rely upon and ensure resources are used efficiently to maximise impact. To that end, a greater focus on the relationship between social and cultural infrastructure and other forms of infrastructure, such as transport or communications networks, is an important step forward. This is key both for enhancing the use and accessibility of existing social and cultural provision and guiding the strategic development of new kinds of provision where gaps are identified.

The framework we propose offers a more flexible and inclusive approach, which aims to address these gaps. Unlike those studies mentioned in Chapter 2 that focus purely on the levels of provision of particular assets, our framework emphasises the importance of understanding both use and value in relation to social and cultural infrastructure. This context-sensitive approach recognises that different types of the same asset may have varying levels of use and access in different places and will be valued by local communities in different ways. For instance, two parks in the same neighbourhood might serve distinct purposes: one could be a hub for community events, while the other might be prized for its quiet, natural setting. Collecting and analysing data on these dimensions provides a more accurate and complete picture of what is needed and why in different places.

Moreover, our framework is designed so that it can complement other tools and methodologies. It acts as a backbone, a structure onto which other frameworks can be attached, creating a comprehensive and flexible approach to evaluating social and cultural infrastructure. Its focus on process, transparency, and adaptability ensures that it is relevant and actionable across different contexts by a wide range of stakeholders. Local authorities, community organisations, and national policymakers alike can leverage its insights to inform decision-making and develop targeted interventions. By embedding this framework into their practices, stakeholders can ensure that social and cultural infrastructure is not only preserved but actively enhanced to meet the evolving needs of communities.

67 The Labour Party. (2024) *Labour's Manifesto*. Available at: https://labour.org.uk/change/kickstart-economic-growth/.
68 Westerling, J. et al. (2024) *Fixing the foundations: A communities strategy for Britain*. Power to Change.

Improving decision-making across scales

To realise the potential of the framework, it is essential to explore how it supports decision-making across different tiers of government. The following sections provide an indication of some of our framework's practical applications, beginning with its use at the national level and then examining its relevance for regional and local governments, funders, institutions, community organisations, and, finally, the private sector.

Central government

Our framework offers a valuable tool for policymakers in Whitehall and the devolved administrations, equipping them with the means to achieve a deeper understanding of social and cultural infrastructure, which enables more informed decisions about where to invest and how to compare places within their respective national contexts. The framework complements several existing initiatives, including:

- The 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy, by broadening the definition of social and cultural infrastructure to recognise that these assets are essential to resilient communities and, in turn, (local) economic growth.[69]
- The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), by providing a tool to inform planning decisions and ensure that new developments strengthen the existing social fabric and contribute to the NPPF's emphasis on creating sustainable, vibrant, and inclusive communities.[70]
- The Land Use Framework Consultation, by providing the means to assess the social and cultural requirements of a particular place, helping to ensure that land use decisions are made in a way that maximises the benefits to communities.[71]
- The UK government's proposed 'new towns for the future' programme, by providing a clear process to incorporate social and cultural infrastructure into their planning and development. This is especially critical since new towns often require the creation of new physical infrastructure and the development of new communities.[72]
- The Scottish government's 'A Culture Strategy for Scotland: Action Plan', by providing a structured approach to embedding social and cultural infrastructure within Scotland's evolving cultural policy landscape, ensuring its long-term sustainability and impact.

These examples also highlight that at the national scale, decision-makers face the challenge of balancing the unique characteristics of individual places while allocating limited resources effectively. This often leads to comparisons between areas, which can oversimplify local realities. Our framework addresses this issue by permitting a more contextual understanding of infrastructure assets. The initial stage relies on gathering and analysing available quantitative data, a task that can help the identification of regions with below-average levels of social and cultural provision, which may require particular attention. However, an essential second step would involve refining these findings by incorporating input from the areas themselves. While quantitative datasets such as ONS data or those used in OCSI's Community Needs Index, provide valuable insights, they inevitably miss the complex, on-the-ground realities of these communities.[73] Quantitative approaches alone cannot capture whether the provision of social and cultural infrastructure genuinely meets the needs of residents or reflects their lived experiences.

69 HM Treasury. (2025) *10 Year Infrastructure Strategy Working Paper*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-infrastructure-strategy-working-paper/10-year-infrastructure-strategy-working-paper-accessible.

70 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. (2025) *National Planning Policy Framework*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2.

71 HM Government. (2025) *Government launches "national conversation" on land use*. Press Release. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-national-conversation-on-land-use.

72 The New Towns Taskforce. (2024) *The New Towns Taskforce*. GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-new-towns-taskforce.

73 OCSI. (2019) *Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge*. Local Trust.

We therefore suggest that a second iteration of the measurement process, focused on local insights, would be critical for validating and enriching the initial analysis. Incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly those of the users of social and cultural infrastructure, would ensure that the identified priorities align with actual experiences and needs. This two-step process, combining quantitative and qualitative data, provides a more accurate and actionable basis for developing interventions that are both relevant and effective.

This process would also support the endeavours of sub-national tiers of government, such as Combined Authorities and local authorities. In this way central government can play a vital role in enabling regional and local governments to better understand and assess their own assets, strengthening overall provision for the public good.

Regional government and combined authorities

The role of Combined Authorities in this policy area is especially important, particularly in the context of the UK Government's English Devolution White Paper, which emphasises the need for a shift of power from central government to local leaders, to enable more tailored decision-making, greater accountability, and stronger collaboration to address regional challenges.[74]

These bodies could use the framework in a range of ways to support both local authorities and national policy goals, while addressing the unique challenges facing different city-regions. Located between national and local government, they act as both strategic coordinators and enablers, uniquely placed to bridge gaps in evidence, resources, and implementation. For example, by integrating digital tools and leveraging large datasets, such as mobile phone data and card transactions, Combined Authorities can gain a more accurate picture of usage patterns and preferences across local borders to inform strategic decision-making. With their broad remit and access to central funding, they can support local authorities to map provision, analyse citizen feedback, and better understand the value of social and cultural infrastructure to a range of different communities. This aligns with the current trajectory of UK public policy, which increasingly emphasises collaboration across tiers of government. Our framework supports this by providing Combined Authorities with a valuable diagnostic tool to identify and address regional challenges. By integrating social and cultural infrastructure into a broader infrastructure landscape, the proposed approach recognises that strengthening these assets may require investment in other forms of enabling infrastructure, like good local transport. And Combined Authorities are well-suited to adopt this perspective relying upon their strategic decision-making powers and their ability to coordinate interventions across multiple local authorities.

Growth remains a central focus for Combined Authorities, particularly through local growth plans, industrial strategies, and the government's housebuilding programme. Our framework offers a blueprint for incorporating the assessment of social and cultural infrastructure within planning for new communities. This should help ensure that as new developments take shape, they include spaces that foster social cohesion, creativity, and well-being as well as helping unlock economic growth.

[74] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2024) *English Devolution White Paper – Power and Partnerships: Foundations for Growth.*

Local Authorities and local governance

Local authorities are at the forefront of improving and supporting social and cultural infrastructure, yet they face significant capacity as well as financial challenges. Our framework provides tools to identify and evaluate existing facilities and amenities and should enable local authorities to understand what kinds of space and facility lie within their jurisdiction. In particular, the framework's emphasis on local context aligns with two important initiatives:

- It can provide a structured approach for gathering and analysing the type of data and insights the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods[75] needs to inform their recommendations at the local level. It may also subsequently help local authorities to apply these recommendations in a targeted manner.
- It can provide the assessment and evaluation structure upon which community engagement can be built as part of the Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness' efforts.[76] The Centre's research could, in turn, help refine and improve the framework itself creating a virtuous cycle of learning and improvement that we have also advocated for through this research.

The absence of an informed understanding of what infrastructure exists, how it is used, and where gaps or deficiencies lie, often leaves councils ill-equipped to allocate funds for maintenance or make the case for new investments. In this context, this framework will help them understand and articulate the significance of community-level infrastructure. This might also enable improved mapping of local assets, the clearer identification of underutilised spaces, and better strategic partnerships. Platform Places is a great example of a social enterprise that facilitates collaboration among local councils, communities, and property owners to establish 'Local Property Partnerships' in town centres. Their aim is to repurpose buildings for community use or ownership and provide these partnerships with essential resources, such as funding, expert guidance, and networking opportunities.[77]

Figure 4: Wandsworth Town Property Partnership get-together. Sarah Furniss Photography ©

While resource constraints undoubtedly pose challenges, local authorities could re-evaluate how to better deploy under-utilised existing funding mechanisms. A recent publication from the Home Builder's Federation showed that significant sums of Section 106 funding are left unspent, and argues that this represents a missed opportunity to invest in long-term community resilience.[78] Addressing, as a first step, any gaps in their understanding of the state and importance of local (social and cultural) infrastructure might well help local authorities consider alternative routes to allocate such unspent funds.

75 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2024). *Welcome to the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods*. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk.

76 Local Trust. (2024) *Press release: £10million research centre to transform community engagement across the UK*. Available at: https://localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/news/press-release-10million-research-centre-to-transform-community-engagement-across-the-uk/.

77 Platform Places. *Start a Local Property Partnership*. Available at: https://www.platformplaces.com/local-property-partnerships.

78 Home Builders Federation. (2024) *Unspent Developer Contributions: Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds held by local authorities*.

Community organisations

Community organisations are pivotal in strengthening, using and protecting local spaces and facilities, and this is particularly so in poorer communities.[79] These organisations provide essential services, foster connections, and address local challenges, and are familiar with the varied experiences and needs of their communities. They often act as custodians of community-owned assets, ensuring that these spaces remain available, inclusive, and democratically managed. Initiatives like Plunkett's Keep it in the Community demonstrate the value these organisations bring to revitalising local infrastructure and fostering community cohesion.[80] Such organisations are instrumental in bridging the gap between grassroots initiatives and broader policy agendas, translating high-level objectives into actionable, place-based solutions.

Our framework directly supports these efforts by providing the tools to evaluate their assets and identify areas of unmet need. It empowers them to advocate for their priorities with evidence-based insights. This can potentially bridge the gap with policymakers and funders, a divide that often arises because organisations with limited resources struggle to clearly communicate their needs in ways that align with rigid evaluation frameworks.

Using our framework, community organisations can build an evidence base to present their value proposition in a more targeted way. Additionally, the framework encourages the integration of new technologies in the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure. For example, initiatives like Save Birmingham demonstrate how online tools can enable bottom-up measurement.[81] The campaign developed an interactive online tool that maps community places nominated by Birmingham residents as vital to their communities. This tool allows users to explore which spaces have been identified near them and whether they are officially registered as "assets of community value." By highlighting these spaces, the campaign empowers communities to take action to protect them, ensuring they have the "right to buy" if assets are put up for sale.

Funding bodies

Funds, including those managed by charitable trusts, community foundations, and other locally controlled financial mechanisms, can play a key role in supporting local social and cultural infrastructure. As do funding bodies like Arts Council England or the National Lottery Fund.[82] The Shetland Charitable Trust, for example, provides core funding for initiatives ranging from maintaining local heritage and cultural assets to supporting mental health services and community sports facilities in Shetland.[83] Our framework offers valuable tools to enhance the effectiveness of these efforts by enabling them to make more informed decisions about where and how to allocate resources.

Our emphasis on local knowledge and the qualitative understanding of the value of community assets helps to address one of the most significant challenges for funders – ensuring that investments align with the specific needs of communities. This is particularly relevant for long-term funding programmes, where a deep understanding of local contexts is essential for creating a sustainable impact. For funders focused on community-led initiatives, the framework also aligns well with strategies that prioritise bottom-up approaches. By complementing tools such as the Community Needs Index, the framework supports funders in identifying gaps in provision, mapping areas of greatest need, and designing interventions that are both targeted and inclusive.

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79 Tomaney et al. (2023) *Social infrastructure and left behind places*.

80 Plunkett UK. *Keep It in the Community*. Available at: https://plunkett.my.site.com/keepitinthecommunity/s/.

81 Save Birmingham is a campaign set up by Co-operatives West Midlands "to protect community places in Birmingham" following Birmingham City Council declaring bankruptcy in September 2023. See Save Birmingham. *About*. Available at: https://savebirmingham.org/about.

82 For example, see Dyer, L. (2021) 'Building cultural infrastructure across England'. *Arts Council England,* 24 May. Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/building-cultural-infrastructure-across-england; Community Fund. *The New Infrastructure Programme*. Available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/new-infrastructure-programme.

83 The Shetland Charitable Trust. *Home*. Available at: https://www.shetlandcharitabletrust.co.uk

In addition to supporting local investment decisions, this framework offers opportunities for funders to draw nationwide comparisons and evaluate the broader impact of their programmes. This dual focus on local and national insights balances immediate, community-specific needs with strategic, system-wide objectives. It also helps identify areas where additional resources or policy support may be required, ensuring that no community is left behind.

Institutions

Institutions of various kinds (including educational, government, economic, religious or social) have a significant role to play both as supporters of, and at times, as forms of social and cultural infrastructure. These institutions shape the character of places, offering spaces for gathering, learning, and shared experiences. Public libraries are vital community hubs. Museums and galleries function as custodians of local and national heritage, creating spaces where customs and common values are developed and shared. This theme was further explored in two British Academy roundtables in early 2025, focusing specifically on the role of the creative and cultural sector in supporting social and cultural infrastructure. Religious institutions anchor communities through outreach programmes and social services alongside faith-related activities. Sports facilities, such as stadiums and recreation centres, offer shared spaces that foster communal identity and sustain local traditions. Similarly, as highlighted during another series of roundtables held by the British Academy in 2024, universities can act as catalysts for community engagement, strengthening ties with local schools, sports clubs, museums, and heritage sites.[84]

One of the unique advantages of these kinds of institution is their often hazy geographical borders, which enables them to engage with a broader constituency. Whether through regional partnerships, engagement, or national networks, they can extend their influence beyond their immediate context to strengthen vital forms of social and cultural infrastructure. This also opens up opportunities to align their activities with broader agendas, such as regional innovation, research and development, and local industrial strategies, bridging policy siloes to generate a wider impact and contribute to the social and cultural fabric of their locales.

Private sector

The private sector, notably developers, asset owners, and investors, plays an increasingly significant role in supporting social and cultural infrastructure. As outlined in our recent report with Power to Change, private companies are well-placed to contribute to the development and enhancement of spaces that benefit communities.[85] While profit is inevitably a key driver for developers and other local businesses, private sector involvement is often motivated by broader considerations, including Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) objectives, social value delivery, and financial incentives.

By incorporating our framework into their strategies, private sector actors can better understand the needs of the communities they serve, particularly because it provides a structured approach to identifying opportunities, evaluating impact, and aligning investment decisions with both financial and social goals. Some private organisations have already begun engaging with local communities to identify new ways of reinvigorating public spaces. In Poole, for example, Legal & General Investment Management worked with a range of local stakeholders to co-design initiatives to help tackle local issues and identify how the Dolphin Shopping Centre could function as social infrastructure.[86]

84 The British Academy. (2024) *Universities as social and cultural infrastructure.*
85 Marks, Craig, and Garling, (2024) *Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure.*
86 Legal and General Investment Management. (2023) *The Dolphin: Community & Shopping Destination, Poole.*

For businesses, investing in social and cultural infrastructure offers a dual benefit: enhancing community well-being while also improving the prospects of commercial success. Retailers, for example, benefit from fostering loyalty within the communities they serve, and property developers recognise the value of social infrastructure in energising town centres, attracting footfall and improving the commercial viability of their developments. Employees also benefit significantly from robust local social and cultural infrastructure as workers with access to such amenities tend to have higher levels of wellbeing, which translates into increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and improved job satisfaction.[87] From a policy perspective, the private sector's growing role in providing social infrastructure presents a valuable opportunity for government, at both central and local levels. And while social and cultural infrastructure are not typically classed as an 'investable asset,' and may therefore be less attractive to some investors, some developers are increasingly recognising the role of social and cultural assets in generating higher returns on their investment.[88]

Transforming decision-making

Our proposed measurement framework provides tools for navigating the complexities and dilemmas arising from the challenge of measuring social and cultural infrastructure. It avoids the rigidity of some other approaches, instead serving as a flexible, transparent diagnostic tool that supports decision-making by a wide range of stakeholders.

This framework could aid central government in strategic investment, emphasising the efficiency of strengthening and maintaining existing infrastructure, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Its scalable methodology enables regional and local governments to prioritise resources effectively and provides stakeholders with a guide to navigate the complexities of social and cultural infrastructure in a more flexible and transparent way. However, ensuring that social and cultural infrastructure is measured and supported effectively requires recognising that solutions need to be sought at all levels of government. While central government might benefit from consistency and comparability in assessment and investment, this may overlook regional and local contexts and variations. Devolved authorities and local actors are thus well placed to take on the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure in a way that reflects what is most valuable within their communities. The framework that is proposed here offers a way to bridge these perspectives, allowing for coordination across levels of government and stakeholders.

87 Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs. (2024) *The Power of Community in Business and Enterprise*. Available at: https://ioee.org.uk/2024/04/04/the-power-of-community-in-business-and-enterprise/.

88 Marks, Craig, and Garling, (2024) *Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure*.

Conclusion

Social and cultural infrastructure is crucial to lives of communities across the country. Research has shown that well-supported social and cultural assets provide many benefits, from creating stronger, more resilient places, to the building of robust social networks and increasing local civic capacity. However, the impacts of a well-functioning library, community centre, or cultural event are not always immediately visible or easily quantifiable. Yet without appropriate tools to understand and evaluate these entities, their significance and value are easily overlooked by policymakers. Our framework addresses this issue, offering a flexible and transparent approach to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure.

Previous attempts to define and measure social and cultural provision remain fragmented and inconsistent, and are underpinned by their architects' often hidden preconceptions and biases. By contrast, our framework is designed to provide a broadly neutral approach that any stakeholder can apply, whatever their context. Of course, users of the framework will bring their own value judgements into play, which will shape decisions about which are the most important local amenities, spaces, networks or organisations in a place. But this framework points towards a more standard and transparent way of evaluating these forms of infrastructure.

To ensure the framework can be used by a range of stakeholders, from national policymakers to community organisations, it is designed to be flexible and to be applicable at different spatial scales. To this end, rather than prescribing a strict methodology to follow or determining what kinds of data should be used, it prompts its users to reflect on their own skills, resources, and purpose when deciding upon how and what to measure. What it does specify, however, is that a range of perspectives on the use and value of community infrastructure should be considered, including those of the users of the social and cultural assets themselves.

The value and importance of social and cultural infrastructure can ultimately only be fully understood within its geographical context. These facilities, spaces, and networks are, like other forms of infrastructure, shaped by relationships, circumstances, and place-specific dynamics. Such a context-sensitive and holistic approach is not only facilitated by the framework's flexibility but also its emphasis on the theory and language of infrastructure. By grounding the definition of social and cultural infrastructure in the characteristics of infrastructure, and focusing on the relationships that exist between different types of infrastructure, stakeholders are encouraged to understand social and cultural infrastructure as elements within a larger ecosystem. Such an approach also enables stakeholders to focus on how existing assets can be maintained and supported through a wide range of investment and policy decisions, rather than simply focusing upon securing resources to create or build new assets. Our hope is that in making the case for this new approach to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure, we have provided a useful tool for stakeholders and furthered the debate around these crucial assets and their value to communities across the country.

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Following the publication of this report, both the British Academy and the Bennett Institute would be interested in working with organisations on taking forward the measurement framework set out in this report. If you would like to engage with the British Academy or the Bennett Institute on the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure please do contact policy@thebritishacademy.ac.uk and office@bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk.

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