

Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure – Guidance for Combined Authorities



Social and cultural infrastructure plays a critical, yet often unnoticed, role in the lives of communities. Despite the concept(s) gaining traction in policy and research circles in recent years, until now there has been no consistent approach to measuring it. Funded by the British Academy, this project develops a novel approach to the measurement of social and cultural infrastructure.

This guidance outlines the framework and why it is useful for combined authorities. It also provides a theoretical example of how combined authorities could use the framework, though we encourage all users to use the framework in a way that is tailored to their priorities and context.

Why is the framework useful for combined authorities?

Combined authorities have an increasingly important role with regards to social and cultural infrastructure amidst an **impetus towards devolution** and **collaboration across tiers of government**.

The framework supports combined authorities by providing them with a **valuable tool to identify and address regional challenges**.

- They will benefit from the framework's integration of social and cultural assets into the broader infrastructural landscape due to their strategic decision-making powers and ability to coordinate policy interventions across multiple local authorities.

Located between national and local government and uniquely placed to bridge gaps in evidence, resource, and implementation, combined authorities could also use the framework to **support local and national policy goals**.

- For example, with their broad remit and access to central funding, they can support local authorities to map provision and analyse feedback from communities.

Key points of the framework

Social and cultural infrastructure *is* infrastructure.

We propose a characteristics-based approach grounded in the theory and language of infrastructure. This approach involves asking three key questions:

- Is the entity being measured an asset?
- Does it function as infrastructure?
- Is it social and cultural in character?

Measurement is a process.

We have developed a unique measurement framework, which involves three phases:

- Phase 1 involves asking why we are measuring and what we will do with the results.
- Phase 2 moves to identifying and measuring the 'stock' of social and cultural infrastructure and its usage.
- Phase 3 encourages stakeholders to present and analyse the evidence collected in dynamic and creative ways that facilitate action.

Strengths of the framework

We believe our approach possesses a number of strengths:

1. It encourages stakeholders to think about how social and cultural assets **interact with other types of infrastructure**.
2. It ensures **greater transparency** with regards to the measurement process and decisions taken as a consequence.
3. It is **flexible** in that it enables anyone to use it, regardless of their purpose, and allows its users to determine the assets under consideration.
4. It encourages a **wide range of data and views** to be taken into account, from national perspectives to community voices.

Case Study: Combined Authority Y

1. Who is measuring and why?

Combined Authority Y is seeking a clearer picture of the **assets supporting their agenda of 'connecting communities, developing skills, and enhancing well-being'**.

It commissions a study to **assess the current provision of social and cultural infrastructure**, examine how residents engage with it, and determine if it meets the population's needs.

2.a Identifying social and cultural infrastructure

Combined Authority Y reviews its current list of social and cultural assets to identify gaps and changes. It recognises that beyond traditional cultural hubs like libraries and theatres, **many other spaces also play a key role in fostering social and cultural connections and community well-being.**

The Combined Authority **creates a new list of social and cultural infrastructure**, including new spaces like allotments and recurring events such as the annual local art festival.

2.b Measuring provision

The Combined Authority wants to use its updated list to capture the provision of social and cultural infrastructure in its boundaries. To do so, it:

- Pulls data from **Google Maps and Open Street Maps** to understand the distribution of assets across the region.
- Aggregates **population data from the ONS** to map the density of assets per 100,000 people.
- **Sets up a website** so local people can identify the spaces and networks they value.

2.c Measuring use and access

Concerned about the low levels of engagement with social and cultural infrastructure in its councils, Combined Authority Y **holds a series of roundtables** with councillors and community representatives to identify barriers to participation and explores how to make assets more accessible. The conversations are recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The Authority also works with a number of publicly owned institutions, including community centres, libraries, and museums, to **ascertain the number and demographic of users.**

3. Analysis and decision-making

Having gathered a range of evidence, the team decides:

- To **map the social and cultural infrastructure** in its jurisdiction to improve their understanding of its distribution.
- Use **data visualisation techniques** to represent the density of assets across councils.
- **Analyse the roundtable transcripts** by extracting common themes, such as accessibility barriers and community preferences.

Based on its findings, the Combined Authority decides to **prioritise investment in areas with lower per capita levels of social and cultural infrastructure and limited accessible.**

In response to the discussion at the roundtables, the Authority also **pledges to support cross-council projects to address regional deficiencies.**