

# Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure

## – Guidance for Institutions



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 institutions. It also provides a theoretical example of how a university 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 institutions?***

Institutions, such as places of worship, leisure centres, sports stadiums, and universities, play a key role in supporting and offering spaces for gathering, learning, and shared experiences.

Institutions could use this framework to **better understand and improve their role in supporting the social and cultural fabric** of their places, thereby strengthening their impact, outreach, and engagement with the local area.

With their capacity to extend their influence beyond the immediate area and bridge policy siloes, many institutions, particularly universities, could use the framework to **understand how they can align their activities with broader policy agendas**, such as regional innovation, local industrial strategies, and tackling socioeconomic inequality.

### ***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: University of Somewhere

## 1. Who is measuring and why?

University of Somewhere wants to understand **how it contributes to local social and cultural infrastructure and how this role can be strengthened** to benefit the local community, improve its impact, and demonstrate how it can support policy priorities.

## 2.a Identifying social and cultural infrastructure

The team decides to include the university's **museums and libraries, its sports facilities** (which are rented out to external organisations), and the **annual festival** that it runs.

It also considers the **organisations that it supports** e.g. a local charity it co-founded which supports young people applying to HEIs.

## 2.b Measuring provision

The team **works with various university departments** to identify which spaces are open to the public and used as social and cultural infrastructure. It **compiles information about the organisations that the university supports**, how it supports them, and the communities they work with.

To understand the university's relationship to non-university assets, the team **identifies and maps other social and cultural infrastructure**, such as cafes, community centres, and public libraries, using **Google Maps and on-the-ground mapping**.

## 2.c Measuring use and access

To explore use and access, the team uses **administrative data related to the numbers and demographics of users** of its libraries, museums, and sports facilities.

The team partner with two of the community organisations that it supports to run **focus groups with residents** to explore how the university could better meet local needs.

The team **meet with the council to identify local challenges** and discuss how the university can help to address them.

## 3. Analysis and decision-making

The team brings together all the evidence and identifies that:

- Residents from more **deprived and ethnic minority backgrounds** are accessing university resources and facilities in **disproportionately low numbers**.
- There is a **strong perception of elitism and feelings of distrust** among the local community towards the university.
- The university is **not working effectively with other local anchor institutions**.

The team therefore recommends that:

- **Two permanent posts be created to build long-term community partnerships** and ensure university-supported projects are co-created with the local community.
- **A panel of local community representatives be set up** to inform the university's outreach work.
- The university **partner with the football club and local schools** to encourage young people from more deprived areas to take up sport by opening up their sports facilities and supporting grassroots sports groups.