

Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure – Guidance for Local 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 local authorities. It also provides a theoretical example of how local 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 local authorities?

Local authorities are at the forefront of supporting and improving social and cultural infrastructure yet face **significant financial and capacity challenges** and often lack an informed understanding of what infrastructure exists, how it is used, and where gaps lie.

By focusing on existing assets and taking into account the wider ecosystem of infrastructure, the framework will help local authorities **build on what already exists** and improve decision-making about their future use rather than just creating more social and cultural assets.

The flexibility of the framework will allow under-resourced local authorities to make informed decisions about **what data and methods they are capable of using**. We also encourage local authorities to **draw on their existing networks and relationships** with local people and organisations as a starting point for gathering relevant information.

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: Local Authority X

1. Who is measuring and why?

Reinvigorating the local high street is a key priority for Local Authority X. In recent years, vacancy rates have increased and footfall has fallen, leading to economic stagnation. The council recognises that one way to achieve the necessary **diversity on the high street** is through the provision of social and cultural infrastructure.

2.a Identifying social and cultural infrastructure

The project team decides to focus on **all assets along the high street that are (or could be) used for social and cultural activities**. This includes the pub, betting shop, supermarket, independent retailers, and weekly market.

Given the high vacancy rates, the team includes in the measurement process **those social and cultural assets that have closed** in recent years.

2.b Measuring provision

Using **Google Maps**, the team maps the social and cultural assets along the high street and then **walks the high street and surrounding roads** to identify any assets they missed initially.

The local authority owns an empty department store on the high street, which it took over after the occupier closed. The team uses a wing of the ground floor as a **community-mapping space** and encourages passers-by to identify the social and cultural assets they use and those that have closed.

2.c Measuring use and access

While walking the high street, the team **asks staff in shops and other businesses about their experiences** of the high street, who uses their businesses, and who they support.

The team asks those who initially participated in the community mapping 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 in the local area. They do this in a range of ways e.g. keeping diaries and taking photographs.

3. Analysis and decision-making

The team runs two focus groups with local residents to help analyse the data and design policy interventions. The team ensures marginalised groups are well-represented by working with community organisations, charities, and statutory services to find willing participants, who may be compensated financially.

After the focus groups, the local authority decides to:

- **Subdivide space in the empty department store** and offer it free to community groups and charities, who will run services and events, such as dementia 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 to enable cross-sector collaboration and implement change.