

Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure – Guidance for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector



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 the VCSE sector. It also provides a theoretical example of how a community organisation 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 the VCSE sector?

The VCSE sector is pivotal in strengthening and protecting social and cultural infrastructure, particularly in more deprived areas, often acting as **custodians of community-owned assets** and ensuring **they remain inclusive and sustainable managed**.

Organisations can use the framework to evaluate their assets, identify areas of unmet needs, and develop evidence-based insights, which **could potentially bridge the gap with funders and policymakers**, a divide that often arises because organisations with limited resources struggle to communicate their needs in ways that align with rigid evaluation frameworks.

This framework encourages the integration of different methodologies and new technologies in the measurement process, allowing community organisations to **incorporate community perspectives in a range of ways**, such as through interactive online mapping tools.

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: Community Organisation

1. Who is measuring and why?

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 young people.**

2.a Identifying social and cultural infrastructure

The organisation knows that **parks, youth centres, sports facilities, and corner shops** are key spaces used by young people to socialise, though it is unsure whether the latter two count as social and cultural infrastructure.

It decides that **sports facilities and corner shops do fulfil the characteristics of social and cultural infrastructure**, so incorporates them into the measurement process.

2.b Measuring provision

The organisation uses several data sources to measure provision, including **Google Maps** and **Sport England's Active Places Power**.

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**, so they subsequently decide to incorporate these spaces into the data collection and analysis.

2.c Measuring use and access

The organisation explores how young people use and access social and cultural infrastructure through a range of methods:

- They use **Google Maps and local transport information** to examine accessibility.
- They encourage participants at the mapping sessions to **write down or visually depict their experiences** of the spaces they use.
- They use data from local youth centres regarding the **numbers of activities they run and attendance levels**.
- They collaborate with other community groups to **run focus groups** with the wider community to discuss the topic.

3. Analysis and decision-making

The organisation brings together the data collected by creating a **short film** exploring the social and cultural opportunities for young people in the area. The organisation also produces a **report** analysing the state of social and cultural infrastructure for young people.

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 works with the local authority, which owns the facilities, to run women-only hours.