



Exploring social and cultural infrastructure's role in addressing policy challenges

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Summary

This paper synthesises insights from the British Academy's work on social and cultural infrastructure (SCI) — the spaces, structures and services that connect people and support community life – and the contribution of SCI to key policy challenges. It draws primarily on two workshops, and also on wider work commissioned as part of the SCI programme, to explore SCI's role in addressing two major challenges: tackling disadvantage, and reducing crime and improving safety.

Evidence from across research, policy and practice demonstrates that accessible and trusted spaces, alongside strong local networks and partnerships, play a significant role in fostering belonging, preventing harm, and enabling recovery.

However, SCI's contribution is often hampered by short-term funding, uneven access, and limited recognition of its value. Many organisations face barriers to sustaining services, coordinating across sectors, and measuring social outcomes effectively. Despite these barriers, SCI plays an important role in supporting effective, place-based and preventative approaches to complex issues, though action to address these barriers could greatly enhance SCI's impact.

SCI plays a critical role in shaping community resilience by providing essential services, fostering social belonging, and creating space for public dialogue, thereby supporting social cohesion and wellbeing. To enhance its impact, it is important to work closely with social and cultural organisations in policy development, valuing longer-term aspects such as prevention and social connection, rather than focusing solely on shorter-term goals and outcomes.

SCI's contribution is strengthened when communities and local actors are given time and resources to co-create projects and services, supported by long-term, targeted investment and collaboration across sectors to maximize reach and effectiveness. Skilled staff and volunteers, who are essential to delivering relational work, require ongoing support, training, and professional development to sustain these efforts.

Finally, as the value of SCI is often difficult to capture in conventional evaluation cycles, developing alternative measurement frameworks is essential to demonstrate its social, cultural, and preventative benefits clearly.

Introduction

'Social and cultural infrastructure' refers to the spaces, structures and services that can bring people together and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of our communities. The British Academy's policy work explores how this infrastructure can:

- Be understood and utilised by policymakers, and others, to reframe policy debates and to help achieve a range of policy aims.
- Play a crucial role in supporting thriving communities, improving wellbeing and resilience, and addressing policy challenges.

As a part of this suite of work, the British Academy is exploring how policymakers across different levels of government, civil society organisations, and other institutions can use and enhance SCI to address major policy challenges facing communities across the UK.

In the context of fiscal strain stretching resources across pressing social, economic and environmental policy challenges, SCI can be an effective way of making use of resources – the spaces, structures, and services - that already exist in neighbourhoods. An SCI lens can provide a way of thinking through how these resources can be leveraged by stakeholders across the policy ecosystem and beyond, to achieve intended outcomes when facing foreseen or unforeseen challenges.

This paper summarises findings from two workshops which convened stakeholders across research, policy and practice to explore social and cultural infrastructure's contribution, and how it can be used and enhanced, to tackle disadvantage and to reduce crime and improve safety. Both of these workshops drew on a large community of experience and expertise. Each workshop included participants from research, policy and practice, and encompassed individuals in a range of positions, including senior leadership roles. This paper also draws on relevant research papers and projects funded by the SCI programme to highlight examples across engagement with heritage, access to playing fields, transformative justice, and perceptions of safety.

We conclude by drawing together cross-cutting lessons for policymakers on how social and cultural infrastructure's contribution can be enhanced for current and future policy challenges.

Annex A contains an account of how the role of SCI has emerged within our wider public policy work, particularly in relation to sustainability, the COVID-19 response, and public trust.

Challenge 1: Tackling disadvantage

Tackling disadvantage is a complex and multifaceted challenge, with social, cultural, and spatial dimensions limiting the ability of people and communities to access essential goods and services and participate in social and cultural life.

To better understand how SCI can help address these inequalities, the British Academy hosted an online workshop on 23 September 2024, which explored how different communities can access, use and benefit from SCI.

This workshop was chaired by Professor Dominic Abrams FBA and included five speakers, listed below, who shared research and policy insights on communities facing disadvantage and on the role of SCI in helping tackle these. Approximately 35 participants attended the workshop, encompassing individuals from research, policy and practice backgrounds. A full list of participants can be found at Annex B.

Professor Tom Shakespeare FBA, Professor of Disability Research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, described how disabled people face a number of barriers, with largely inaccessible buildings and public transport, a higher rate of poverty, and stigmatising cultural attitudes preventing them from using, and feeling welcome in, public spaces. He highlighted the need to improve inclusion and enforce existing laws and regulations on equality and accessibility.

Dr Melissa Jogie, a British Academy Innovation Fellow and Director of Research Culture, Impact & Early Career Development at the University of Roehampton, spoke to the complex needs faced by rough sleeping homeless people who have to keep moving, are unable to sleep or find safety, face access barriers to basic services such as healthcare, and are highly reliant on access to public spaces and voluntary services. She pointed out the need for better design, methodologies and innovation to capture data to inform policy and prevent hidden and further harm.

Professor Nasar Meer FBA, Professor of Social and Political Science at the University of Glasgow, discussed how the relatively small number of people applying for asylum in the UK face long waiting times, during which they can't work, register for a GP or develop their skills. Drawing from pioneering local schemes developed in an Italian town, he showcased the potential for mobilising social and cultural infrastructure (with modest funding) to incorporate people seeking asylum into the local labour market and regenerate previously abandoned places.

Anna Fowle, Chief Executive of SCVO and member of the Oversight Board of The Promise Scotland, emphasised how care-experienced children and young people (particularly those in residential care) are prohibited by costs, risk assessments and stigmatisation from accessing sports or digital infrastructures. She explained how a lack of access, or restricted access, to social and cultural infrastructure can impact negatively upon children and young people's ability to contribute to local communities, develop their wellbeing and make lasting friendships.

Professor Ann Phoenix FBA, Professor of Psychosocial Studies at UCL, spoke to how a one-size-fits-all approach for social and cultural infrastructure perpetuates inequalities and existing power dynamics, as well as ignores complex intersections of disadvantage. The impact of services and spaces intended to tackle challenges such as loneliness or access to necessities can be limited by fears related to physical safety, judgement and a lack of inclusion. She highlighted the need for a holistic, intersectional approach to planning and operating social infrastructure, to the benefit of everyone.

Contributions to tackling disadvantage

During workshop discussions, participants from research, policy and practice reflected on the wide-ranging contributions of SCI in tackling different types of disadvantage. Table 2 sets out the insights shared by participants, across five themes that emerged from the workshop discussion.

Table 2: Workshop participants' insights on SCI's role in tackling disadvantage

Theme	Examples of the role of social and cultural infrastructure
Trust and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering a deep understanding of how to build the trust and relationships necessary to create inclusive and welcoming environments and develop community-led and co-produced solutions. Helping bridge divides and build familiarity between people with diverse life experiences and perspectives to mitigate the stigma and stereotypes often associated with disadvantages, including perceptions of who deserves to access public support (and who doesn't).
Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating vital, publicly accessible spaces (both physical and online), often forming the only safe spaces for those experiencing marginalisation and economic deprivation. Enabling opportunities to challenge existing power dynamics. By bringing together civil society and people facing disadvantage, SCI can co-create, develop, and operate spaces that best serve their communities and tackle collective challenges, such as urban regeneration.
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering holistic support to diverse groups facing disadvantages, supporting opportunities for skills development, mental and physical wellbeing, social inclusion, and access to essential and recreational services. This can include providing an address for GP registration, or support for transport and the right kit to participate in sports.
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating services and forming community networks to increase efficiency, accessibility and holistic benefits of spaces and services according to local needs. This includes, for example, being a key partner in policy initiatives (such as The Promise)¹ that aim to develop joined up efforts across councils, the voluntary sector and public sector.
Place-sensitive support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responding to the needs and strengths of complex intersectional communities, working with multiple vulnerabilities to create highly tailored and localised solutions for people and families. This includes reflecting on the diversity of places, paying careful attention to the existing community demographics, capacity, assets and leaders available.

The intersectional nature of disadvantage highlights the value of utilising an SCI lens in initiatives which take account of, and sensitively address, the complexities of disadvantage. Such initiatives can make this complexity visible in ways that reflect local communities. Box 1 draws from a discussion paper funded by the British Academy which explored how young people's engagement with heritage infrastructure can reduce place-based and social disparities.

¹ Independent Care Review (2020), 'Follow the money: The lifetime costs of the care system in Scotland'

Box 1: Young people's engagement with heritage²

In a discussion paper commissioned by the British Academy, Blamire et al explore how heritage infrastructures can act as means of reducing spatial disparities and create spaces for diverse communities to connect and address social exclusion. They analyse two youth-led heritage projects: one focused on local and queer heritage in Burnley, and the other centred on connecting with Yemeni elders' heritage in Liverpool. These projects demonstrate:

- Youth driven approaches can respond to a lack of provision locally, while providing a wide range of personal and community benefits, including social, health and learning benefits for the young people involved.
- Heritage infrastructure reflective of their diverse community can foster place-based identity, belonging and social cohesion across generational and social groups, while nourishing young people's creative drive to socially and economically revive and shape their local areas.
- Skilled adult facilitators play a crucial role in connecting a range of community actors from public, heritage, religious, and cultural sectors. Through these collaborations, they can generate new spaces for interaction and co-create organisations that operate within the gaps of existing services and structures, helping to respond to community needs.
- Engaging with the various social groups of a place helps identify what forms of heritage infrastructure are needed, how they might be developed, and who they should serve. This approach helps to ensure both community buy-in and meaningful representation.

These projects showcased previously hidden community histories in public spaces and shared stories across generations. They also developed new community events, a digital app and stronger networks. The paper makes the case for more targeted and long-term capacity investment, both from government and alternative funders, on place-based and co-created heritage infrastructures.

Barriers to tackling disadvantage

Disadvantage is often intersectional and compounding, meaning different forms of disadvantage, such as poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, overlap and intensify one another. SCI is an important tool in addressing these challenges. However, its contribution is constrained when communities and decision-makers hold divergent views about disadvantage, and about which approaches, services, and spaces matter.

Workshop participants reflected on the systemic barriers that constrain SCI's contribution to tackling disadvantage:

- Resource constraints, short-term and competitive grant funding, and a lack of community-owned assets or capacity to manage high-risk liabilities have restricted access to the investment needed to establish local spaces, maintain innovative practices, and achieve longer term change.
- There is a need to value and fund the highly skilled people behind this vital infrastructure, to effectively foster communities of care, and to run, support and create welcoming and inclusive SCI.

² Blamire et al (2024), "Young people's engagement with heritage: tackling inequality & other opportunities for public policy" from the '[Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy: discussion papers](#)'

- Cultural attitudes have a considerable impact on whether marginalised communities feel welcome in a space, as well as the level of support they feel able to accept. More targeted investment from local and national government is needed to scale up support for the areas that need it most. This, however, requires flexibility in design and adaptation to promote inclusion and social cohesion across diverse communities.
- Promising practice can be held back by a conflicting policy environment. Existing policies and legislation intended to tackle disadvantage—such as the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, the Equality Act of 2010, the Public Sector Equality Duty, and building and accessibility regulations—lack effective implementation and accountability. Concurrently, other blanket, one-size-fits-all approaches fail to account for the inherent complexities in experiences of disadvantage.
- Bureaucratic processes, siloed budgeting, and an environment that encourages short term rather than longer term thinking and planning, can prevent access to social and cultural spaces and services and result in greater exclusion, particularly for care-experienced children and young people.
- Current approaches to measuring value struggle to capture social and cultural contributions, or the human and economic cost of inaction. Organisations working to tackle disadvantage in communities therefore struggle to measure SCI's value, though some are beginning to experiment with broader definitions of data and innovative research methods to better understand community needs.

A lack of access to, and agency in, social and cultural life can both reinforce and be reinforced by inequality and marginalisation. Box 2 showcases how a lack of access due to investment decisions can hold back already under-served communities.

Box 2: Playing fields for all³

In “Playing Fields for all,” a discussion paper commissioned by the British Academy, Chen highlights the vital role of sports infrastructure in shaping and enhancing quality of life, bringing benefits to physical health and mental wellbeing while fostering social connection. However, financial pressures on local authorities have led to the closure of a vast range of sports and leisure facilities and services, and there are geographic and social disparities in their availability for marginalised and under-served communities.

Chen's analysis of Birmingham's capital investment, data and ground-level insights on sports infrastructure demonstrates:

- A clear geographical disparity in sports facility availability for the most deprived and marginalised communities, linked to higher levels of inactivity and obesity.
- A demand for accessible sports infrastructure due its benefits to mental and physical health and its role in facilitating and enriching social cohesion that extends beyond the ‘playing field’.

The paper highlights the need for more targeted and longer-term funding and investment for sports infrastructure to areas most in need as well as stimulating community-based sports programmes and activities to address systematic inequalities in access.

³ Chen (2024), ‘Playing fields for all: examining the opportunities of sports infrastructure in disadvantaged communities’ from the ‘[Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy: discussion papers](#)’

Challenge 2: Reducing crime and improving safety

Crime and safety involve a range of intersecting actors and relationships, including people with convictions, survivors of crime, affected families and communities, and children and young people in preventative support. These issues are framed within national priorities such as the current Labour Government's Safer Streets mission, which emphasises the importance of prevention, of increasing public confidence in the criminal justice system, and of reducing opportunities for crime.

Understanding what contributes to crime reduction therefore requires attention both to policy drivers and to the lived experiences of those directly affected.

Community members and organisations across civil society and the public sector work to reduce harm and its ripple effect on communities. To examine how these efforts can be strengthened, the British Academy convened an online workshop to explore the role of SCI in reducing crime and improving safety. Chaired by Professor Jane Millar FBA, the session featured three speakers, below, who contributed perspectives from policy, practice, and research. Approximately 30 participants attended the workshop in total, and a full list of participants can be found at Annex B.

Jimmy Paul, Head of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, spoke about taking a public health approach to prevention, and reflected on the role of spaces, structures and services:

- Spaces (whether physical or virtual) influence if people feel safe or fearful and establish social norms around offending behaviour.
- Structures involve how we organise ourselves and share information and resources to prevent violence at different levels and reduce risk factors (such as poverty).
- Collaboration between services, data sharing and learning lessons from past interventions can all help prevent further harm from taking place.

Fay Maxted OBE, Chief Executive of The Survivors Trust, highlighted how sexual violence occurs in every society and social group and discussed the role of support services:

- The Trust brings together survivors, voluntary organisations, and statutory agencies around a shared vision to end sexual violence and abuse.
- Sexual violence support agencies provide a range of trauma-informed support such as counselling, recovery-focused services and institutional advocacy.
- The funding crisis risks closure and reduction of victims' services, demonstrating a need for improved funding frameworks and a better understanding of the value and expertise of these services.⁴

⁴ Bradbury-Jones C, Damery S, Fruin K, Gunby C, Harlock J, Hebberts L, et al. (2025). 'Exploring voluntary sector specialist services for victim-survivors of sexual violence in England: the PROSPER co-production study' *Health Soc Care Deliv Res* 2025;13(10).

Professor Fergus McNeill, Professor of Criminology & Social Work at the University of Glasgow, emphasized how crime and punishment entrench existing structural inequalities, and the need for relational repair:

- Rehabilitation has many dimensions (including social, material, legal, and moral) which rely on building belonging in communities and social structures.⁵
- Social processes and community practices help build relationships of solidarity and safety for people who have been stigmatised and marginalised.⁶
- Rehabilitation and reintegration are deeply relational, relying on the work of civil society, communities, families, and citizens, supported by the state's enabling role.

Contributions to reducing crime and improving safety

Across the workshop, speakers and participants reflected on the role of SCI and how it can facilitate whole person (and whole community) approaches to reducing harm. Table 3 sets out the insights shared by participants across the same five themes that emerged from the first workshop.

Table 3: Workshop participants' insights on the role of well-functioning social and cultural infrastructure in reducing crime and improving safety

Theme	Examples of the role of social and cultural infrastructure
Trust and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building trust and relationships through support that is grounded in communities. • Fostering caring and difficult conversations and activities that help people feel they matter. • Envisioning a path forward that reflects community members' values and the value they can bring to society. • Providing more intangible support by helping justice-affected people rebuild a sense to belonging, repair relationships, and make social connections through creative community practices (from cooking to songwriting), working to address fear, conflict, isolation, trauma and stigmatisation.
Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing trauma-informed specialist support across spaces, including in courts, in partnership with police, in prisons, at the grassroots in communities, across sectors such as housing and education, in online peer-orientated spaces and with employers.
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivering practical support and advocacy (such as in access to necessities, housing, skills, justice and wider services) to help address root causes of offending and support the wellbeing of family members and partners, who experience the wider ripple effects of harm. This includes the many survivors of crime, particularly of sexual violence, who have barriers in accessing justice through the criminal system.
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving justice outcomes through anonymised information sharing by survivors' networks, which supports targeted policing and arrests, encourages victims to come forward. Additionally, providing training, awareness, research, and advocacy on the impacts of crime, reducing harm, and upholding victims' rights. This includes informing improvements around the wider structures to address risk factors (such as homelessness) for people affected by the highly concentrated nature of violence. • Establishing and maintaining multi-agency approaches that provide holistic, wrap-around support for individuals and communities, drawing on the strengths of both voluntary and statutory organisations.

⁵ McNeill, F., & Schinkel, M. (2024). 'Tertiary or relational desistance: contested belonging. *International Journal of Criminal Justice*' Korean Institute of Criminology and Justice.

⁶ Generative Justice. Distant Voices. Available at: <http://www.distantvoices.org.uk/>

Place-sensitive support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying cold spots for support in communities affected by recent acts of violence and providing targeted youth services, group therapy and community policing to help prevent retribution and further harm. Developing place-based projects in areas of high deprivation, bringing together private, public and third sectors to set up community events, identify gaps, introduce new activity, and secure or join up public and private funding to improve support where it is needed most.
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Participants stressed how social relations have both positive and negative dynamics with harm reduction, which can change and evolve over time. Peer support can build pro-social belonging, such as groups of former offenders supporting each other's recovery or groups of survivors helping each other to feel comfortable and safe in their communities. Negative dynamics can include gangs and criminal networks using social connection to recruit people experiencing isolation or marginalisation. Place-based associations linked to past trauma, events, or negative peer networks can bring added difficulties for rehabilitation for those leaving prison and/or recovering from harm.

Box 3 illustrates how SCI approaches are uniquely positioned to facilitate communities to explore the complexities of harm and build positive mutual support. It also shows how a lack of earlier social support or joined up services can perpetuate cycles of harm.

Box 3: Transformative justice for women⁷

In a research project funded by the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation, as part of the Understanding Communities collaboration, Havard et al explore how taking an arts-based transformative justice intervention involving women with convictions can support resettlement in local communities.

This approach recognises that people who have caused harm have often been victims of harm themselves. Focus groups with women in Stoke-on-Trent who were survivors of domestic abuse and women in prison in Staffordshire who had received custodial sentences revealed a range of findings:

- Women across both groups felt let down, unheard, and dismissed by the justice system. Experiences of stigmatisation and gendered assumptions made it more difficult to change behaviour and exit negative peer groups or situations.
- Opportunities to support women had been missed, such as housing men with injunctions near their former partners due to poor communication between agencies. This perpetuated the cycle of harm, by reinforcing feelings of powerlessness for women, who then sought retaliation.
- Locally rooted creative and arts-based approaches enabled participants to explore experiences of (and responses to) harm in their lives, communities and wider structures.
- Shared experiences of trauma and loss created a sense of empathy, solidarity, a desire to give and receive mutual support as well as improve opportunities and structures for rehabilitation and recovery.

Trauma-informed community responses have been identified as the most effective way to address causes of offending by women. However, community provision for this vital work is patchy and inconsistent.

Barriers to reducing crime and improving safety

While social and cultural infrastructure support plays a valuable role in rehabilitation and fostering community connection, its impact can be undermined by unequal levels of access to this infrastructure for different communities.

Workshop participants highlighted several barriers relating to the contribution that SCI can make in reducing crime and improving safety:

- There is uneven distribution and availability of resources resulting from a national funding crisis for community support. Communities have highlighted a need for spaces to gather and for greater investment in essential, therapeutic, and recreational services that meet their needs. They also seek structures that recognize and respond to their lived experience of what works.
- Not enough esteem or resources are provided to the highly skilled people behind social and cultural infrastructure (such as independent sexual violence advisors) who work with sensitive and complex circumstances, take a whole person and whole community approach, and connect work across agencies and services.
- In some cases, support services have emerged in response to a lack of national action to listen to and learn from the lived experiences of survivors and people who have offended, particularly in tackling the underlying factors of harm such as poverty, addiction, limited access to justice, and challenges within the care sector.
- While some projects showcasing best practice have emerged across a range of places, a national effort is needed to enable joined up services, distribute resources equitably, and sustainably scale up successful approaches.
- The definitions commonly used to shape national policy, such as anti-social behaviour and who is classed as a person affected by crime, fail to capture the lived realities of communities and families, and the ripple effects of harm.
- There is a tension between the time it takes to do this deeply relational work versus the evaluation timelines and what is measured (and therefore valued). Time - as essential for communities to find spaces, make them accessible, and bring people in - is an investment in prevention, integration and reengagement.
- Multi-agency partnerships can face challenges for joint working such as differences in working cultures, perceptions of risk, and differing priorities. Success requires compromise, recognition of differing expertise, more streamlined information sharing, and time to build trust across groups and institutions.
- To reduce harm in the long term, a national conversation grounded in compassion is needed on the role of prevention, early intervention in victims support, alternative routes to prosecution, and what happens after punitive processes.

While social and cultural spaces can play a vital role in building a sense of safety and security, a perceived lack of safety in a space can impact whether communities feel welcome and able to use it. Box 4 illustrates how building a sense of safety and security require careful attention to the design of spaces and how they are accessed.

Box 4: Young people and feeling safe in their communities⁸

In a research project funded by the British Academy, London Development Trust investigated young people's views and experiences of social and cultural infrastructure in London, and what enables their access to this infrastructure. Feelings of safety are crucial to their ability to access these vital spaces, with young Londoners feeling acutely unsafe:

- Many young people seldom leave their local area due to a lack of affordable transport or fears of traveling through the 'wrong' area, meaning closures and cuts in local areas impact them more intensely.
- Young people's perceptions of safety and security can vary from person-to-person, with participants discussing streetlights in a park, CCTV, female-only sessions at a gym, compassionate supervising adults as well as more structural responses such as housing for the homeless.
- Trusted and familiar people in communities – such as teachers, sports coaches, corner shop staff and 'bossman' at the chicken shop – are pivotal in helping young people feel comfortable and safe and can bridge access to different spaces.

The paper identified a range of measures that can support young people's safety and mitigate their concerns to improve access, such as:

- Organising visits and safe travel to spaces via schools or youth clubs
- Hiring and training trusted adults to support safety and accessibility; and
- Providing information on local options and the inclusivity and safety of events.

Lessons for enhancing social and cultural infrastructure's contribution in addressing policy challenges

Social and cultural infrastructure has long supported — and continues to support — people and communities across the UK in strengthening the fabric of our society. However, regional disparities may determine people's access to it, impacting their neighbourhood's adaptiveness and resilience to change.

The UK Government's commitment to resetting the relationship with civil society through the Civil Society Covenant⁹ provides an opportunity for policymakers to nurture an environment where the contribution of civil society in communities can be fully realised, by improving and targeting existing levers of investment and enhancing the use of the people, spaces, networks and organisations to tackle major policy challenges.

With a vast range and diversity in social and cultural infrastructures and the communities they serve, there is no one-size-fits all approach. Instead, there are opportunities for policymakers to embed lessons that embrace SCI's role across policy development. Across the workshops and papers explored in this paper (as well as wider links to public policy detailed in Annex A), four lessons are identified for policy considerations, set out in table 4 below.

Table 4: Lessons and corresponding policy considerations to enhance SCI's role in addressing policy challenges

Lessons on social and cultural infrastructure's contribution	Policy considerations
The health of SCI shapes community resilience to wider societal challenges by providing essential services, fostering social belonging, and offering space for public dialogue over complex issues.	Deepen work with social and cultural organisations to inform the framing of policies seeking to build or rely on social resilience. Go upstream of short-term approaches, by valuing the role of prevention and social connection.
To address policy challenges, social and cultural actors can meet communities where they are but need time to co-create holistic services and projects that build on existing activities and networks.	Focus on targeted, joined up and sustained investment to improve access to social and cultural infrastructure where it is needed most, while remaining cognisant of the time required to co-design and secure a legacy for local projects.
Social and cultural workers and volunteers bring the specialist training, skills and emotional resilience needed to deliver and sustain deeply relational work with communities. This essential resource is often undervalued.	Improve the implementation and longevity of social infrastructure by providing more support for workers and volunteers, with avenues for skills, capacity and professional development.
The value of SCI, and its role in building social capital, resilience, and cohesion, is poorly understood and difficult to measure within evaluation cycles, impacting its parity of esteem with other forms of infrastructure.	Explore new alternative frameworks for measurement to better capture the value and benefits of social and cultural infrastructure, e.g. the framework set out in Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure . ¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-covenant-framework-launch>

¹⁰ The British Academy & Bennett Institute (2025), 'Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure'

Annex A: Social and cultural infrastructure in public policy

SCI's role in tackling pressing societal challenges is a recurring theme across the British Academy's wider policy work, and Table 5 sets out some examples. The presence of SCI across complex challenges with regional, economic, technological and social dimensions illustrate this infrastructure's foundational role in community resilience and collective action.

Table 5: Social and cultural infrastructure in public policy challenges

Topic	Examples of the role of social and cultural infrastructure
<u>COVID Decade</u>	Local and hyper-local charity, voluntary and grassroots mutual aid groups proved vital to the UK's early response to the pandemic. Their availability, networks and access to funds before the pandemic shaped the success and nature of place-based responses. Cuts to and inequalities in community infrastructure meant that some areas had less capacity to respond to the COVID-19 crisis than others. ¹¹
<u>Governance to accelerate net zero</u>	Community-based organisations support place-based decarbonisation by engaging diverse publics and providing local intelligence on how to harness existing activity, social capital and affiliations. Public spaces and arts-based approaches can build dialogue and bring (often hidden) net zero technologies and practices into public visibility. A lack of resources, short-term funding and exclusion from governance slow down their ability to support the diffusion of net zero adaption. ¹²
<u>Public trust in science-for-policy-making</u>	Local networks of trust, knowledge systems and the familiarity of messengers (in terms of their track record and reputation) influence trustworthiness to diverse publics, particularly for local community leaders. Civil society and media (including social media) can influence the framing, understanding and accessibility of a subject in public discourse. ¹³
<u>Cohesive Societies</u>	Social cohesion should be understood in a broad sense. This involves understanding cohesion in terms of its social meaning, but also in terms of the structural and institutional mechanisms that exist across local, regional, and national scales. ¹⁴
<u>Digital poverty and inequality</u>	Public spaces, community-based initiatives and trusted local organisations are crucial to building digital access and skills. They develop locally relevant digital infrastructure that make social benefits tangible for communities. To better address digital needs, the public sector can coordinate, share knowledge, and provide access to funding to support civil society partnerships. Addressing digital inequality will require action to address broader, intersecting social and geographical inequalities. ¹⁵

¹¹ The British Academy (2021), *'The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19'*

¹² The British Academy (2025), *'Governance to accelerate net zero'*

¹³ The British Academy (2024), *'Public trust in science-for-policy-making: understanding and enhancing the role of science in public policy debate across the UK'*

¹⁴ The British Academy (2019), *'Cohesive Societies Literature Review'*

¹⁵ The British Academy (2022), *'Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK'*

<u>Future of the Corporation</u>	The concept of 'purposeful business' is foregrounded in the report, to summarise a system in which the purpose of business is creating profitable solutions for problems of people and planet, and not profiting from creating problems. This includes a focus on the actions that businesses can take in partnerships based on aligned common purposes. This refers to the creation of partnerships around joint interests in prosperity and wellbeing that governments, purposeful businesses, investors, workers, communities and other stakeholders share. One aim of these partnerships can be to work towards improving the places where businesses operate. ¹⁶
<u>Understanding Communities</u>	Understanding Communities was a joint research programme of the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation with the aim to increase understanding of how communities function and how they can improve people's lives. Across the projects, funded SCI was highlighted as one of the key conditions needed for communities to survive, and ultimately to thrive. SCI can also play a role in strengthening the social capital and social cohesion of a community. ¹⁷

¹⁶ The British Academy (2021), 'Policy & Practice for Purposeful Business'

¹⁷ The British Academy (2025), 'Understanding Communities: Final Report'

Annex B: List of workshop participants

Tackling Disadvantage

- Professor Dominic Abrams FBA – Professor of Social Psychology, University of Kent
- Megan Belcher – Transformation and Commissioning Officer (Co-production), Bristol City Council
- Mandisi Bhebhe – Strategic Team for Anti-Racism, Scottish Government
- Dr Miriam Burke – Chief Operating Officer, London Development Trust
- Rachel Casey – Policy Adviser, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Dr Christina Cooper – Assistant Professor, Northumbria University
- Dr Paige E. Davis – Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, University of Leeds
- Professor Neli Demireva – Professor of Sociology, University of Essex
- Rachid El-Ouaret – Greater London Authority
- Anna Fowlie – Chief Executive, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Anil Gupta – Chief Officer (Communities), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)
- Selina Hales – Founder and Director, Refuweege
- Dr Ella Harris – Researcher, London Development Trust
- Professor Nadine Holdsworth – Professor of Theatre and Performance, University of Warwick
- Claire Hoskins – Communities and Inclusive Growth Directorate, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
- Max Holford – Senior Product Manager (Analysis and Data), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
- Ethne James-Souch – Grand Challenges Coordinator (Justice & Equality and Cultural Understanding), University College London
- Dr Melissa Jogie – Institutional Research Culture Lead, University of Roehampton
- Leyla Kerlaff – Research Associate, Children and Young People's Centre for Justice, University of Strathclyde
- Professor Monique Lhussier – Director, Centre for Health and Social Equity, Northumbria University
- Professor Jane Millar FBA – Professor Emeritus of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath
- Dr Linda Monckton – Head of Wellbeing and Heritage, Historic England
- Gayle Munro – Director, Centre for Children and Families, National Centre for Social Research
- Dr Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros – Research Associate, Bennett Institute, University of Cambridge
- Professor Ann Phoenix FBA – Professor of Education, Institute of Education, University of London
- Lucy Porter – Policy Adviser, Department of Health and Social Care
- Dr Liz Sayce – Visiting Senior Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science

- Dr Rachel Sandford – Reader in Physical Education, Youth and Social Justice, Loughborough University
- Professor Tom Shakespeare FBA – Professor of Disability Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Eilidh Shearer – Policy Officer, Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland
- Professor Fiona Stafford FBA – Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Oxford

Reducing Crime and Improving Safety

- Luke Billingham – Youth and Community Worker, Hackney Quest
- Dr Anusree Biswas Sasidharan – Director, Bridging Change
- Professor Nicholas Blagden – Professor of Criminological Psychology, University of Derby
- Professor Erica Bowen – Professor of Forensic Psychology, Nottingham Trent University
- John Cooper – Performance & Insights Manager, Governance & Insights Command, Durham Constabulary
- Marie Eden – Survivor Engagement Coordinator, IDAS
- Nathan Farrell – Head of Research and Data Insight, Victim Support Scotland
- Vicky Fobel – Head of Better Justice Partnership, Narco
- Dr Kathy Hampson – Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Aberystwyth University
- Dr Tirion Havard – Professor of Gender Abuse and Policy, London South Bank University
- Andy Higgins – Research Director, The Police Foundation
- Max Holford – Senior Product Manager (Analysis and Data), MHCLG
- Claire Hoskins – Communities, Governance & Institutions, MHCLG
- Dr Kier Irwin-Rogers – Co-Investigator, ESRC-funded project Public Health, Youth and Violence Reduction, Open University
- Beatrice Liese – Communities, Governance & Institutions, MHCLG
- Professor Kieran McCartan – Professor of Criminology, University of the West of England, Bristol
- Professor Susan McVie – Professor of Quantitative Criminology, University of Edinburgh
- Ian Mahoney – Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Nottingham Trent University
- Michelle McGuire – Community Advice Manager, Centre for Justice Innovation
- Michael Phipps – VCSE Strategic Lead, Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit
- Professor Jane Millar FBA – Professor Emeritus of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath
- David Robinson – Programme Manager, Derby & Derbyshire Violence Reduction Unit
- Debbie Sadler – Head of Advice, Unlock
- Aisa Shearing – Senior Restorative Standards Officer, Restorative Justice Council
- Lara Snowdon – Violence Prevention Programme Lead, Welsh Violence Prevention Unit, Public Health Wales
- Alice Stell – Mission Delivery Unit, No. 10
- Rachel Tynan – Influence and Communications Manager, Clinks
- Professor Belinda Winder – Co-founder, Safer Living Foundation, Nottingham Trent University

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