Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy

Discussion Papers

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Introduction

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The discussion papers presented here are part of the British Academy's *Valuing People, Places and Spaces* programme, which considers social and cultural infrastructure from a range of angles. Social and cultural infrastructure refers to the spaces, services and structures that support the quality of life of a nation, region, city or local community.[1] These spaces, services and structures bring people together and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of communities. Social and cultural infrastructure is an area that has been brought to the fore by the Academy's previous work on *Cohesive Societies,* and the *Covid Decade* reports on the long-term societal impact of Covid-19, and, most recently, the 2023 report *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure*.[2]

Space for Community was the culmination of the first phase of work on social and cultural infrastructure by the British Academy. The report explored three key aspects of social and cultural infrastructure. The first aspect was using social infrastructure to support the social fabric, for example by treating social infrastructure as an asset to promote approaches that build on what communities already have. A second aspect was treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure, by carefully considering the costs of maintaining social infrastructure and the role of the private sector in the provision of social infrastructure. The final aspect was defining the purpose of social infrastructure, in the sense of the different meanings different people or groups ascribe to social infrastructure, and the importance of including community voice in the design and maintenance of social infrastructure.

The second phase of the British Academy's work aims to delve deeper into the findings and outcomes of the first phase as set out above, and also to broaden out the exploration of social and cultural infrastructure. This second phase includes exploration of how social and cultural infrastructure can best be measured and valued, the role different institutions and sectors play in creating, supporting and enhancing this infrastructure, and how this infrastructure can contribute towards tackling specific policy challenges.

This collection both expands on some on the insights from the first phase while also taking the analysis in new directions. It provides detailed case studies on a wide range of social and cultural infrastructures, covering areas including sports infrastructure, community business, and heritage, and themes varying from the role of social and cultural infrastructure in superdiverse societies to governance frameworks for digital social and cultural infrastructure.

For those who argue that communities and places hold inherent social and cultural value, these papers could be seen as collectively making a powerful case for the importance of social and cultural infrastructure as an end in itself. They can be read as a set of case studies which assert that social and cultural infrastructure is essential to the social life of communities and places, and in this sense, strong social and cultural infrastructure must be an inherent and positive part of the fabric of communities and places.

However, one problem with this perspective on social and cultural infrastructure is that how we determine what is a 'positive' contribution to a community is a complicated and ultimately normative question. Different people will have different ideas about what is 'good' for a community. The importance of the differing purposes different people or social groups ascribe to social and cultural infrastructures was indeed an important finding of *Space for Community*. A park, for example, could be experienced as a good place to meet by some members of a community and, simultaneously, as a site of anti-social behaviour by others.

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1 See British Academy, 'Invitation to Tender: Measurement of Social and Cultural Infrastructure'. Available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/measurement-of-social-and-cultural-infrastructure/#:~:text=Social%20and%20cultural%20infrastructure%20refers,and%20cultural%20fabric%20of%20communities (accessed 7 February 2024).

2 Cohesive Societies'. Available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/cohesive-societies/ (accessed 27 March 2024); British Academy, The Covid Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of Covid-19 (London, 2021); British Academy, Shaping the Covid Decade: addressing the long-term societal impacts of Covid-19 (London: 2021); British Academy, Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure (London: 2023).

Taking an empirical or evidence-led approach at least partly cuts through this knotty problem. The papers collectively highlight specific, detailed and evidenced impacts created by social and cultural infrastructure that can be shown to have a net beneficial effect on communities or places. This does not mean that accessing these benefits does not present significant challenges for communities or parts of communities. Nor does it mean that specific examples of social and cultural infrastructure will not bring costs as well as benefits. The challenges of creating effective social and cultural infrastructure indeed reoccurs as a theme throughout the collection. But when developed and managed with due attention to factors such as community voice, representativeness, partnership-building, and so on, strong social and cultural infrastructure can be fundamentally good for communities. It is not a matter of simply funding and building more physical spaces, more parks, libraries or community centres, but also how strong social and cultural infrastructure is developed, used and managed.

Yet the papers show how social and cultural infrastructure can also act as a means for tackling broader policy problems or issues. From this perspective, social and cultural infrastructure can be understood as part of a policymakers' toolkit for responding to some of the deeper and broader questions shaping contemporary policy agendas. Strengthening social and cultural infrastructure is not a silver bullet, but it can form part of an answer to a wide range of questions facing policymakers. We have identified four key themes: *reducing regional or spatial disparities; engaging, empowering and strengthening communities; creating inclusive social cohesion and pride in place; and digital social infrastructure(s)*. These are meant as a guide – many papers fit into more than one theme, and the four themes identified here should be imagined in an overlapping, Venn diagram-like sense, rather than as tightly defined, exclusive categories.

Overview of Essays

Reducing regional or spatial disparities

The first theme is the role of social and cultural infrastructure in **reducing regional or spatial disparities.** The UK is one of the most spatially unequal countries among the 38 members of the OECD.[3] These profound disparities inspired the Levelling Up agenda, and they will likely, in one way or another, remain a key issue over the course of the 2020s and beyond.

The papers in this collection that engage with this theme effectively show that strengthening social and cultural infrastructure can form part of a holistic response to the complex, multifaceted – and not purely or strictly 'economic' – problems created by spatial imbalances. Shushu Chen's paper, 'Playing fields for all: Examining the opportunities of sports infrastructure in disadvantaged communities', for example analyses sports infrastructure in Birmingham, first demonstrating a clear link between the availability of sports infrastructure within a given place and community health and wellbeing. Through empirical research in Birmingham's most deprived areas, Chen reveals the heightened value of sports infrastructure to communities, especially post-pandemic, highlighting a dual demand—social and health benefits—that motivated residents to actively seek out these spaces. Chen goes on to make the case for a combination of 'hard' policy measures, such as investment in sports infrastructure targeted at economically disadvantaged places, and 'soft' measures, such as policies aimed at stimulating community-based sports programme and activities. This mixture of policies, Chen suggests, would facilitate 'Levelling Up' and upward social mobility in a context where there are clear geographic disparities in the availability of sports infrastructure.

Heritage infrastructures can also act as means of reducing spatial disparities. This is a central claim of Joshua Blamire, James Rees and Rob Elkington's paper, 'Young People's Engagements with Heritage: Tackling Inequality & Other Opportunities for Public Policy', which shows

[3] National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 'Where are we with regional inequalities in the UK?'. Available at https://www.niesr.ac.uk/blog/where-are-we-regional-inequalities-uk (accessed 7 February 2024).

that targeted spending on place-based heritage infrastructures offers a means of revitalising places and communities and restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging in places where this has been lacking or lost. The paper highlights the relatively low cost of such initiatives, something likely to be attractive to policymakers. For Blamire, Rees and Elkington, instead of a big, headline legislative or largescale policy programme, cleverly targeted pump-primed money, from both government and alternative funders, could better align existing resources to support this form of social and cultural infrastructure over the long-term. It is not that this approach presents no challenges. The paper shows, for example, that there are sometimes tensions over whether heritage infrastructures should be open to all parts of a community for all purposes, or whether some heritage infrastructures should be developed by, or aimed primarily at, specific groups within a community. Engaging different social groups in a dialogue to determine what forms of infrastructure are required, how they might come about, and for whom these infrastructures should exist, offers a means of ensuring community buy-in to attempts to cultivate pride in place via heritage infrastructures.

Engaging, empowering and strengthening communities

The second theme to emerge from the collection is that of social and cultural infrastructure as a means of **engaging, empowering and strengthening communities**. Social and cultural infrastructures often perform these three functions simultaneously. Particular cases of social and cultural infrastructure might simultaneously involve community engagement and empowerment, while also strengthening communities by, for example, providing spaces for the fostering of social connections, or contributing to the regeneration of neglected high streets. Jude Fransman's paper, 'Engaging local communities with the governance of social and cultural infrastructures', argues that engaging communities not merely in the use and maintenance of social infrastructure, but also in its *governance*, can in itself act as a form of social infrastructure. In other words, engaging communities in the governance of social and cultural infrastructure can help facilitate interactions between and within diverse sections of a community, and inculcate new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity within place-based communities, all of which are crucial elements of social and cultural infrastructure itself. However, as Fransman notes, community engagement is not unproblematic or invariably virtuous. It can be ineffective, unrepresentative or exacerbate inequalities, unless handled carefully. Fransman suggests solutions for policymakers, such as responding to scale, building on grassroots initiatives or networks that already exist, ensuring representativeness, and inclusive practice, and establishing capacity and committing the resources to enable meaningful engagement.

The theme of empowering communities is taken up by Danielle Hutcheon and Artur Steiner's paper, 'Community business as a distinct form of social infrastructure'. For Hutcheon and Steiner, community businesses, whether pubs, shops or leisure centres, are vital shared spaces and facilities where community members can meet. They help promote community cohesiveness and anchor neighbourhood networks. UK-wide policy agendas often emphasise the empowerment of communities to tackle local challenges or to own and manage local assets, but adequate policy mechanisms must be in place for these aspirations to be realised for community businesses. Building on the proposals of Power to Change, an independent trust that aims to strengthen communities through supporting community businesses, Hutcheon and Steiner suggest that this should include government funding for social infrastructure that community businesses can access. Hutcheon and Steiner further argue that policymakers should see community businesses as partners and work together in creative ways to develop new solutions that are beneficial to all stakeholders. With the right policies in place, community businesses offer an important mechanism for empowering communities.

Alexandra Kviat's paper, 'Playful infrastructures: building communities through social board gaming', is a case study as to how a specific type of social infrastructure, that of 'social' board gaming, can help strengthen communities. Traditionally seen as a private activity, board gaming in public venues is now a notable element of the UK's social life. Starting from the premise that merely putting people together in the same physical space does not necessarily bring them together socially, Kviat argues for a shift from the *'where'* to the *'how'* - from an emphasis on the provision or maintenance of physical spaces to a more nuanced understanding of how policymakers can ensure existing spaces are effective in strengthening communities. Social board gaming brings benefits such as the facilitation of social interaction among members of communities who may feel less comfortable in other social environments, such as pubs, as well as improvements in wellbeing and mental health within communities. Kviat's recommendations include partnerships between board gaming organisers and national and local social/health care organisations such as the NHS or mental health charities such as Mind, and establishing a location-based app that could match social board gaming organisers with available venues in their local community. The paper's emphasis on a shift from the where to the how may also have relevance when considering how other examples of social and cultural infrastructure, apart from social board gaming, can help strengthen communities.

Creating inclusive social cohesion and pride in place

A third theme to emerge from the papers is that of social and cultural infrastructure as a **means of creating inclusive social cohesion and pride in place.** Leyla Kerlaff and Emmaleena Käkelä's paper, 'Understanding good places to meet: the role of 'common interest infrastructures' in promoting social cohesion in superdiverse societies', demonstrates that social and cultural infrastructure can play a pivotal role in fostering refugee integration and community cohesion. 'Common interest infrastructures', or 'good places to meet' that facilitate inclusive social connections, whether creches, churches, pubs or leisure centres, enable communities to bridge ethnic, cultural and religious differences, and help inculcate feelings of belonging and connectedness for both refugees or migrants and other groups. The paper recommends that common interest infrastructures be supported by long-term, sustainable investment, and that decision-making regarding these infrastructures should flow through local communities. This, it is suggested, would help ensure cohesion within communities shaped by migration.

Another paper that speaks to this theme returns to the topic of heritage. Catherine Clarke and Jon Winder's paper, 'Promoting diversity and place attachment through place-based histories: hybrid material-digital infrastructures and the public realm', provides an analysis of place-based history projects, with a particular focus on those created by local communities. They first make the case for seeing place-based histories as a form of social and cultural infrastructure, before showing how these histories can support greater inclusion, widen and diversify participation, and strengthen place attachment, ownership and pride in place among varied community groups. Diversifying historical narratives about particular places via place-based histories can help foster feelings of belonging and attachment to a place by all members of a local community. As well as providing a useful survey of the place-based history projects already existent in the UK, Clarke and Winder advance a number of policy insights or recommendations. These include the creation of national-scale digital infrastructure for place-based histories, and strategies for ensuring constructive debate over particular questions, such as monuments or street signs, that have the potential to be fraught or polarised. Handled carefully, Clarke and Winder suggest, place-based histories offer the possibility of creating inclusive forms of pride in place that are accessible to all members of a community.

Digital social infrastructure(s)

The fourth and final theme is that of the **importance of digital social infrastructure as a means for fostering social connections in the 'physical' world**. A paper by Gina Neff and Jeremy Hughes, 'Lives online: Digital Social Infrastructures', builds on *Space for Community*, reframing the idea of 'space for community' through the lens of the digital realm.

They highlight the increasingly significant role online spaces play in society, often functioning as a form of 'digital social infrastructure'. Neff and Hughes argue for a policy framework that acknowledges three key impacts of digital social infrastructure: that digital tools and services play an increasingly important role in building and maintaining the social fabric; that online spaces are critical for democratic participation; and that societies increasingly rely on digital connections for the maintenance of social infrastructure in the more general sense. They recommend that policymakers understand what is needed to ensure good digital social infrastructure, and also note the speed at which these will need to be implemented in an area where things change rapidly.

Another paper concerned with digital social and cultural infrastructure likewise builds on *Space for Community* to consider specific digital aspects that were not covered in the original report. Eun Sun Godwin's paper, 'Digital Place Making – Strengthening social fabric connecting people, places and spaces', emphasises that digital social infrastructure can act as a bridge between different physical spaces and by doing so can improve inclusivity and strengthen the social fabric tying together diverse groups within communities. Godwin shows, for example, that digital social infrastructure can play a role in regenerating high streets, arguing that instead of substituting digital for physical space, digital social infrastructure should rather be used to create bridges between the two roles, with community apps such as *NextDoor* helping to facilitate interactions in physical spaces. Simultaneously, the increasing salience of digital social infrastructure creates problems of exclusivity. Rural communities or older people, for example, may be less likely to find digital social infrastructure accessible. Godwin suggests that, for the purposes of utilising digital social infrastructure to strengthen communities and places, policymakers should tackle the 'digital divide' that makes some community members less able to access digital tools and services. The Academy has explored some of these challenges in more detail in its recent work on Digital Technology and Inequality, particularly in its 2022 report examining digital poverty and inequality in the UK.

Future Areas of Interest

These papers make a strong case for the double-value of social and cultural infrastructure – as something that can, in the right circumstances and with the right handling, act as an essential source of strength for communities or places, and as something that can act as a means to achieve broader policy goals. This creates challenges as well as benefits. The complexity of social and cultural infrastructure means there are no simple answers or one-size-fits-all approach that will be applicable for all policymakers, policy contexts or issues, or for all examples of social and cultural infrastructure. Yet the central value and potential of SCI to provide better foundations for a flourishing society means that it is all the more important to find effective policy levers with which to build and strengthen it.

The British Academy will continue to explore how we can best create, support and enhance social and cultural infrastructure. Our second phase of work on social and cultural infrastructure aims to mobilise SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) insights to show how it can be measured in ways that are useful to policymakers, a series of roundtables that will explore what the of role of institutions in different sectors in developing and sustaining resilient social and cultural infrastructures, and how these infrastructures can form part of a response to specific policy challenges, such as the challenge of ensuring cultural inclusion in a diverse society, to take just three of the key areas of interest of this work. These papers should thus be read as part of a much broader attempt to establish how understanding, valuing and strengthening social and cultural infrastructure can help improve people's lives, and the places and communities they inhabit.

1 Playing fields for all: examining the opportunities of sports infrastructure in disadvantaged communities

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Abstract

This discussion paper aims to examine the effectiveness of sports infrastructure investments in meeting the needs and interests of the communities they serve. Recent reviews have confirmed positive associations between 'green space' and 'health effects' for disadvantaged (deprived) communities. Yet, it is a common observation that disadvantaged communities tend to have less access to green spaces and are among the least privileged groups in this regard. Focusing on deprived communities, this discussion paper uses quantitative analysis of the supply-demand logic to explore the supply of sports infrastructure in Birmingham and compare and contrast how sports infrastructure opportunities vary across different wards. Qualitative data gathered from the newly awarded British Academy Innovation Fellowship are used to provide in-depth insights into the needs and values of sports infrastructure from the perspectives of disadvantaged communities. Collectively, the findings of this discussion paper provide evidence and rationales for advocating more policy interventions to support deprived communities in gaining access to sports infrastructure opportunities.

***Keywords*:** sport, supply-demand, underserved, community

Introduction

The vital role of social and cultural infrastructure in shaping and enhancing the quality of life within diverse geographic scales, ranging from nations to local communities, has been progressively acknowledged in academic and policy circles. Recent findings from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy[1] underscore this importance, suggesting that such infrastructures are more than mere physical entities; they act as influential catalysts that foster societal unity and rejuvenate the cultural ethos of communities. The *Space for Community* report put together by the British Academy and Power to Change[2] further reinforces this perspective by emphasising the essential role these infrastructures play in fostering tighter community bonds and enriching the socio-cultural fabric of a region.

As a distinct sub-category of social and cultural infrastructure, sports infrastructure presents an especially intriguing case for examination. Not only does sports infrastructure provide the physical locations for athletic activity, but it also serves as a nexus for a variety of social and cultural phenomena[3]. These facilities act as focal points for communal identity, serving as venues where shared values, rituals, and traditions are performed and perpetuated[4]. Moreover, sports infrastructure often becomes a site where various social dynamics intersect. Issues of social class, race, and gender can become highly visible[5], either through the demography of spectators and participants or through the types of sports that are supported and valorised. By serving as platforms for shared experiences, celebrations, and even commiserations, these sports infrastructures become more than mere venues; they contribute to a wider spectrum of social interactions, often unfolding in shared public spaces.

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[1] Bennett Institute for Public Policy, (2021), *Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure*, vol. 7 (Cambridge: University of Cambridge).

[2] British Academy and Power to Change, (2023), *Space for Community: Strengthening Our Social Infrastructure* (London: The British Academy).

[3] Tim Delaney and Tim Madigan, *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction* (McFarland), 3rd Edition.

[4] Bale, J. (2003). *Sports Geography*. Routledge.

[5] Carter-Francique, A. R., and Courtney L. F, (2013), 'Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Sport' in *Gender Relations in Sport*, ed. Emily A. Roper (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers), 73-93.

Despite its capacity to offer significant physical, mental, and social value, sports infrastructure is often not prioritised as a basic form of public amenity. This might be due to structural problems. The governance of sports and leisure spaces and the delivery of their services have primarily been the role of local government in the UK. Yet, local government has arguably been the tier of government most subject to ideological, financial, and political pressures,[6] particularly in the wake of the pandemic and financial austerity. This has led to a certain fragility, manifested in the closure of the provision of sports and leisure facilities and services.[7] As a result, the closure of sports facilities and the slow pace of government responses have underscored the marginalised status of sports infrastructure. This situation is particularly severe in Birmingham (a diverse city, ranked third most deprived English Core City, with high ethnic-based segregation) and West Midlands where, for instance, as Swim England reported,[8] 14 of the 15 most deprived local authorities in the region currently face a shortage of swimming pools.

This discussion paper pivots around two central themes: sports infrastructure and deprived communities. In terms of *sports infrastructure*, the paper examines specific types in line with the UK's planning guidance,[9] which entails open spaces and sports facilities. In terms of *community*, recent reviews by Public Health England and WHO have confirmed positive associations between green spaces and positive health outcomes for disadvantaged communities.[10] However, while the myriad benefits of these spaces are incontrovertible, it is also clear that disadvantaged communities often have limited access to these green spaces.[11] This disjunction is concerning, particularly given that public parks and leisure facilities, largely funded by taxpayers, are mandated to serve the broader public without discrimination.[12] As argued by Samantha Power and her colleagues,[13] the essence of community infrastructure and services should revolve around ensuring equitable access, especially for historically marginalised sections of society.

Given this context, our research takes on special significance, particularly within the framework of the UK's Levelling Up policy agenda.[14] This policy initiative aims to redress systemic inequalities through a comprehensive, enduring strategy that includes significant capital investments in infrastructure to address regional disparities. This paper focuses on the UK's second city, Birmingham, to explore investments in sports and green spaces infrastructure, how quantity varies with levels of deprivation, and the health and social driving participation.

Through a combination of secondary data analysis and ground-level insights, this discussion paper aims to explore the sports infrastructure landscape of Birmingham — a city marked by its vibrant diversity and socio-economic challenges. Birmingham boasts a population of over 1.1 million residents, with 51.4% of the city's population from ethnic minority backgrounds, according to the latest census data.[15] Birmingham also faces significant socio-economic difficulties, as evidenced by the 2019 Indices of Deprivation,[16] which reveal that an alarming 43% of its population resides in areas categorised among the top 10% of the most deprived locations in the UK.

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6 Henry, I., (2001), *The politics of leisure policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

7 Goodier, M., (2023), *England Has Lost Almost 400 Swimming Pools since 2010* (London: The Guardian).

8 Swim England, (2022), *Beyond Birmingham 2022 Report: The Future of Aquatics in the West Midlands.*

9 Greater London Authority, (2015), *Social infrastructure: supplementary planning guidance* (London: Mayor of London).

10 Public Health England, (2020), *Improving Access to Greenspace: A New Review for 2020* (London: Public Health England). WHO, (2016), *Urban Green Spaces and Health: A Review of Evidence* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe).

11 Lin, et al., (2014), 'Opportunity or Orientation? Who Uses Urban Parks and Why', *PLOS ONE* 9: e87422. Mitchell and Popham, (2008), 'Effect of Exposure to Natural Environment on Health Inequalities: An Observational Population Study', *The Lancet* 372: 1655-60.

12 Crompton and West, (2008), 'The Role of Moral Philosophies, Operational Criteria and Operational Strategies in Determining Equitable Allocation of Resources for Leisure Services in the United States', *Leisure Studies* 27: 35-58.

13 Powers, et al., (2020), 'Understanding access and Use of Municipal Parks and Recreation through an Intersectionality Perspective', *Journal of Leisure Research* 51: 377-96.

14 HM Government, (2022), *Levelling up the United Kingdom: White Paper (Executive Summary)* (London: HM Government and Housing and Communities Department for Levelling Up).

15 Data provided by Birmingham City Council, 2021. Data source: Office for National Statistics.

16 Birmingham City Council, (2019), *Deprivation in Birmingham: Analysis of the 2019 Indices of Deprivation* (Birmingham: Birmingham City Council).

Recognising the prevailing challenges, Birmingham's administration unveiled the 'Be Bold Be Birmingham' Corporate Plan in 2022.[17] This strategic document, serving as a blueprint for the city's future trajectory, articulates a clear commitment over the next few years to support, serve, and endeavour to level up – bridging the prevalent socio-economic divides. We aim to highlight areas where focused 'levelling up' actions are needed, by examining capital investment trends, analysing how opportunities for sports infrastructure vary across locations in Birmingham based on the deprivation index, and exploring the needs for sports infrastructure from the perspectives of individuals who live in deprived areas. Before looking at the Birmingham case study, the next section briefly reviews the evidence on the relationship between access to sports and green spaces infrastructure, and community health and wellbeing.

The link between sports and green spaces infrastructure and community health and well-being

A vast body of evidence underscores the health benefits of access to nature and green spaces.[18] Essentially, these benefits span three main health outcomes: physical,[19] mental,[20] and social health and well-being.[21]

Within various population segments, research indicates that the connections between poor mental health and access to green spaces are more pronounced among individuals of low socio-economic status than their higher socio-economic status counterparts.[22] Additional studies emphasise the significant benefits of green spaces for these populations, particularly in alleviating stress.[23]

The integral role of green spaces, often seen as part of social fabrics, becomes evident when considering their ability to unite people.[24] Particularly in the context of sport, research conducted in various places globally has highlighted that various sports infrastructures (such as community sport clubs, and leisure centres) serve as a form of social fabric, providing opportunities for people to interact and play.[25] Engaging in sports and physical activities within these spaces, as demonstrated by Putnam,[26] can also solidify community ties.

Without delving too deeply into the bonding, bridging, and linking aspects of social capital, it is evident that participating in communal activities facilitates *exchange* and *connection*. Specifically, engaging in shared activities in communal spaces evokes a sense of unity (the *commonalities*). This unity often transitions to collaborative physical actions,[27] reinforcing community bonds (the *connections*).[28]

[17] Birmingham City Council, (2022), *Corporate Plan (2022-2026): To Support, to Serve, to Level Up*, (Birmingham: Birmingham City Council).

[18] Bowler, et al., (2010), 'A Systematic Review of Evidence for the Added Benefits to Health of Exposure to Natural Environments', *BMC Public Health* 10: 456. Lee, and Maheswaran, (2010), 'The Health Benefits of Urban Green Spaces: A Review of the Evidence', *Journal of Public Health* 33: 212-22.

[19] Lachowycz and Jones, (2011), 'Greenspace and Obesity: A Systematic Review of the Evidence', *Obes Rev* 12: e183-9.

[20] Stigsdotter, et al., (2010), 'Health Promoting Outdoor Environments--Associations between Green Space, and Health, Health-Related Quality of Life and Stress Based on a Danish National Representative Survey', *Scand J Public Health* 38: 411-7

[21] WHO, *Urban Green Spaces and Health: A Review of Evidence* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe).

[22] Mitchell, et al., (2015), 'Neighbourhood Environments and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Mental Well-Being', *Am J Prev Med* 49: 80-4.

[23] Roe, et al., (2013), 'Green Space and Stress: Evidence from Cortisol Measures in Deprived Urban Communities', *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 10: 4086-103.

[24] Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Townscapes: *The Value of Social Infrastructure*.

[25] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Sport and social capital'.
Okayasu et al., 'The relationship between community sport clubs and social capital in Japan', International Review for the Sociology of Sport.
Sport Ireland & Sheffield Hallam University, 'Researching the value of sport in Ireland'.

[26] Putnam, R., (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster).

[27] Neal, et al., (2019), 'Community and Conviviality? Informal Social Life in Multicultural Places', *Sociology* 53: 69-86.

[28] Studdert and Walkerdine, (2016b), *Rethinking Community Research: Inter-Relationality, Communal Being and Commonality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

The interaction between individuals is a dynamic, iterative process, which promotes *mutual engagement*. Such engagement is crucial for the formation and sustenance of any community, as it fosters a shared sense of belonging, purpose and identity. This is in line with community theory[29], which places mutual engagement at the core of community building.

Thus, in the context of sport, activities like playing football and running together establish shared experiences, create mutual engagement, and further bridge divides. Moreover, participating in sports and physical activities introduces scenarios that demand *cooperation*, especially in team sports. As Neal and her colleagues found,[30] it is the *trust* built through overcoming challenges and conflicts during these social activities that help to navigate social and cultural differences.

While abundant research exists on confirming the positive relationships between green spaces and their health outcomes, the evidence often suggests that opportunities for access to social infrastructure have not been equally distributed among various communities.[31] As highlighted by different studies,[32] disadvantaged and marginalised populations face significant barriers of accessing social infrastructure, to the extent that it affects their participation and engagement in recreational activities.[33] Taking parks as an example, various studies demonstrate that factors like safety concerns, fear, racial discrimination, affect participation and engagement[34]

Those communities, characterised by a high proportion of populations from diverse backgrounds and facing socio-economic challenges, often experience a combination of disadvantages. This aligns with the notion of multiple hierarchy stratification, as coined by Markides, Liang & Jackson.[35] As a result, these communities often have limited access to recreational opportunities, despite their heightened need for such amenities.[36] A point to make here is that limited access might partly be due to a scarcity of green spaces in disadvantaged areas,[37] or partly because of societal disparities obstructing access to these spaces.[38] Our research, therefore, focuses on these communities that might have traditionally been underserved, aiming to ascertain whether sports opportunities have been, or could have been, adequately provided for them. With this focus, the subsequent section outlines our research methodology, designed to explore these intricate dynamics in depth.

Methods

This study utilises both primary and secondary data sources for its analysis, grounded in the foundational economic concept of supply and demand. This principle describes the relationship between the availability of a product or service (supply) and the desire or need for that same product or service (demand).[39]

29 Studdert and Walkerdine, (2016a), 'Being in Community: Re-Visioning Sociology', *The Sociological Review* 64: 613-21.
30 Neal, et al.,(2019), 'Community and Conviviality? Informal Social Life in Multicultural Places'.
31 Mowen, et al., (2005), 'Change and Stability in Park Visitation Constraints Revisited', *Leisure Sciences* 27: 191-204.
32 Scott and Lee, (2018), 'People of Colour and Their Constraints to National Parks Visitation', *George Wright Forum* 35: 73-82. Zanon, et al., (2013), 'Constraints to Park Visitation: A Meta-Analysis of North American Studies', *Leisure Sciences* 35: 475-93.
33 Lee, et al., (2001), 'Structural Inequalities in Outdoor Recreation Participation: A Multiple Hierarchy Stratification Perspective', *Journal of Leisure Research* 33: 427-49.
34 Harris, et al., (2020), 'Contested Spaces: Intimate Segregation and Environmental Gentrification on Chicago's 606 Trail', *City & Community* 19: 933-62. Scott, and Lee, (2018), 'People of Colour and Their Constraints to National Parks Visitation'.
35 Markides, et al., (1990), 'Race, Ethnicity, and Aging: Conceptual and Methodological Issues' in *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (San diego, CA: Academic Press): 112-29.
36 Powers, et al., (2020), 'Understanding access and Use of Municipal Parks and Recreation through an Intersectionality Perspective'.
37 Rigolon, (2016), 'A Complex Landscape of Inequity in Access to Urban Parks: A Literature Review', *Landscape and Urban Planning* 153: 160-69.
38 Powers, et al., (2020), 'Understanding access and Use of Municipal Parks and Recreation through an Intersectionality Perspective'.
39 Mankiw and Taylor, (2011), Economics (Andover: Cengage Learning).

For the purposes of this discussion paper, we regard 'sports infrastructure opportunities' as the 'supply' and the 'motivations and rationales for using these sports infrastructure' as the 'demand.' Specifically, this paper investigates two primary categories of sports infrastructures: 'sports facilities' and 'open and green/blue spaces'.

Sports facility data are sourced from Sport England and encompass facilities funded by both public and private sectors (including educational establishments). These data are organised into 20 distinct sports facility types, ranging from gyms and indoor sports halls to outdoor tennis courts. The open and green/blue spaces data, organised by the Ribble Rivers Trust, offers insights into the size and diversity of green/blue spaces available to the public. This includes recognised public spaces like parks, nature reserves, and accessible terrains, as well as cycling paths and areas such as woodlands, rivers, and open fields.

Data sources

A collection of datasets was assembled to provide a thorough perspective on Birmingham's situation at the ward level (See the Table below).

Topic	Source	Date
Demographics (population, geographic ward size, age, ethnicity, religion, education, deprivation index)	Birmingham City Observatory (Birmingham City Council)	2019
Public open and green/blue spaces Health outcomes (illnesses associated with obesity/inactivity)	Ribble Rivers Trust (funded by Natural Course)	2019
Sports facilities	Active Places Open Data (Sport England)	2023
Levels of physical activity participation	Active Lives Survey and Sport Birmingham (Sport England)	2015-2022
Local authority capital expenditure on fixed assets ('Recreation and Sport' and 'Open Spaces')	Local Government Finance Statistics (Communities and Local Government)	2011-2022
National Lottery funded investment for the cause of 'Sport'	National Lottery database (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport)	2011-2022

In addition, where feasible, empirical observations were derived from a recent project funded by the British Academy Innovation Fellowship. This project, conducted in partnership with the Birmingham Race Impact Group, involved fieldwork in some of Birmingham's most deprived areas, including six focus groups and a series of semi-structured interviews with senior community-based organisation staff and local residents, carried out in 2023.

Data analysis

As noted above, the aim of the analysis is to explore investment in sports infrastructure and green spaces, how use varies with levels of deprivation, and the health and social drivers of participation. To set the scene, we start by summarising data on levels of physical activity in Birmingham.

Guided by the supply and demand principle, we then examine trends in capital investment in sports facilities and open and green spaces in Birmingham over the past decade and compare this to the national average. The next section uses ward-level data to examine the relationships between physical activity participation and ward deprivation status.

Our focus shifts to the 'demand' side, exploring two primary dimensions: those who engage with these spaces for health needs (specifically, exercising regularly to mitigate health concerns) and those who do so for social needs (such as meeting friends). This draws on data from the British Academy Fellowship to provide a nuanced understanding of local perceptions regarding the value of sports.

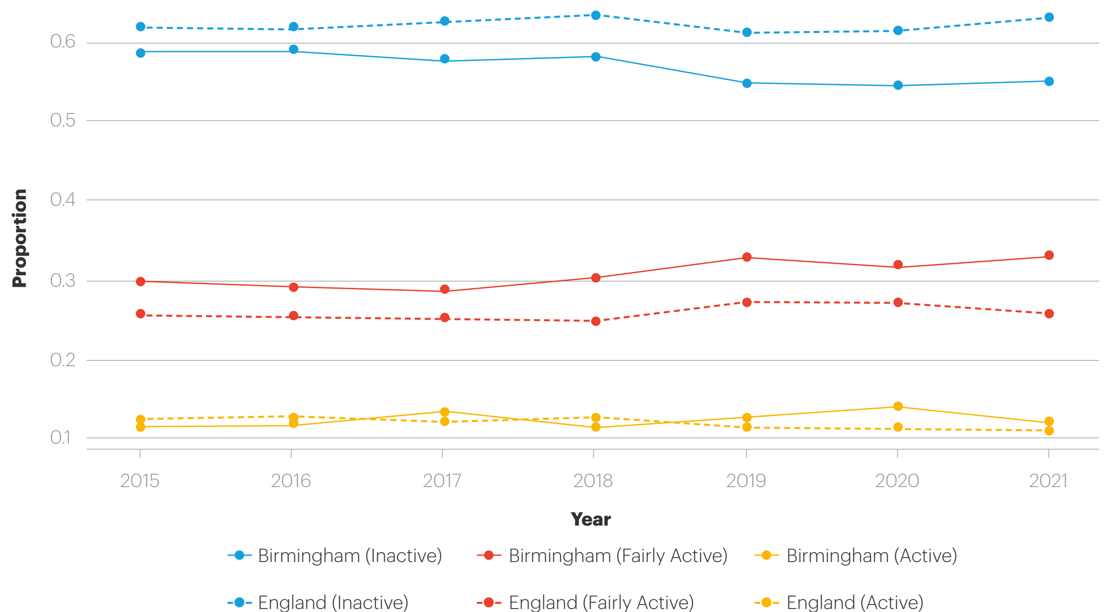
By centring our research on tangible sports infrastructure, we aim to highlight its role in determining physical activity, thereby offering vital insights for stakeholders, especially those contemplating infrastructure investments. While our tests focus on robust, readily available data as an initial step, we advocate for future studies to conduct more intricate analyses for significant findings by integrating more predictor variables.

Results

Is Birmingham doing well on physical activity participation?

From a health and wellness perspective, Birmingham presents a mixed picture. An exploration of the city's physical activity trends over the past seven years reveals that only 56.8% (on average) of Birmingham's adult residents adhere to the Chief Medical Officer's recommended guideline of taking part in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity weekly.[40] This is somewhat below the national average, which stands at 62.2% (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Levels of Adults' Physical Activity Participation in Birmingham (2015-2022).

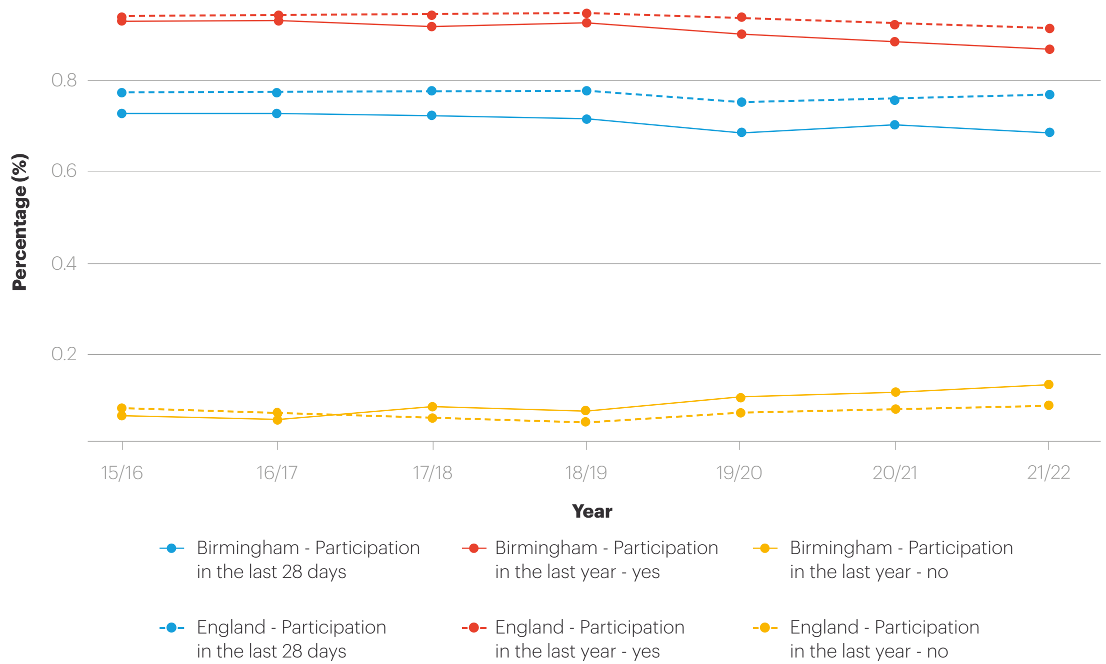


[Source: Data adapted from Sport England's Actives Live Survey].

Although Birmingham has managed to surpass the national average in the 'Fairly Active' cohort (those engaging in 30 to 149 minutes of weekly physical activity), the overall inactivity rates are a cause for concern. The troubling state of physical inactivity in Birmingham is further clarified in Figure 2, which provides a detailed breakdown of the city's various inactivity levels. Falling consistently behind national averages, Birmingham's statistics reflect a less than optimal scenario. For instance, an average of 29.3% of Birmingham's residents reported no engagement in any form of physical activity during the previous 28 days. Even more concerning is the increasing trend in inactivity: an average of 9.3% of the population indicated they had been completely inactive over the past year. Taken together, these data reinforce the conclusion that Birmingham faces a more severe problem with physical inactivity than what is generally observed at the national level.

40 Department of Health and Social Care, (2011), 'Guidance: UK Physical Activity Guidelines'.

Figure 2: Levels of adult physical activity participation in Birmingham (2015-2022) (Data continued).

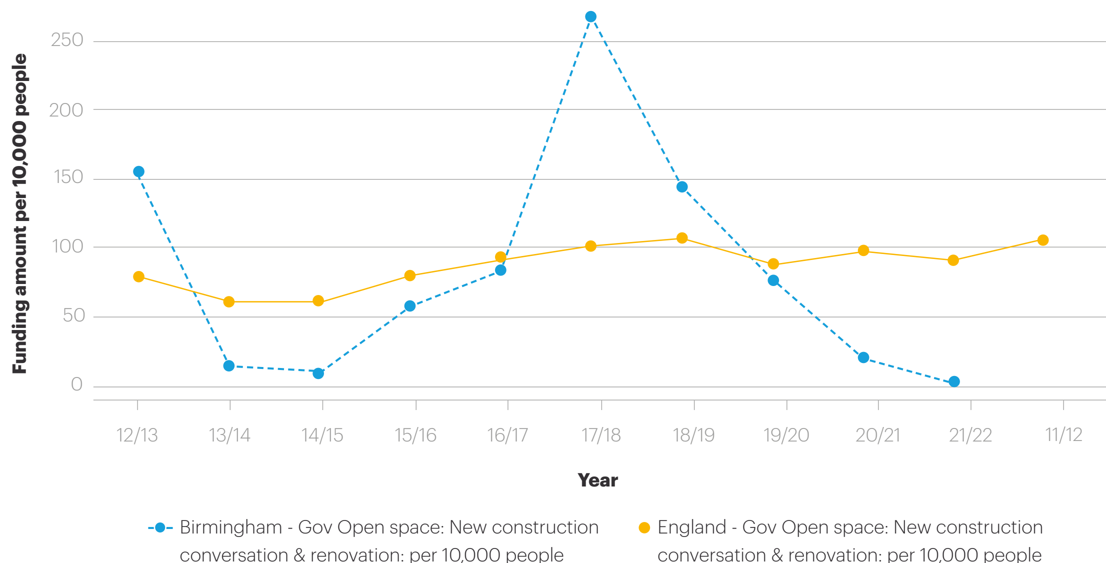


[Source: Data adapted from Sport England's Actives Live Survey].

Supply: The investment on sports infrastructures

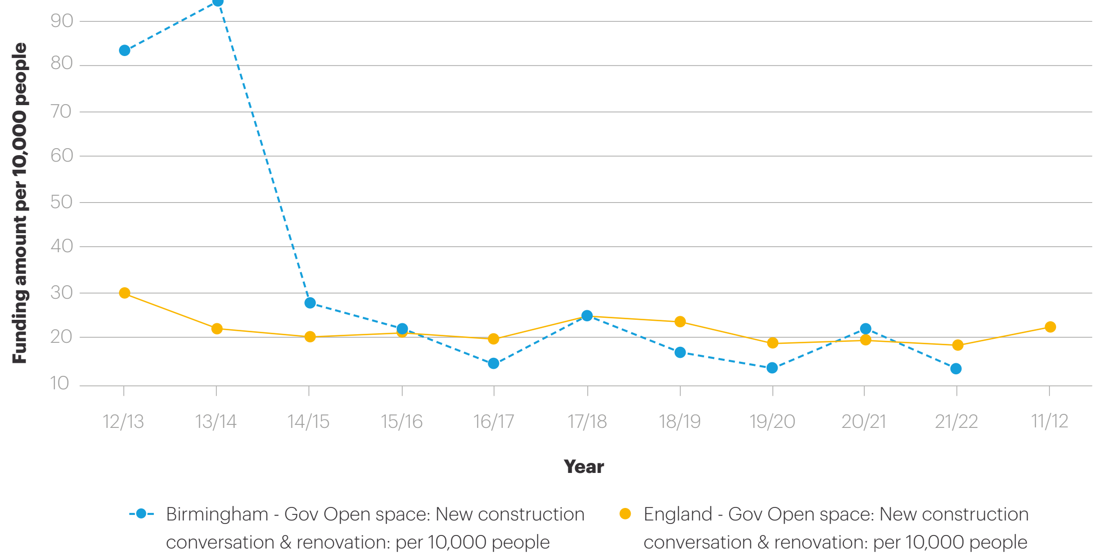
Investment at the grassroots level for public-funded sports facilities and community-based programmes primarily stems from two sources: the national Exchequer and the National Lottery. Data from the Office for National Statistics highlights yearly capital investments in 'Recreation and Sport' and 'Open Spaces' for the past decade in Birmingham, adjusted per 10,000 residents. This is analysed alongside Lottery grants for 'sport,' compared to the England average (see Figures 3-5).

Figure 3: Capital investment (£ thousands) from the exchequer on new construction, conversion and renovation of 'Recreation and Sport': per 10,000 people (2011 – 2022).



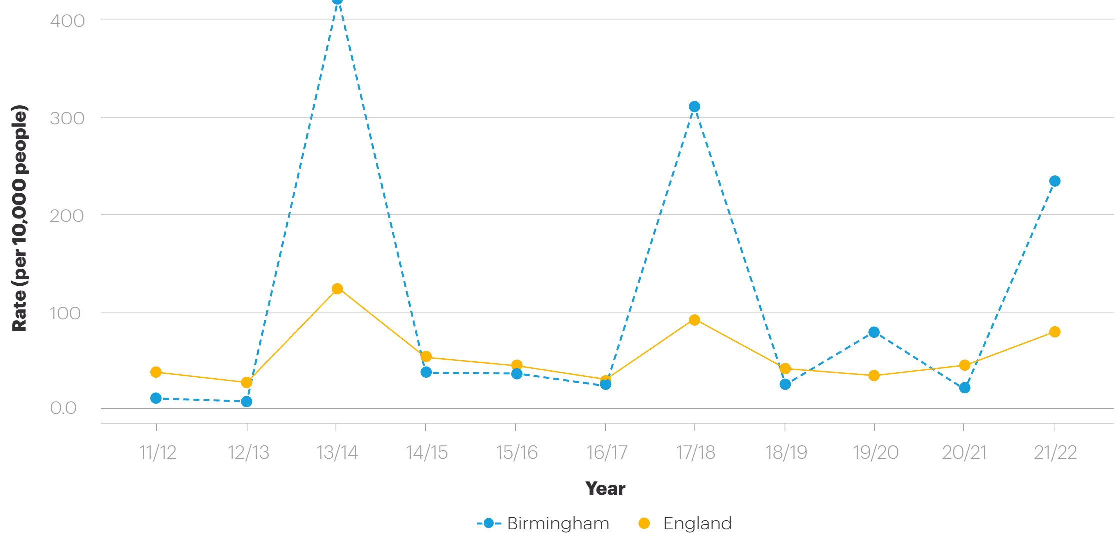
[Source: Data adapted from Local Government Finance Statistics].

Figure 4: Capital investment (£ thousands) from the exchequer on new construction, conversion and renovation of 'Open Space': per 10,000 people (2011 – 2022).



[Source: Data adapted from Local Government Finance Statistics].

Figure 5: Lottery grant award (£ thousands) on the good cause of 'Sport': per 10,000 people (2011 – 2022).



[Source: Data adapted from National Lottery database].

Over the years, Birmingham's trends in investments towards 'Recreation and Sport' and 'Open Space' have often paralleled national trajectories, albeit with certain specific deviations. Both Birmingham and the national average manifested peak investments in 2013/14, presumably a reverberation of the success of the London 2012 Olympics. An investment surge specific to Birmingham's sports facilities was observed in 2016/17, potentially in anticipation of hosting the Commonwealth Games. If those significant peaks are excluded, overall, capital investments in Birmingham are considerably below the national average.

On average, the per capita annual investments for 'Recreation and Sport', Birmingham stands at £76,170, whereas the national average is £87,660. Conversely, Birmingham's investment in the 'Open Space' category surpasses the national average, registering £31,720 compared to the national figure of £21,780. Notably, Birmingham's investment through the Lottery grant is approximately double the national mean, underscoring a strong inclination towards lottery-backed sports initiatives.

Overall, the data suggests a 'moderate' level of investment in sports infrastructure in Birmingham compared to national averages. Considering Birmingham's status as highly deprived, this level of investment could be seen as insufficient in aligning with the 'levelling up' agenda. The notable exception appears to be the targeted investment efforts provided by the Lottery to support Birmingham.

Supply*: *Sports infrastructure opportunities

Although ward-level data for capital investment in sports infrastructure was unavailable, we used recent Sport England data to gauge the status of sports facilities across different wards. This data is visualised in the following heatmap (see Figure 6). Notably, two of the 69 wards - Hall Green South and Lozells – lack any sports facilities[41].

A clear geographical disparity in sports facility availability emerges when we juxtapose the wards based on the 2019 Indices of Deprivation index. Clustering the wards into three categories – the top 10% and 20% most deprived based on the national average, and above 30% – the heatmap seemingly indicates that both the variety and number of sports facilities dwindle in the more deprived regions. This trend is echoed when observing the distribution of 'Open and Green/Blue Space'.

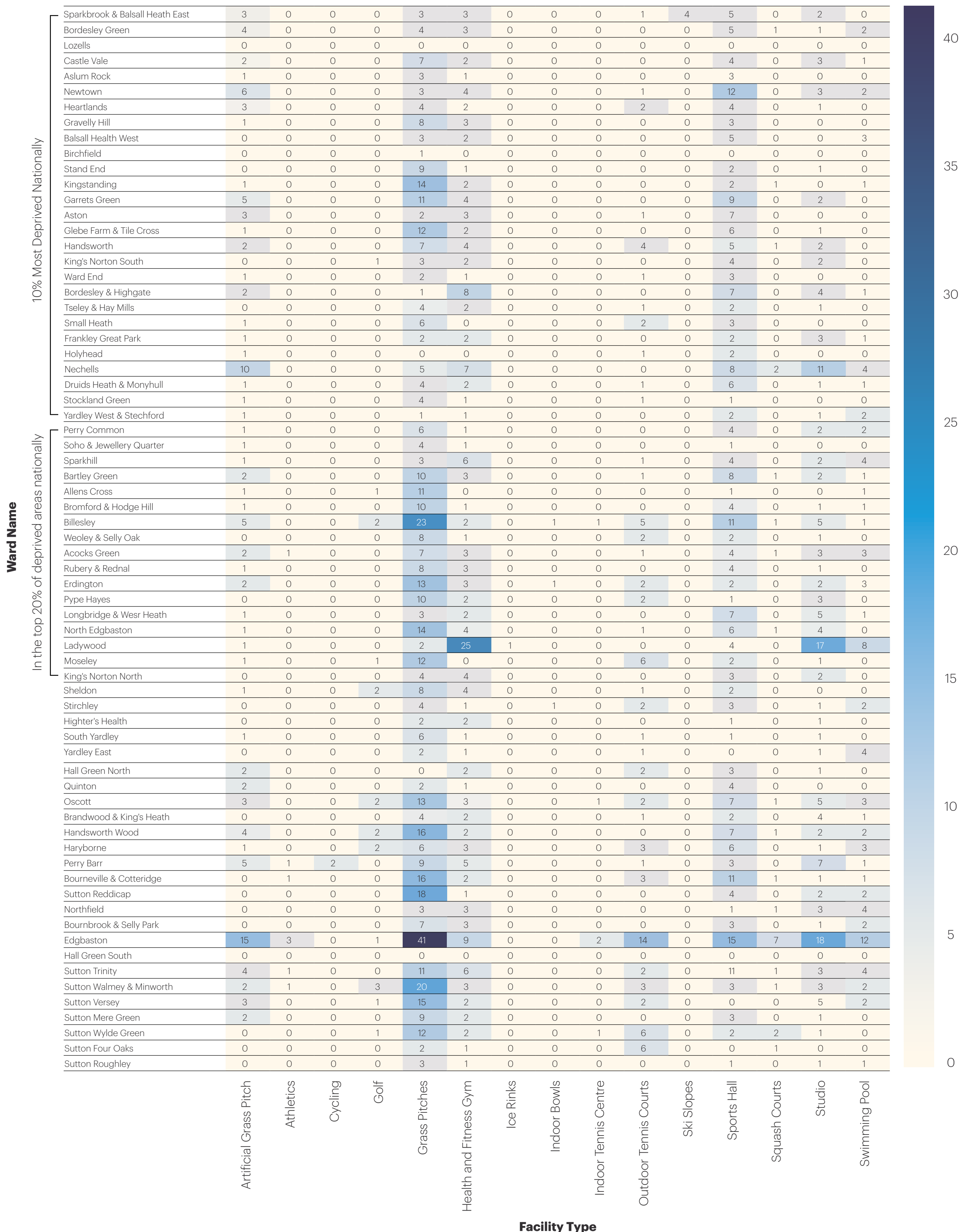
Upon detailed examination of the data, it becomes evident that wards with lower levels of deprivation tend to have more sports facilities and larger expanses of open green and blue spaces. However, the association between lower deprivation levels and the number of 'Sports Facilities' is weak and does not yield results that are statistically meaningful.[42] In contrast, there is a moderate and statistically significant relationship between lower levels of deprivation and the presence of 'Open and Green/Blue Spaces.[43]

41 In 2018, Birmingham's ward boundaries were restructured from 40 to 69 to ensure more equitable representation. Previously, Lozells was combined with East Handsworth, and Hall Green South was part of a larger Hall Green ward. Both original wards had sports facilities.

42 $r=0.187$, $p > .05$.

43 $r=0.33$, $p < .05$

Figure 6: Heatmap of Facility[44] Types (2023) by ward (ordered by Deprivation Level).



Ward Name	Artificial Grass Pitch	Athletics	Cycling	Golf	Grass Pitches	Health and Fitness Gym	Ice Rinks	Indoor Bowls	Indoor Tennis Centre	Outdoor Tennis Courts	Ski Slopes	Sports Hall	Squash Courts	Studio	Swimming Pool
Sparkbrook & Balsall Heath East	3	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	1	4	5	0	2	0
Bordesley Green	4	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	2
Lozells	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Castle Vale	2	0	0	0	7	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	3	1
Aslum Rock	1	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Newtown	6	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	1	0	12	0	3	2
Heartlands	3	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	2	0	4	0	1	0
Gravelly Hill	1	0	0	0	8	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Balsall Health West	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	3
Birchfield	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stand End	0	0	0	0	9	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0
Kingstanding	1	0	0	0	14	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1
Garrets Green	5	0	0	0	11	4	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	2	0
Aston	3	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	1	0	7	0	0	0
Glebe Farm & Tile Cross	1	0	0	0	12	2	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	1	0
Handsworth	2	0	0	0	7	4	0	0	0	4	0	5	1	2	0
King's Norton South	0	0	0	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	0
Ward End	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0
Bordesley & Highgate	2	0	0	0	1	8	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	4	1
Tseley & Hay Mills	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0
Small Heath	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	0	0
Frankley Great Park	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	1
Holyhead	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Nechells	10	0	0	0	5	7	0	0	0	0	0	8	2	11	4
Druids Heath & Monyhull	1	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	1	0	6	0	1	1
Stockland Green	1	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Yardley West & Stechford	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	2
Perry Common	1	0	0	0	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	2
Soho & Jewellery Quarter	1	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Sparkhill	1	0	0	0	3	6	0	0	0	1	0	4	0	2	4
Bartley Green	2	0	0	0	10	3	0	0	0	1	0	8	1	2	1
Allens Cross	1	0	0	1	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Bromford & Hodge Hill	1	0	0	0	10	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	1
Billesley	5	0	0	2	23	2	0	1	1	5	0	11	1	5	1
Weoley & Selly Oak	0	0	0	0	8	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	1	0
Acocks Green	2	1	0	0	7	3	0	0	0	1	0	4	1	3	3
Rubery & Rednal	1	0	0	0	8	3	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	0
Erdington	2	0	0	0	13	3	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	3
Pype Hayes	0	0	0	0	10	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	3	0
Longbridge & Wesr Heath	1	0	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	5	1
North Edgbaston	1	0	0	0	14	4	0	0	0	1	0	6	1	4	0
Ladywood	1	0	0	0	2	25	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	17	8
Moseley	1	0	0	1	12	0	0	0	0	6	0	2	0	1	0
King's Norton North	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	0
Sheldon	1	0	0	2	8	4	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
Stirchley	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	1	2
Highter's Health	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
South Yardley	1	0	0	0	6	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Yardley East	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	4
Hall Green North	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	1	0
Quinton	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
Oscott	3	0	0	2	13	3	0	0	1	2	0	7	1	5	3
Brandwood & King's Heath	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	4	1
Handsworth Wood	4	0	0	2	16	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	2	2
Haryborne	1	0	0	2	6	3	0	0	0	3	0	6	0	1	3
Perry Barr	5	1	2	0	9	5	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	7	1
Bourneville & Cotteridge	0	1	0	0	16	2	0	0	0	3	0	11	1	1	1
Sutton Reddicap	0	0	0	0	18	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	2
Northfield	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	4
Bournbrook & Selly Park	0	0	0	0	7	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	2
Edgbaston	15	3	0	1	41	9	0	0	2	14	0	15	7	18	12
Hall Green South	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sutton Trinity	4	1	0	0	11	6	0	0	0	2	0	11	1	3	4
Sutton Walmey & Minworth	2	1	0	3	20	3	0	0	0	3	0	3	1	3	2
Sutton Versey	3	0	0	1	15	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	5	2
Sutton Mere Green	2	0	0	0	9	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0
Sutton Wylde Green	0	0	0	1	12	2	0	0	1	6	0	2	2	1	0
Sutton Four Oaks	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	1	0	0
Sutton Roughley	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

[Source: Data adapted from Active Places Open Data].

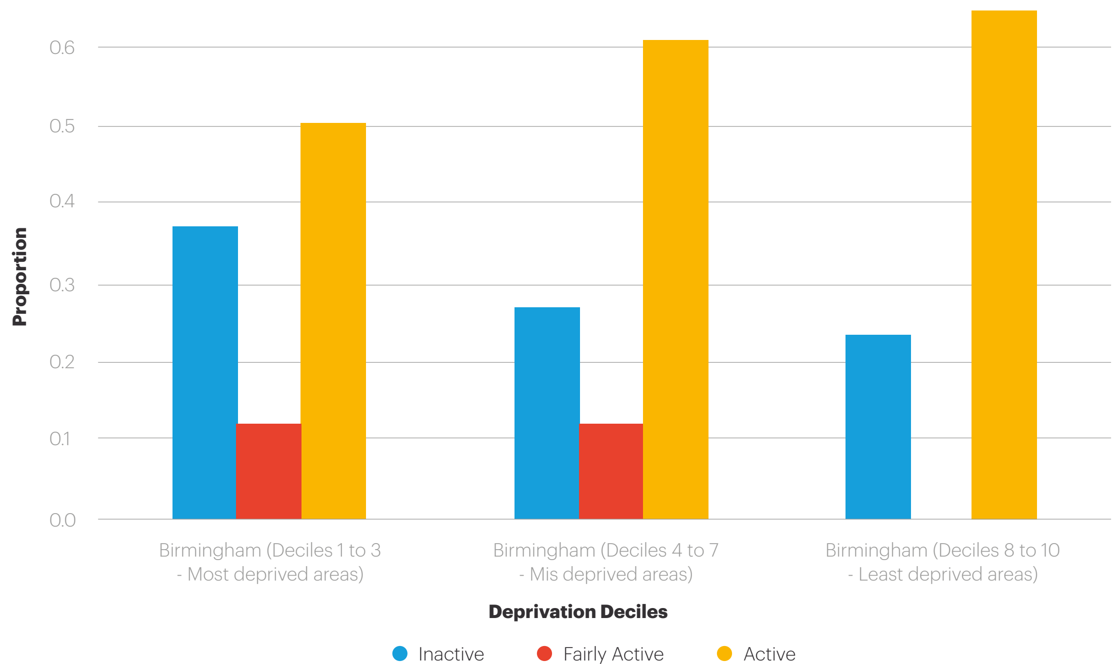
[44] Note: One site can, in some places, comprise multiple sports facilities. The counting is based on the facility unit rather than the building unit.

Further tests confirm the influence of the deprivation level on the availability of 'Open and Green/Blue spaces'.[45] However, deprivation is not a strong predictor of the number of sports facilities in a ward.[46] This implies that, in practical terms, when selecting locations for new sports facilities, the ward's deprivation level may not be a predominant factor in the decision-making process.

But why should socio-economic contexts influence sports infrastructure investment decisions? The answer lies in the correlation between heightened deprivation and increased physical inactivity.

Data from Sport England's latest Active Life survey (visualised in Figure 7) reveals a pattern: Birmingham's most deprived regions (falling within Deciles 1 to 3) record the highest inactivity rates (less than 30 minutes of activity a week). This trend gradually wanes through intermediate deprivation bands (Deciles 4 to 7) and is least prevalent in the least deprived regions (Deciles 8 to 10). This begs the question: Do sports infrastructure opportunities directly impact physical activity levels?

Figure 7: Physical Activity Levels by Depreciation Deciles in Birmingham (21/22). Data from Active Live Survey.



[Source: Data adapted from Sport England's Actives Live Survey].

Our analysis confirms this correlation. Specifically, areas with more sports facilities tend to have fewer people who are inactive, although this relationship is moderate in strength.[47] Similarly, regions with a greater number of sports facilities are likely to have more active residents.[48] However, it's important to note that both relationships are moderate, meaning that while sports facilities do have an impact on activity levels, they are not the sole determining factor.

45 r-squared = .10, p<.05, coefficient of 17.73
46 r-squared = .035, p=.124, coefficient of 1.76
47 r=-0.338, p =.004. Coefficient is -0.0013, p =.005, accounting for roughly 11.4% of the variation in inactivity.
48 r=0.36, p=.01. Coefficient is 0.0015, p=.005, explaining approximately 13% of the variation in activity levels.

Demand: Health needs

After reviewing the supply dynamics, we turn our attention to the demand side. One might ask: What is the optimal number of sports infrastructure per capita? What should their capacities entail? How accessible should they be for residents? When considering the socio-economic landscape, how many additional sports facilities should be constructed in deprived wards to ensure equity? Such questions, although intricate and crucial, unfortunately, remain without clear answers for now.

As highlighted earlier in the paper, research exploring the demand for sports infrastructures from the perspective of disadvantaged communities is notably scarce. Our British Academy Innovation Fellowship project seeks to bridge this gap. Our objective is to delve into the underlying motivations driving the demand for these infrastructures. This analysis allows us to ascertain whether these motivations align with a wider demographic and, if possible, identify specific sub-groups that demonstrate a marked preference for sports infrastructure.

Consistent with existing literature, we identified health motivations—both physical and mental well-being—as primary reasons for using sports infrastructures. This is particularly evident under the GP Exercise Referral scheme, where patients with medical conditions such as obesity, hypertension, or type 2 diabetes are referred for structured exercise programs. As a resident (English as a second language) from Sparkbrook & Balsall Heath recounted,

> I've got arthritis and rheumatism…For my joints, it [doing exercise] do[es] help with my arthritis and rheumatism …. My doctor told me [to be] here to do more exercise…

This strong 'health need' was discerned from our qualitative data. Quantitative data highlights that more deprived wards tend to have a higher prevalence of obese residents ($r=-.57$, $p< .05$). This correlation was observed by a senior staff member from a community-based organisation in Alum Rock, who remarked upon the prevalence of unhealthy food options and their appeal to the younger population:

> One thing I've noticed since coming to this area about two years ago and looking at the statistics is the [high] obesity level, especially among young people. I was doing a bit of an observation around the area; there are a lot of takeaways. And the thing is [that] a lot of young people, particularly around here, if they had £2, for example, and a choice between a sandwich for £2, or chips and a fizzy drink, they would go for the fizzy drink and chips. But, they are unhealthy food.
>
> So I decided….to consult with these young people, asking them, 'If there were some sports activities organised here [the youth centre], what would you like to do?' And football, cricket, boxing, and wrestling were something that came up…to help them become healthier.

Furthermore, tangible benefits in mental well-being were repeatedly underscored. Phrases such as 'exercise makes me happy' and 'feeling good about myself' were recurrent themes frequently cited by community members.

For many of them, participating in sport and physical activities offered 'double benefits' - physical and mental upliftment achieved simultaneously. As highlighted by an Aston Resident, 'coming out to a different environment…other than your home or even your street' to do exercise was just 'brilliant'.

The existing health concerns within a population can serve as indicators for the demand for sports facilities and green/blue spaces. Specifically, we are keen to understand if the prevalence of health issues can influence the development of sports facilities or green spaces—essentially, if areas with more health concerns tend to prioritise sports infrastructure to address these needs.

The quantitative data offer some encouraging insights. While the size of open green and blue spaces in different Birmingham wards doesn't show a statistically meaningful link with any particular health conditions, the number of sports facilities does correlate with certain health issues. Specifically, the analysis suggests that areas with higher estimated numbers of individuals suffering from specific health conditions—such as coronary heart disease,[49] depression,[50] diabetes mellitus,[51] hypertension,[52] and obesity[53] —appear to have more sports facilities. However, it's worth noting that while the relationships are statistically significant, they are relatively weak, indicating that these health factors are not strong predictors of the availability of sports facilities.

However, other health conditions such as asthma, cancer, chronic kidney disease, and stroke and transient ischaemic attack did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with the number of facilities.

Demand*: *Social needs

Previous research has consistently emphasised the array of social benefits linked to accessing sports and green spaces. These benefits often manifest as positive health outcomes, making them of paramount significance. Yet, the intricate dynamics and processes through which marginalised groups experience these social benefits, especially within the realm of social and sports infrastructures, remain under-explored. Our study delves deeply into this subject, seeking to understand these nuanced experiences and relationships.

When exploring the motivations behind choosing communal spaces for activities that can easily be done privately (such as at home), the perspective of a female respondent from an ethnic minority in Handsworth offers a compelling insight:

> **Respondent:** I enjoy [doing exercise] Because this is [beneficial] for our health.
>
> **Moderator:** Certainly, I'm sure, but you could do it at home, why choose to come here [a community centre]?
>
> **Respondent:** It's not the same (laughs). There's more enjoyment, you've got the group... before you come, you could have a chat, and before you go you could have a chat ... you make friends.

Such sentiments are not isolated. They resonate profoundly with many women we interviewed from ethnic minority backgrounds. These women underscore the irreplaceable value of social interaction facilitated by sports. For some of them, seeking social interaction is not just a *secondary* outcome of engaging in sports or physical activities; it's a *primary* draw. Their lives, shaped and at times confined by their cultural backgrounds, benefited greatly from these interactions. Another respondent, a woman from an ethnic minority, explains:

49 r-squared = .059, p<.05, coefficient of 0.025
50 r-squared = .059, p<.05, coefficient of 0.0085
51 r-squared = .074, p<.05, coefficient of 0.0086
52 r-squared = .057, p<.05, coefficient of 0.0056
53 r-squared = .072, p<.05, coefficient of 0.0082

> I think because for many Asian ladies, they get busy with life and kids... You know, just go on and on and on. I myself have got kids and a husband that I take care of, but then I make that choice for myself. You know, I do everything [at home] and I have kids and husband. But then I want the time for myself and I make sure that I get it [from coming to here] and I do that for myself.

This active choice to 'step out' and 'be part of a larger social leisure group' paves the way for enriched interactions, leading to opportunities to 'get to know other people, understand their cultures and languages and everything', as voiced by a White British woman.

And often, these interactions mature into deep-seated friendships. Such bonds lead to more organic social activities beyond the confines of the fitness sessions. Group dinners, coffee chats, and even day trips become common. For many, these friendships are invaluable, offering a robust support system. As one respondent emotionally shared,

> Since the lockdown, you've been all locked in in the house. We've come out and met friends now. So, I think this [the community centre] is a life support, it's brought us together. And I greatly appreciate it. ...

This evolving relationship with sports infrastructure underscores a shift in perception, moving from a view that primarily emphasises their role in physical activity to one that also acknowledges their utility in fostering both health and social cohesion. As indicated by an interviewee in the study, no longer are these spaces merely for 'playing sports'; they are arenas for 'meeting through sports'. When sports and physical activities are conducted in these shared settings, they serve as important facilitators for social integration. This evolving recognition invites a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted utility of sports infrastructure.

Conclusion

The in-depth exploration into Birmingham's sports infrastructure provides critical insights into its dual function of shaping community health and social behaviours. This makes variations in levels of provision and access a key issue for policy. Our research highlights the following key points.

Firstly, our findings affirm the fundamental relationship between the availability of sports infrastructure and community engagement in physical activities. Notably, areas with high deprivation levels and increased physical inactivity are often inadequately served by sports facilities, thereby reinforcing the urgent need for targeted policy interventions.

Secondly, our research paints an even more compelling picture for policy action targeting deprived areas, especially those with high ethnic minority populations. After all, these communities not only stand as crucial focal points for social cohesion policies, aiming to strengthen community ties and improve quality of life, but they also represent pivotal areas where targeted 'levelling up' investments are needed most. Such investments could address systemic inequalities and facilitate upward social mobility, thereby benefiting both the communities and society at large.

By revealing the demand for sports infrastructure for health and social reasons, our study reaffirms the potential of sport and physical activity as vehicles for achieving social cohesion among ethnic groups in deprived areas. This provides compelling evidence to support the implementation of more policy interventions in the provision of sports and recreational offerings.

Furthermore, our qualitative interviews delved deeply into understanding how 'social bonding' and 'connections' were formed through participation in organised sports or physical activities in shared spaces. These exercises evolve into communal experiences that serve as catalysts for social cohesion. In such environments, the scope of social and cultural infrastructure extends beyond the temporal boundaries of individual sessions, serving as a foundational element for the creation and maintenance of extensive social networks. These networks, in turn, provide essential structures for social support and interpersonal solidarity.

Thus, when considering the policy implications, the primary takeaway is the imperative for a focused and inclusive policy approach aimed specifically at the areas most in need. Moreover, policy interventions should extend beyond mere 'hard' investment in sports infrastructure development and must be supplemented with 'soft' measures, such as community-based organised sports and physical activity sessions.

Additionally, to foster 'connections' and create 'mutual engagement,' the process takes time. Thus, consistent and sustained funding for community-based sports and physical activity programs is also essential. Otherwise, when social exchanges have only just begun but have not yet transformed into meaningful 'ties,' community bonds remain fragile and susceptible to breaking once again.

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2 Young people's engagements with heritage: tackling inequality & other opportunities for public policy

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Abstract

Despite recent investment within the sector, still little is known about young people's engagements with heritage programmes and activities that are informal, extracurricular, and place-based. In this paper, we argue that understanding the role and value of heritage in generating positive social, economic, and health outcomes, as well as to social infrastructure, is vital in order to inform public policy, and to better make the case for public investments into the heritage sector. Drawing on research conducted by the Institute for Community Research and Development and Arts Connect on behalf of Historic England, the paper examines two youth-driven place-based heritage projects in North West England that utilised heritage to address social exclusion as well as to improve the health and wellbeing of young people.

A range of positive outcomes – such as personal development for young people, opportunities for fostering a sense of identity and belonging, participation that builds stronger and more cohesive communities, and social mobility – align to contemporary policy ambitions to cultivate 'pride in place'. The activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual and generational identities. The programmes place heritage squarely within the realm of social and cultural infrastructure, which has key implications for policymaking. The projects also demonstrate how 'Levelling Up' can work through targeted government spending – rather than any largescale policy instruments – that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate forms of social and cultural infrastructure, in turn revitalising communities.

***Keywords*:** young people, culture, heritage, place, health and wellbeing

Introduction

Broadly speaking, social and cultural infrastructures encompass the wide range of spaces, services and structures working together within a place to enable communities to function, to form regular and meaningful social connections, and to flourish. There has been growing interest in the concept within recent years, with policymakers keen to better understand the role and potential for these infrastructures in helping to address the ongoing challenges presented by austerity, the implications of Brexit, the pandemic, the shift to net zero, and the cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, the UK Government's policy commitment to 'Level Up' the country grasps that economic policies alone are insufficient for addressing the associated regional and place-based inequalities, particularly in so-called 'left behind' places, nor for restoring "a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost"[1].

This paper presents new evidence gathered by the authors, working with Historic England[2], during a wider research project that explored young people's engagements with heritage. Focusing on two youth-driven place-based heritage projects in North West England, we demonstrate how their activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual and generational identities, and particularly for some of society's most marginalised groups. In so doing, we extend ideas about what might be thought of as social and cultural infrastructures to new areas of consideration that have implications for policymaking. We examine the distinct role played by heritage, and of exploring the heritage(s) of people in place, in shaping these novel forms of social interaction. The findings should encourage politicians, policymakers, civil society leaders and communities to consider the value and importance of collaboration and partnership-working among diverse stakeholders at local, regional, and national scales, and to promote new social and economic investments into the public realm through which to strengthen the UK's social and cultural fabric and to address long-standing geographic inequalities in order to achieve just and equitable forms of 'Levelling Up'.

[1] HM Government, 2022: xviii.
[2] Historic England is the non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, that helps people care for, enjoy, and celebrate England's historic environment..

We first introduce the research with Historic England before discussing the two case studies. Next, we critically consider their role as distinct forms of social and cultural infrastructure, and reflect upon how these activities might inform public policy. Finally, we conclude by offering recommendations as to how future policy interventions might support the flourishing of these novel spaces of engagement. We argue that 'Levelling Up' can work through targeted government spending – rather than any largescale policy instruments – that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate forms of social and cultural infrastructure, in turn revitalising communities. There is also scope for widening fledgling place-based social prescribing models to incorporate novel forms of innovative heritage activity.

Exploring Young People's Engagements with Heritage

Despite considerable investment into the sector, little is known about young people's engagements with heritage, particularly with place-based and extracurricular projects that sit outside of the remit of formal education and heritage venues. Although there is a well-established body of literature concerning the benefits of arts-related activities for young people[3], the evidence base for heritage is limited. Meanwhile, among a range of practical barriers, research has identified a paucity of youth-friendly activities within heritage spaces, combined with a widespread perception among young people that heritage venues do not tell stories that are relevant to them[4]. Those from minority ethnic groups, the socio-economically disadvantaged, and those with disabilities are the most excluded within these spaces. In response, some scholars and heritage practitioners have advocated for a fresh critical pedagogical approach that empowers young people from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds to explore and to celebrate the meanings of their own lived experiences within cultural and heritage institutions[5]. Such viewpoints see young people as highly-engaged political subjects capable of defining their own claims as to what counts as heritage[6], and of instigating social change. Yet, the broader role of these heritage projects in building social and cultural infrastructure, and their significance for delivering on policy goals, was hitherto unclear.

Concurrently, contemporary policy contexts necessitate heritage organisations to accelerate their ongoing transitions from being predominantly interested in heritage to more holistic offers related to health and wellbeing, with for instance the potential to support social prescribing[7]. This policy involves linking service users to non-clinical statutory services, voluntary sector organisations, and community groups in order to improve their health and wellbeing. Understanding the role and value of heritage in generating positive socioeconomic and health outcomes, tackling place-based inequalities, and contributing to 'Levelling Up' is vital in order to inform future activities, to influence public policy, and to better advocate for public investments into the heritage sector.

Working with Historic England[8], we examined seven young people's projects across diverse areas of England that each utilise heritage to address social exclusion, to enhance health and wellbeing, and to improve the lives of young people. We found that, first, participation in these programmes contributed to multiple positive personal, social, health, and learning benefits for the young people involved. Second, these place-based engagements with heritage offered unique opportunities for fostering identity and belonging, and empowering those young people to re-interpret and re-present the places where they live. Third, these activities can contribute to building stronger cohesive communities. Fourth, these opportunities can play a crucial role in promoting social mobility, and persuading young people to remain resident in so-called 'left behind' places: bringing together their renewed sense of belonging combined with the key skills, local networks, and creative impulse to socially and economically revive

3 Matarasso, 1997; Konlaan et al., 2000; Fancourt and Finn, 2019.
4 Manchester and Pett, 2015; Ecclesiastical, 2020.
5 Habib, 2021.
6 Madgin et al., 2018
7 SQW, 2020.
8 Blamire et al., 2023.

their places according to their own image. These outcomes each align with 'Levelling Up' policy ambitions to cultivate 'pride in place'. For reasons of space, we now pay closer attention to two of those projects, both based in North West England. We will demonstrate how these projects responded to a lack of provision by establishing new social and cultural infrastructures led by young people.

Stand Out

Stand Out is an LGBTQ+ based heritage project run by a team of young producers aged 13-25, that works with the youth-led arts organisation Blaze Arts. Inspired by the first public meeting held by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1971 at Burnley Library, which recently commemorated its 50th anniversary, Stand Out was formed in 2022 to explore local history and queer heritage in Burnley, particularly by way of gathering oral histories from older members of the local LGBTQ+ community. The group's initial aims were to revisit and reclaim the struggles of LGBTQ+ people, to create new forms of expression and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people in Burnley and, through so doing, to combat discrimination within the town. Since then, Stand Out has published a zine investigating local and general queer-related history, and has organised pop-up exhibitions across the town as well as Burnley's first ever pride parade[9].

We found that a key driver which encouraged young people to engage with place-based heritage activities was having the opportunity to learn more about the place they live and/or events relating to it, as well as having the chance to challenge, re-interpret and re-present the ways in which that place is understood. For instance, there is a desire among some of the young people involved to disrupt popular depictions of Burnley. Within recent public discourse, a perception has emerged, verging on a cliché, that strong support for Brexit within so-called 'left behind' towns such as Burnley reflects the views of an older, white, working-class local population that is reactionary, nostalgic, and resentful of the far-reaching cultural shifts that have come to define contemporary Britain[10]. In response, Stand Out makes visible and affirms the hidden histories which reflect social diversity within Burnley and, through so doing, stakes a claim for all minority people living in the town, and inspires queer culture to be celebrated within the town. The project has created a safe, inclusive social group for young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and allowed for new social connections to form across generational identities.

Stand Out has not only begun to reconfigure the landscapes of sexuality politics within the town, in turn making it arguably a more open, tolerant, vibrant, and diverse place in which to live, but the group is actively seeking to build partnership networks through which to obtain further funding towards establishing a permanent premises for LGBTQ+ people. Consequently, the young people can be seen as developing social capital and capacity within Burnley, and contributing positively to civic life. Participants gained new skills in leadership and communication through liaising with local charities, the community and voluntary sector, trade unions, Burnley Borough Council and Burnley Football Club. Some individuals also received training in aspects of event planning, management, and marketing. Through these activities, those involved became better equipped to stake their own claims to place, and to re-shape the town according to their own needs and desires.

9 Slater, 2023.
10 See Tyler et al., 2022 for a critique of this viewpoint.

Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage

Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage was an intergenerational project co-created by National Museums Liverpool working with a range of community partners: Liverpool Arabic Centre, the Al-Ghazali Centre, Al-Taiseer Mosque, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, and the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre. The project's aims included: enhancing community identity and pride among Yemeni communities; cultivating intergenerational community dialogue; enabling skills development for young people; and bringing museums closer to local communities and strengthening partnership-working with community organisations[11]. The project was inspired by a 14-year-old local boy of Yemeni background whose grandmother lived with dementia. Having discovered that the museum's app designed for people living with dementia failed to portray pictures and stories of specific relevance to the city's Yemeni community, an initiative to curate culturally-specific items was born. The project enabled young people of Yemeni heritage to support their parents and grandparents to re-connect with their own cultural heritage by capturing and preserving community stories and cultural traditions through dialogue with older community members. The material collected formed the content of a *Memories of Yemen* app launched in 2022. Over 40 young people participated in these activities. In September 2021 the project's Yemeni Culture Day, celebrated with traditional dance, dress, and food, attracted a multiethnic and multicultural audience of over 300 local residents.

Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage has invited young Muslim boys and girls to share their lived experiences and stories of migration, to explore their own diverse identities, and to consider the contribution of Yemeni cultural heritage in shaping modern-day Liverpool. In so doing, the project enabled the young people to: "connect with Yemen"; to "share [their] Yemeni culture with others"; to "connect with new people"; to "learn things from one another"; and to "feel closer to the [Yemeni] community". The activities have helped to spur new interactions across generation, to welcome new arrivals into the city, and to forge new conceptions of identity and belonging for young Yemenis who already call Liverpool home. These new connections then have a role to play in combating social exclusion and building cohesive communities.

The young participants we spoke to also reflected upon the personal and educational development outcomes of the activities, such as using these experiences to gain entry to college, university, or the labour market, and the positive impacts upon their health and wellbeing. Finally, the project is thought by partners to have catalysed a sea-change in how communities and place-based organisations work together, as one project partner reflected: "for too long [our] under-resourced communities have been used to support the ambitions and work of those bigger and richer. We made it clear that this could not happen here again". Instead, the legacies are those of new voices being heard within the museum, and new forms of ownership of the city's existing social and cultural infrastructures are taking hold. Meanwhile, those from traditionally marginalised groups (young people, minority ethnic) were empowered to enrich this place and to positively contribute to civic life.

Towards New Social and Cultural Infrastructures

Taken together, these activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and generational identities. In so doing, they emphasise the places and spaces within which new social and cultural infrastructures are emerging with the potential to transform society. Let us consider further how these new infrastructures emerged, how they engaged with pre-existing forms of social and cultural infrastructure, and some of the challenges in building and maintaining these vehicles of change.

[11] Wilson, 2023.

First, the projects both responded to a lack of pre-existing social and cultural infrastructures, a gap within provision, or a specific need for that social group within a locality. They then depended upon already existing informal networks or partnerships, skilled adult facilitators (often in the form of youth workers or community leaders) holding the requisite local knowledge and social capital to connect with young people and to support the work, combined with the inspiration and creativity of the young people themselves. While the projects appeared spontaneous, and did arise somewhat organically, they exploited different national-level heritage and non-heritage governmental and charitable funding mechanisms and drew upon the legacies of previous funding interventions. Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage was supported through the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund while *House of Memories*, the museum's dedicated dementia awareness programme, was originally funded through the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care. Stand Out was supported by Blaze Arts, which emerged out of Curious Minds, a charity established in 2009 to tackle unequal access to creativity and culture for young people in the North West[12], and was one of the 10 Arts Council England-funded Bridge organisations[13] set-up to build and develop the infrastructure for young people's engagement with culture. Stand Out has since received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

These new social and cultural infrastructures called upon pre-existing place-based organisations, and their services and assets to create new spaces of interaction and engagement in innovative and creative ways. In Liverpool, this meant engaging with a system that seemed unrepresentative and impenetrable, and hoping for sympathetic gatekeepers. The partnership between different heritage, religious, and cultural institutions in the city continues to unsettle these barriers, and has stimulated new modes of cultural engagement bringing the voices of young Muslim boys and girls into these spaces and empowering them to shape and co-produce services. By comparison, in Burnley, the arts 'incubator effect' has allowed for the growth of a new organisation that can be invested in and developed over the long-term building connectivity and infrastructure. Successive policy initiatives since 2010, such as the Coalition Government's Localism and Big Society agendas, have advocated the redistribution of power away from the public sector and towards social enterprises, community groups, the private sector, families, and individuals. Notwithstanding its many critics[14], these activities do show how marginalised communities can form novel, creative, and more reciprocal relationships with the public sector involving the co-creation of community-based services anew – often in-between the cracks of existing services and structures – rather than simply assuming responsibility for statutory ones.

Place is integral to nurturing the development of social and cultural infrastructures. First, in terms of how communities respond to what they might lack or desire, such as safe spaces and means of expression for LGBTQ+ people living in Burnley. These residents-driven, new spaces of engagement take on the distinct character and needs of those communities and reflect a degree of authenticity that centrally-administered services cannot replicate. While both projects responded to an injustice, they also took advantage of particular place-based opportunities thus answering the question of 'why here?'; similar ideas in other places may not necessarily have flourished. Yet, place is not just the terrain upon which this action occurs but, as set out above, is interwoven through the activities which seek to redefine this place and to invoke new ideas about what it, in the words of geographer Doreen Massey[15], 'stands for'. The demographic, socioeconomic, political, and geographical make-up of a place therefore plays a role in determining the precise expressions and inflections of the types of social and cultural infrastructures that may emerge. The activities also entailed the claiming and appropriation of semi-public and public spaces such as museums, libraries, and the street, through which new communities became part of this place.

12 Curious Minds, 2023.
13 Arts Connect, based at the University of Wolverhampton, was also part of the Bridge network.
14 See North, 2011 for commentary.
15 Massey, 2007.

There is a tendency within the 'Levelling Up' discourse to suggest that once-strong pride in ('left behind') places has since been lost, but in contrast these projects caution against any portrayal of place that remembers local communities as always homogeneous and harmonious. Instead, heritage provided the tool by which individuals could explore their own biographies and identities, and connect with a wider community of people within place. Stand Out, for instance, recognised Burnley as a site of multiple diverse and contested histories, advocating for what Doreen Massey[16] calls a 'progressive sense of place' that challenges reactionary ideas about a place ever being devoid of conflict. Making these alternative histories visible is seen by some community members as being a crucial step towards building a more diverse, vibrant, and peaceful town. The work of heritage, then, in informing public policy, is to be open and alive with possibilities rather than being nostalgic and backwards-looking.

There are crucial challenges to consider. First, there are important questions as to how these groups are being received within place. If Stand Out's visions for a more inclusive town are not necessarily shared among all residents, members may experience a sense of belonging jarred in addition to further marginalisation, prejudice, and discrimination. We should not romanticise these activities: building and maintaining infrastructures of this kind is not a straightforward process but is a highly politically and emotionally-charged endeavour with a myriad of uncertain outcomes.

Second, while the projects engaged new voices, young people's extracurricular heritage activities still attract a predominantly white, middle-class audience[17]. This underscores the importance of working with community partners to ensure that these spaces represent a range of diverse voices and interest groups.

Third, there are tensions concerning whether social and cultural infrastructure should be accessible to all for a range of activities by different people (such as, for instance, a local library). Our view is that these two models are blueprints for engaging different social groups and place-based organisations in dialogue to determine what forms of infrastructure are required, how might they come about, and for whom these infrastructures should exist.

Fourth, regarding legacy: the participants may move on; there is high staff turnover within the heritage and voluntary sector; project funding may be exhausted; community organisations might cease to exist; and the original purpose of the work may have been served. This emphasises the crucial role of anchor institutions such as local authorities, universities, museums, theatres, and football clubs in creating the conditions whereby these activities might be sustained and flourish, including documenting and archiving as well as maintaining institutional memory within place. Stand Out has won funding and has ambitions for self-sufficiency, but it is worth considering how these models may be better embedded in public policy.

Opportunities for Public Policy

These social and cultural infrastructures have a considerable role to play in strengthening the UK's social fabric and can help address long-standing geographic inequalities that have been accentuated by austerity, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. The activities have contributed to building stronger cohesive communities, to enriching civic life, and to promoting young people's social mobility which may contribute to reviving the fortunes of so-called 'left behind' places. How, then, can these activities be better supported through public policy?

We have proposed recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and funders who are looking to advance heritage work with young people.

[16] Massey, 1994.
[17] Blamire et al., 2022.

First, individuals are most attracted by opportunities to explore their own heritage and that which they themselves consider to be important. Those individuals should be engaged in the coproduction of activities and empowered to shape their own visions for heritage.

Second, the most transformative work has focused not only upon outcomes for young people but also for families, neighbourhoods and wider communities, and has displayed intercultural and intergenerational components.

Third, there is not enough robust evidence regarding 'what works' in heritage engagement as a body of professional knowledge and practice – i.e. the how and why of approaches and practices that achieve different ends and purposes. We have consequently argued that it ought to be a prerequisite of funding that activities are evaluated in accordance with consistent and high-quality measuring and reporting, twinned with the establishment of a publicly accessible central archive which collates details of programmes' activities and outcomes[18]. This policy would improve decision-making and accountability, better grow the evidence base concerning what works and why, and support research into new areas.

Fourth, proposed activities should demonstrate credible ideas for partnership-working as well as the skills for partnership practice such as the ability to lead, to broker, to hold space and convene, to co-create, and to support other partners. This could entail working with local, regional, and national stakeholders across the education, housing, transport, and healthcare sectors.

While redistributive policy is no doubt needed to reverse geographic inequalities, these examples demonstrate highly cost-effective means to 'Level Up' the country through revitalisation of communities via targeted spending that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate social and cultural infrastructure. This is particularly pertinent within a political context in which, for many years, the major political parties in the UK have competed on the terrain of fiscal responsibility. It is unlikely that the next UK General Election will herald a 'big bang' of public spending regardless of who wins office, with both Labour and the Conservative Party seemingly eager to find cuter preventative solutions to tackling inequalities, social exclusion, and crime, and improving health and wellbeing. Our research demonstrates that the physical infrastructures already exist, that there is considerable energy and untapped potential among young people living within 'left behind' places, and with the requisite funding and support these activities can improve the social fabric of a place. This work could be nurtured through nuanced and targeted pump-priming money, rather than any big legislative or largescale policy programme, in order to support the flourishing of those 'spaces in-between'. This need not solely be about government money, but different funders better aligning their resources to support this social infrastructure over the longer-term. This could also take the form of capacity investment, enabling partners to build relationships, trust, and ideas, in order to develop this collaborative work.

We also propose widening fledgling place-based social prescribing models to incorporate innovative and creative heritage activity. Our work with regional healthcare partners in the West Midlands has illustrated the need to map existing forms of social infrastructure for the purposes of growing social prescribing[19]. Embedding these heritage models within social prescribing could help to create *new* spaces of interaction and engagement. During our fieldwork, one young person noted that their local museum offered no provision for celebrating (their) Romanian heritage. Within a social prescribing model, an anchor heritage organisation may take the lead in organising, for instance, a time-limited community heritage project that co-curates an exhibition exploring Central and Eastern European cultural heritage and its contribution to the UK. Residents could contribute personal stories and lend material objects to the exhibition, promoted through local events. The participants may be referred by local migrant and refugee charities, social care, health services, and schools, working with heritage

18 Blamire et al., 2023.
19 Hopley et al., 2023.

professionals to exchange skills, knowledge, and experience. Unlike within existing versions of social prescribing, the delivery organisation would receive per-participant payments in order to properly and meaningfully carry out the work. This policy would enable such activities to be better embedded within local health and social care systems. As with those heritage activities that met local need, place-based social prescribing models also typically favour a more organic pro-social approach to health and social care provision.

Finally, we call for a fresh research agenda to explore these themes, especially in relation to policymaking contexts, which our *Tackling Inequalities through Heritage and the Arts* body of work at the Institute for Community Research & Development has begun, working to understand the broader possibilities for heritage and the arts in responding to these policy challenges and contributing to the social and economic revival of places.

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3 Engaging local communities with the governance of social and cultural infrastructures

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Abstract

While the engagement of local communities is a recurring theme and a key recommendation across the policy-focused literature on Social and Cultural Infrastructures (SCIs), there is a tendency to present both SCIs and 'community engagement' as unproblematic and inherently virtuous drivers of social cohesion or social capital. This obscures potential tensions around the function, resourcing, ownership and inclusivity of SCIs, as well as the significant evidence that participatory interventions can be ineffective and unrepresentative, undermine democratic processes, exacerbate inequalities and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants. In response, this paper seeks to support policymakers to determine appropriate methods for engaging place-based communities in the governance of SCIs. It draws on literature from a range of scholarly fields to examine three sets of cross-cutting challenges relating to place, assets, and community. This discussion informs a framework that is then applied to a discussion of seven approaches to community engagement, highlighting both their potential and limitations. The paper concludes by suggesting that community engagement can itself function as a form of SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires significant investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers are urged to think systemically by paying explicit attention to their strategic assumptions, contexts of implementation and modes of representation and to assess their capacity to support ethical practice, recognising and resourcing the labour of engagement. Where capacity does not extend to supporting engagement responsively and responsibly, policymakers should be transparent and consider other approaches to context-sensitive and equitable resourcing.

***Keywords*:** community engagement, participatory governance, political economies, ethics, systems thinking

Introduction

Though defined in various ways, the concept of Social and Cultural Infrastructures (SCIs) is broadly understood to have three key elements: first, the presence of physical sites or assets, potentially ascribed with cultural value; second, the ability to facilitate interactions between and within diverse sections of a community; and third, the ability to inculcate meaningful relationships, creative expression or cultural practice, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity among local people[1]. Key to this definition, and indeed a recurring recommendation across the policy-focused literature, is the engagement of local communities not just in the use and maintenance of SCIs but also in their *governance*: from defining terminology and setting agendas, to planning, implementation and evaluation[2].

However, there is a tendency in the policy-focused literature to present both SCIs and the notion of 'community engagement' as unproblematic and inherently virtuous drivers of democracy, social cohesion or social capital[3]. This obscures potential tensions around the function, resourcing, ownership and inclusivity of SCIs, as well as the significant evidence that participatory interventions can be ineffective[4] and unrepresentative[5], undermine democratic processes[6], exacerbate inequalities[7] and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants[8]. An additional layer of complexity is introduced by the notion of 'the local', which conceals assumptions about context, scale and homogenous experience.

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1 This definition is adapted from the British Academy's *Space for Our Community* report (2023) and the review by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (Kelsey and Kenny 2021).
2 Power to Change 2021; Department for Levelling Up 2022; Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy 2023; The British Academy 2023.
3 Voorberg et al 2015; Bakker 2015; Verschuere et al 2018.
4 Williams et al 2016; Slasberg and Beresford 2017; Bradsen et al 2018; Osborn et al 2018; Bussu et al 2022b.
5 Neblo et al. 2010; Xoco et al 2023; Harris 2021.
6 Cooke and Korathi 2001; Ishkanian 2014; Bouchard 2016; McMullin and Needham 2018; Steen et al 2018;
7 Hickey and Kothari 2009; Dillon et al 2011; Brandsen et al 2016; Stein et al 2018; Bua and Bussu 2023.
8 Honingh & Brandsen 2018; Wilson et al 2018; Banks & Westoby 2019; Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021

In response, this paper seeks to support policymakers to determine appropriate methods for engaging place-based communities in the governance of SCIs by drawing on research from the fields of social policy, public administration, political economy, international development, participatory governance, human geography, community development, urban design and heritage studies, to examine three sets of challenges relating to *place, assets,* and *community*. This expanded understanding is then applied to a discussion of seven approaches to community engagement, highlighting both their potential and limitations.

The paper concludes by suggesting that community engagement can itself function as a form of SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires significant investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers are urged to pay explicit attention to their strategic assumptions, contexts of implementation and modes of representation and to assess their capacity to support ethical practice, recognising and resourcing the labour of engagement. Where capacity does not extend to supporting engagement responsively and responsibly, policymakers should be transparent and consider other approaches to context-sensitive and equitable resourcing.

Unpacking community engagement with the governance of SCIs

The notion of 'local community engagement with SCIs' includes a series of assumptions about context, representation and the social and material elements that comprise communities, systems of governance and SCIs themselves. In response, this Section draws on a range of academic and applied research to interrogate the concepts of *place, assets* and *community* in order to arrive at an expanded understanding.

Place*: *the challenges of context and scale

Place-based approaches (PBA) are initiatives delivered at a specified local level, usually with the aim of reducing regional inequalities by redistributing resources and responding to the needs of specific contexts[9]. PBAs have enjoyed a long history in the UK across the devolved nations and most recently, through the national Levelling Up agenda[10], and a plethora of indices have been developed to measure the presence, distribution and experience of SCIs in different parts of the country[11]. Though initially framed as an alternative to spatially-blind or 'people-focused' approaches to policy, increasing recognition of the seamless interaction between people and places has led to a 'people-in-places' framing of PBAs[12]. However, within this approach there remains some discrepancy over what constitutes 'the local' and whether it is defined through measurable geographical coordinates such as *location*; material-social configurations such as *locale*; or, more subjectively through personal or collective perception as a *sense of place*[13]. This interplay between geography, material environment, social experience and personal (or shared) meaning can be contentious, with approaches favouring the distribution of SCIs by location sitting in tension with those that respond to a more subjective sense of the meaning to different groups in specific places. Further conflict exists between scales of 'the local'. While the literature tends to agree that policy approaches to address inequality should focus on SCIs at the neighbourhood level[14], critical geographers suggest that even neighbourhoods like council estates are characterised by concentric and often contested social scales spanning

9 Lowndes and Sullivan 2008; Matthews et al 2012; Crew 2020; Marmot 2020
10 What Works Scotland (Scottish Government 2019); Communities First and the Community Renewal Fund in Wales (Baker 2022); the Social Investment Fund in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Executive 2018); England's New Deal for Communities (UK Government 2022) .
11 E.g. the Index of Priority Places, Left-Behind Places (OCSI's Community Needs Index), Thriving Places Index; Heritage Index, Co-op Community Wellbeing Index, Social Fabric Index, and the proposed Community Asset Register; each of which utilise different indicators at different levels of granularity.
12 Green, 2023.
13 Cresswell 2009.
14 Power to Change 2021.

streets, blocks of flats and homes[15]. Research into place-attachment, for example, has shown that despite evidence of positive neighbourly experience at the level of the block or street, sublimation of these hyper-local units within a stigmatised portrayal of the council estate has been used to suggest lack of attachment in order to justify demolition[16]. Moreover, SCIs are distributed unevenly across these scales, for instance, through micro-segregation whereby social housing tenants have been excluded from facilities, which their privately renting or home-owning neighbours can access[17].

Policy approaches that limit SCIs to the local level can also be constrained in effectiveness. A review by IVAR for Lankelly Chase[18] contrasted *communitarian* approaches (which locate both problems and solutions in the characteristics of neighbourhoods and residents) to *systemic* and *structural* approaches (that work with regional and national policy instruments to improve local systems by tackling the structural causes of deprivation and inequality). To be effective, PBAs should be considered in the context of broader systems, should be multi-scalar and integrated across different policy domains[19] and should be applied in tandem with "wider investment and poverty reduction strategies if they are to make a significant contribution."[20]

However, scale also has a temporal dimension. The social and material boundaries of place are constantly shifting, whether in response to administrative reform (which renegotiates *location*), regeneration (transforming *locales*) or events such as Covid-19 (which transformed residents' *sense of place* as social interaction shrunk to the 'hyperlocal' or shifted online[21]). A place-based approach to engagement with SCIs should therefore be explicit about its localities and scales and the politics enacted through them, recognise the emergent nature of place, taking into account histories (and potentially futures[22]) and the implications for different timeframes of participation ranging from one-off events to participation across generations.

Assets: the challenge of resourcing and capacity

Asset-based approaches map physical (and potentially, economic, environmental, institutional, human, social and cultural) resources or sources of 'capital' and are increasingly popular alternatives to deficit models of community development that emphasised need in the absence of resources[23]. In the UK, asset-based approaches have evolved from an interest in *access* to that of *ownership*, with 'Community Asset Transfer' (CAT) first established by New Labour, extended through David Cameron's localism agenda as Community Rights and introduced as Community Ownership Funds as part of Boris Johnson's Levelling Up strategy[24]. This pluralist focus on 'community power'[25] as separate from both state and market, has informed a body of policy-focused literature on SCIs, which builds on the work of Eric Klinenberg to highlight the availability, quality, accessibility and uses of SCIs, some of which might serve 'accidental' rather than 'intentional' functions in different contexts and for different groups[26]. However, as with the notion of 'place', SCIs are not static but evolve over time. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic

15 Kusenbach 2008; Lewicka 2011.
16 Watt 2022.
17 Middleton and Samanani 2022; Horton and Penny 2023.
18 IVAR 2017 and see also Cleaver 2001 on 'the limits of the local'.
19 Green 2023.
20 What Works Scotland 2019; Baker 2022.
21 Morrison et al 2020.
22 E.g. Raekstad and Gradin (2020) on prefigurative 'local-to societal' strategies.
23 Green and Haines 2015; Rippon and Hopkins, 2015; McLean et al. 2017; Blickem et al 2018.
24 See Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023), though the diversity of community-based organisation working through different types of assets should be noted (Aiken 2011; Henderson et al 2021) as well as the role of policymakers in enabling (or prohibiting) effective asset-transfer/management. For example, a report for LGA by Locality identified the importance of clear strategy, support for community-based organisations, long-term leases and transparency of decision-making and showed how councils demonstrating political commitment to community ownership are more likely to invest resources to develop a supply pipeline and work with communities to build capabilities. For example, Cornwall's Community Estates strategy involves developing a comprehensive map of assets available for future community ownership (Locality 2020; LGA 2022).
25 Power to Change 2022.
26 The British Academy and Power to Change, 2023.
27 Together Coalition 2020; Local Trust 2021.

exposed the benefits of established assets in community responses to the crisis[27] while revealing the devastating impact of austerity on diminished assets, challenges to the sustainability of assets beyond crisis-management[28], the uneven distribution of assets[29] and the rise of newly valued assets, such as digital infrastructure[30].

A significant body of evidence from the field of critical urban geographies[31] has also suggested that a civic-liberal 'politics of provisioning' (such as that favoured by the policy-focused SCI literature) tends to neglect the role of power and the fact that SCIs can be *contested*, with the aims of certain assets (e.g. those promoting gentrification) potentially undermining others (e.g. informal social infrastructures within council estates)[32] while reproducing or even exacerbating inequalities[33]. Similarly, research into 'community anchors' in Scotland has suggested that smaller organisations tend to struggle in neo-liberal policy contexts concerned with efficiencies, economies of scale, and market solutions[34]. Asset-based approaches as a key component of David Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative were also critiqued in evaluations for being less appropriate to contexts characterised by deprivation, underinvestment and division[35], for undermining the importance of meaningful public investment through progressive taxation[36], for privileging groups who are less vulnerable to inadequacies in services[37], and for absolving the state of responsibility and accountability as the lines between the public, private, voluntary sectors are blurred[38]. A key point here is that SCIs are not politically neutral and cannot be separated from the political economies and the social structures in which they are embedded.

Finally, a range of scholars from the arts and humanities as well as urban geographers and political economists have criticised asset-based approaches for failing to recognise their dependency on low or unpaid labour (which is often gendered or otherwise unevenly distributed[39]) and for emphasising products over process and participation[40]. These points suggest that more attention is needed to understand the capacity requirements and resourcing of engagement with SCIs. A good example is Gateshead Council's commitment to strengthen their existing community assets portfolio before expanding, by offering support with business planning to develop the capabilities of community centres to deliver services[41]. Conversely, research from Brunel's former Centre for Citizen Participation noted that effective engagement also requires changes in the structures and cultures of institutions and infrastructures to render them more 'community friendly' and accessible[42]. However, developing and sustaining 'in-house' capacity for public services, decision-making mechanisms and engagement requires significant investment. There is a growing tendency to outsource much of this work to private consultant[43], which critics claim is fuelling a burgeoning 'engagement industry'[44] that risks

28 Standring and Davies 2020.
29 Macmillan 2020, Morrison et al 2020; Taylor and Wilson 2020.
30 Westoby and Harris 2020; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
31 Using critical political economy analysis – e.g. McFarlane and Silver 2017; Luke and Kaika 2019; Elliot-Cooper et a; 2020; Siemiatycki et al 2020; Penny 2022; Horton and Penny 2023.
32 See Horton and Penny (2023) who pose the question: whose infrastructures count? And discuss, amongst other examples, the promotion of 'social mixing' as a justification for speculative development of working-class residential areas and the often racialised dispossession and displacement of working class residents.
33 See Grey 2011 and Friedli, 2013. Power can also work more insidiously, e.g. through uneven distributions of digital infrastructure with implications for quality and accessibility but also environmental impact, increase in surveillance, exploitation of data and misrepresentation through biased algorithms (Gilchrist and Taylor 2022).
34 Henderson et al 2021.
35 Dillon et al 2011; Daly and Westood 2018.
36 Slasberg and Beresford 2017.
37 Ishkanian 2014; Daly and Westood 2018; McMullin and Needham 2018.
38 Dillon et al 2011; Steen et al 2018.
39 See O'Brien and Matthews 2015; Hall 2020; Holdo 2020; Strauss 2020. Horton and Penny (2023) employ AbdouMaliq Simone (2004)'s notion of 'people as infrastructure' to show how infrastructures such as playgrounds, libraries and community centres must be brought to life by (gendered and otherwise unevenly distributed) labour of those reproducing the services and connections that they enable.
40 For instance, Performing City Resilience noted in a House of Commons report that cultural funding often assumes an eventual artwork, when it could involve "brokering connections between artists, culture workers and city officials and bring these strategic placemakers together to reveal how they are addressing challenges and practices of place" DCMS, 2022. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcumeds/155/report.html#heading-2
41 Locality/LGA 2022.
42 Beresford 2021.
43 Steen et al 2018; Barry and Legacy 2022.
44 Lee 2015; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.

undermining the capacity of the public sector to facilitate engagement, decontextualising support from specific contexts of policy and practice and detracting resources away from civil society due to high consultancy fees. Any consideration of the resourcing and capacity for community engagement with the governance of SCIs should therefore account for the labour of participation, evaluate the trade-offs surrounding short-term delivery with longer-term investment and establish whether investment in participatory processes might come at the expense of investment in inclusive infrastructure itself.

Community: the challenge of representation and inclusion

While the term 'community' features prominently in the policy-focused literature on SCIs, it is often presented as a static, homogenous, harmonious and even virtuous unit of analysis or site of intervention[45] that can be neatly separated from state and market[46] with unified interests that can be represented by individuals[47]. However, even proponents of community-led governance have recognised the interdependence of community-based organisations with the enabling (or inhibiting) apparatus of the state[48] as well as market-driven political economies[49]. Significant evidence from the fields of community studies and international development has revealed a tendency to decontextualise, depoliticise and homogenise communities, which conceals inequalities defined by age, gender and sexuality, income and education levels, (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion, visa status or housing tenure[50] and the fact that communities are not by nature virtuous, but can also be inward looking and 'Othering'[51]. Conversely, scholars from across the arts, humanities and social sciences have argued that relational identity is dynamic and (re)configured through participation in family units, neighbourhood committees, interest groups, use of services and virtual platforms, and affiliation to formal organisations and social movements[52]. Communities are also characterised by transience, both in the context of daily mobilities, which are influenced by (and themselves influence) the material environment[53], and as circumstances change and people move in and out of identities and places[54]. These shifting contexts and identities limit the effectiveness of short-term engagement, suggesting the need for more emergent and sustained approaches to participation and ethics[55].

This complexity creates significant challenges for the representation of diversity. Empirical evidence from the field of deliberative democracy has shown that participatory initiatives have struggled to recruit participants, particularly from more excluded groups[56] as those from more affluent neighbourhoods and with higher levels of wealth and education are more likely to have an interest in participating as well as the sense of being *capable* of participating[57] and the resources to participate[58]. Evidence from across the fields of international development and community studies has also shown that wealthier and higher qualified residents benefit more from engaging with policy processes, which may exacerbate inequalities in the distribution of resources as well as the inclusivity of their design[59]. Within deliberative approaches, inequalities

45 Gilchrist and Taylor (2022) distinguish between descriptive uses of the term community (as a group sharing certain characteristics), normative uses (how groups should operate morally), and instrumental uses (suggesting agency to achieve common ends).
46 Pollard et al 2021; Lent and Studdert 2021.
47 Either quantitatively through aggregated survey responses, or qualitatively, through inclusion of 'community representatives'.
48 Aiken et al 2011; Henderson et al 2022; Bussu et al 2022b.
49 Horton and Penny 2023.
50 Cooke and Kothari 2001; Minkler, 2005; Osborn et al 2009; Mikesell et al 2013; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
51 Cochrane 2007; Berkeley 2020.
52 Facer and Enright 2016; Banks and Westoby 2019.
53 Pred 1984; Seamon 1984; Massey 1993.
54 Mayo 2017; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
55 Liston 2014; Banks and Westoby 2019.
56 Neblo et al. 2010; Xoco et al 2023; Harris 2021.
57 van Eijk et al 2017.
58 Dillon et al 2011; Daly and Westood 2018; Steen et al 2018; Morrison et al 2020.
59 Blair 2000; Gaventa 2004; Liston 2014; Daly and Westood 2018.

and power relations distributed along 'hierarchies of knowledge' can also influence group dynamics and undermine democratic decision-making[60] and intersectional exclusions can arise from 'adult-centric, heteronormative and ableist assumptions' built into planning processes, as well as a lack of awareness of specific traditions or cultural idiosyncrasies that can affect participation[61]. However, as philosophers such as Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò have cautioned, there is a danger that 'identity politics' (or a superficial focus on crudely defined demographic categories) without due consideration of the underlying systemic inequalities can reproduce rather than alleviate those inequalities[62].

Seven approaches to community engagement with the governance of SCIs

Returning to the three defining elements of SCIs (physical sites, social/cultural interaction and the creation of social/cultural value) the analysis above suggests that an aspirational model for 'local community engagement' might be viewed as a type of SCI. It manifests in material settings, which must be resourced and maintained (whether community centres, public offices or digital fora). It facilitates interaction between different groups (whether place-based, identity-based or issue-based). And it strives to generate value (whether individually developmental, social, cultural, political or economic). However, the analysis has also revealed profound challenges surrounding assumptions about place, assets and community that can undermine engagement. It has revealed a need for sensitivity to context and dynamic spatial and temporal scales, for careful consideration of the ways in which communities are represented and any barriers to inclusion that specific groups might face and for commitment to the necessary capacity for engagement with implications for resourcing.

This section applies these challenges to a review of different approaches to community engagement. Though often conflated under the banner of 'participation', these approaches (including *participative methods; public engagement; user involvement; peer research; multi-stakeholder partnerships; co-production/creation;* and *deliberative governance*) have been shaped by academic research, professional practice and policy initiatives in multiple contexts around the world[63]. This section classifies these initiatives into seven broad approaches, and highlights their contributions, the way they respond to the challenges of context and scale, representation and resourcing and finally, the risks of the 'Dark Side of Participation'[64].

[60] This is referred to by Cooke and Kothari (2001) as the 'tyranny of the group' (see also Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Sunstein, 2009; and Di Lorito et al 2017).
[61] Bussu et al 2022a.
[62] Táíwò 2022.
[63] While contemporary research on community engagement has been dominated by the scholars based in Europe and North America (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2007; Tandon and Hall 2017), the origins of participatory practice can be traced back to the 'Majority World' (Tandon and Hall 2014).
[64] Cooke and Kothari 2001; Bouchard 2016; Williams et al 2016; Steen et al 2018; Oliver et al 2019.

Table 1: Seven approaches to local community engagement with the governance of SCIs

	Contribution	Context and Scale	Representation	Resourcing	Risks
1. Popular education	Awareness raising and critical analysis of SCIs (e.g. function, access, ownership) embedded in political economies	Place-based, hyper-local or municipal. Ongoing, often linked to other resident-led decision-making.	Power-conscious collective discussion. Potential exclusions of certain groups due to local power dynamics.	Sustained by community leaders who have been trained in the approach.	Limits of the local (can be ineffective); and subject to local politics.
2. Project-based participation	Local knowledge maps and visual analyses of distribution, access, engagement with SCIs to inform planning.	Usually place-based but could be identity or issue based. Framed by project timelines.	Can be power-conscious but framed by project agendas and their specific definitions of 'community'	Usually led by a consultant or external expert. Can be costly.	Can be extractive, tokenistic or cooptive if externally imposed.
3. User involvement	Aggregated opinions of a range of individual members of the public around plans for SCIs.	Less explicitly place-based. Usually framed by planning timelines but could be ongoing via advisory boards.	Challenges around recruitment and representation. Opinions individualised and aggregated rather than negotiated collectively.	Public sector facilitator or outsourced to a consultant (in which case can be costly.)	Can be unrepresentative, tokenistic and inflate expectations.
4. Peer research	In-depth access to lived experience of specific groups in relation to their perceptions and use of SCIs.	Could be place-based or identity/issue based. Peer researchers usually recruited for specific projects, but could be part of longer-term advisory networks.	Peer researchers recruited to represent experience, but can lead to downplaying other differences in demographics, identity or circumstances.	Extensive training required and complex ethics involved to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of peer researchers and respondents.	Risk of harm to welfare/wellbeing and training can be time consuming.
5. Participatory governance	Evidence-informed consensus on key policy decisions relating to SCIs from a representative sample of citizens.	Tends to be larger-scale (city/town, region or council level). Usually one-off initiatives, but can be institutionalised as jury-style service.	Representative recruitment (on the basis of official demographics) is essential. Outcomes are not individual opinion but collectively negotiated consensus.	Higher costs associated with representative recruitment. Deliberative capabilities required.	Misrepresentation. Potential to undermine less formal democratic processes.
6. Organisational partnerships	Involvement of local organisations in the management (and potentially ownership) of SCIs	Tends to be longer-term initiatives with a tenancy of at least 10 years. Often rooted at ward level, but some assets can by managed at higher (or multiple) scales.	Communities represented by organisations rather than individuals. Representation can be diluted in multi-stakeholder partnerships were there may be issues of equality.	Significant capacity needed which can exclude smaller or less resourced organisations from participating.	Challenges around representation, capacity and hidden labour costs where volunteers are involved.
7. Polycentric systems	Co-operative self-organised governance (potentially scaled-up via institutionalised systems) involving place-based decision-making about SCIs as a set of collectively owned resources.	Diverse initiatives can be at any spatial scale/time-frame but institutionalised systems have been town/city level and longer-term, multi-scalar and emergent	Multiple opportunities for representation of communities in different spaces including anchor institutions, co-ops and participation in adult education, union and council-led initiatives plus collective dialogue.	Needs significant investment and leadership to bring constituent parts together and a nurturing policy environment as well as public support.	Works best at town/city level but extremely complex and can be unpredictable. Hard to embed and evaluate.

Popular education and critical analysis of SCIs

Grounded in the work of Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia and Paulo Freire in Brazil, the Latin American participatory movements of the 1970s mobilised knowledge from place-based communities to unpack the 'politics of everyday' by provoking critical analyses of systems of exclusion with an emphasis on collective learning to inspire transformative action[65]. These early examples of 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR) evolved into community-based research or place-based collaborations between communities and research institutions[66]. With roots in Marxist historical materialism, these approaches pre-empt the political economy analyses of contemporary critical urban geographers who recognise SCIs as contested, relational and multi-scalar, produced through (and reproducing) socio-spatial inequalities[67]. This raises questions such as: how and for whom is infrastructure designed, financed, and governed? And how does the identification of forms of collective life as 'social' negate other forms as 'anti-social'?[68] However, it also draws attention to the 'limits of the local' in place-based approaches and the challenges of resourcing and sustainability, with initiatives collapsing[69], or failing to embed[70], particularly in complex contexts characterised by deprivation, underinvestment and division[71].

Mapping SCIs through project-based participation

Influenced by PAR, scholar-practitioners from the field of international development studies developed a repertoire of participatory methods known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and later, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)[72]. These tools included visual and embodied analysis of group dynamics, spatial and temporal 'social mapping', calendars, timelines and methods to elicit excluded voices. The analytical logic with its focus on linear timelines and cause-and-effect lent itself well to the planning and evaluation requirements of development projects. And while the intention was initially to challenge the supremacy of 'international experts' by empowering place-based communities to contribute their lived experience, the methods were rapidly mainstreamed and integrated into the structural adjustment programmes and Poverty Reduction Strategies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, leading to a critique of participation itself as a 'new tyranny'[73], which masked power in group dynamics, reinforced the agendas of governments or funders, and claimed methodological dominance. Originally framed as a radical, emancipatory concept, the codification of participation into technique transformed it into rationalist, predictable and measurable interventions[74]. Critics suggest this 'cleaning up' of local knowledge through mapping and ordering, discards any messy or unmanageable elements[75] and other methods could be better for accommodating the true 'mess' of community experience[76]. Standardised methods have also led to an increasingly professionalised (and commercialised) 'participation industry'[77] that risks directing resources to decontextualised (and highly paid) consultants instead of more sustainable community-based organisations and public sector facilitator[78]. However, the influence of PRA remains in the range of cartographic approaches used to chart the distribution and accessibility of SCIs and incorporate community perspectives into planning, including symbolic representation of place through arts-based methods[79], and 'citizen science' through Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), remote sensing software[80].

65 Freire 1970; Fals Borda and Rahnema 1991; Díaz-Arévalo 2022.
66 Munck et al 2014; Tandon and Hall 2017
67 Siemiatycki et al 2020; Middleton and Samanani 2022; Power et al 2022.
68 Horton and Penny 2023.
69 Carlisle 2010.
70 Bussu et al 2022a.
71 Slasberg and Beresford 2017.
72 Chambers 1997; 2008.
73 Cooke and Kothari 2001
74 Eyben et al 2015.
75 Hickey and Korathi 2009.
76 Law, 2004; Thomas-Hughes 2018; Bua and Bussu 2023.
77 Lee 2015; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.
78 Critics have also noted that such professionalisation and standardisation of originally radical movements is a form of 'elite capture' (Táíwò 2022) and 'virtue hoarding' (Liu 2021) which glosses over or even reproduces the systemic inequalities it is charged with addressing.
79 Facer and Enright 2016.
80 Hecker et al 2018; Davies and Mah 2020; Gharaibeh et al 2021

User involvement in the planning and production of SCIs

While PRA used place-based analysis to influence development projects and programmes, an alternative approach (developed through the fields of social policy and public administration[81]) incorporates users into the conception, development and evaluation of products and services. In the UK, the notions of 'co-creation' or 'co-production' evolved from the initially consultative practice of 'patient and public involvement'[82] into user-oriented participation in service design for public policy and urban planning[83]. While a comparative analysis by Carnegie identified several positive features (valuing people as assets; including different perspectives; building citizens' capacity; recognising the transformative potential of services and professionals as facilitators; working across sectoral boundaries; developing networks; and, realizing mutual benefits[84]) public policy scholars have suggested more critically that co-production can be used to legitimise services or exploit citizen capacity in response to local authorities' dwindling resources[85] and that the high transaction costs associated with participation might be better invested in provision of services themselves[86]. Studies have also shown that if participatory processes fail to meet inflated expectations, they can actually diminish rather than increase trust[87], leading to the 'co-destruction of value'[88]. Yet, whether intended as an accountability measure, a means of capturing resources or a more transformative programme of social justice, approaches to the co-creation and co-production of SCIs are framed within the timelines of product and service development, rooted within public administration, and unlike place-based and *collective* participatory approaches, tend to engage individual 'users' either aggregated through surveys[89] or brought together as 'committees' on advisory boards[90].

Peer research to explore the engagement of specific communities with SCIs

While co-production tends to be administered by researchers or consultants on behalf of policy-makers, 'peer research' is implemented by fellow 'community members' (defined by identity, experience or place), who might also participate in framing questions, analysing data and communicating findings[91]. This links back to the challenges of capacity (as extensive training is often required) and resourcing (as peer researchers are often inadequately compensated for their time)[92]. Other potential risks concern mental and physical safety and wellbeing, when vulnerable participants are brought into insecure spaces or engaged in sensitive topics due to their lived experience[93]. Studies suggest that these roles are also often gendered, with women more likely than men to feel obligated to volunteer or accept precarious and part time contracts and tend to absorb more of the emotional labour during participatory processes[94]. Finally, by focusing on 'specific communities' represented by 'peers', this approach runs the risk of portraying diverse communities as homogenous.

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81 Voorberg et al 2015; Brandsen et al 2018; Smith et al 2022.
82 Ocloo and Matthews 2016.
83 Voorberg et al 2015; Brandsen et al 2018; Smith et al 2022 and see also, the extensive guidance produced by Nesta/New Economics Foundation (2009; 2013); The Co-Production Network for Wales (2018); Scottish Co-Production Network (2017); Northern Ireland Department of Health (2018) and Involve (2018).
84 Coutts/Carnegie 2019.
85 Brandsen et al 2018.
86 Bradsen et al 2018.
87 Fledderus 2015; Williams et al 2016.
88 Osborn et al 2018.
89 E.g. Community Life Survey, Taking Part Survey and the Place Satisfaction Index as well as consultations over platforms such as CommonPlace: https://www.commonplace.is and of specific groups such as 'creatives' (see House of Commons DCMS 2022).
90 E.g. 'Community Advisory Boards' – see Newman et al 2011.
91 Bell et al 2021; ICS 2023.
92 Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021.
93 Di Lorito et al 2017; Wilson et al 2018; Banks and Westoby 2019.
94 Osborne et al 2009; Facer and Enright 2016; Honingh and Brandsen 2018) Griffin et al 2012.

Participatory governance in SCI policy

The incorporation of citizens into democratic processes[95] ranges from direct democracy (e.g. through localised referenda or 'street votes') to decentralised approaches to planning (such as participatory budgeting[96]) to 'mini-publics' or assemblies of demographically representative citizens, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making[97]. While traditional approaches to deliberative democracy open up 'invited spaces' for participation in formal governance processes[98], political scientists have suggested that contentious political engagement (or agonistic democracy) can also be necessary for social change[99] and have shown how deliberative space can be 'claimed' by movements as a means of transforming policy processes themselves[100]. Research into participatory governance raises important questions about the representative selection and recruitment of participants (usually by sortition but with challenges around diversity and inclusion), the nature of evidence (to inform deliberation), capabilities (including the confidence to deliberate as well as the dynamics of participation) and the ultimate impact of assemblies on policy[101] as well as the extent to which more radical processes might be sustainably 'embedded', which depends significantly on the policy context[102].

Collaboration in the delivery of SCIs through organisational partnerships

While the previous approaches have represented 'communities' through either place-based resident groups or representative individuals, a sixth approach involves collaboration between policymakers and community-based organisations. In the UK, the North American 'community anchor' model was first adopted by the New Labour Government and more recently, by the SNP Scottish Government through their 'community planning partnership approach'[103]. With aspirations for *community-leadership* (including financial self-sufficiency via community ownership of resources); *holistic collaboration* (across economic, social and policy sectors); and *responsiveness to context* (attending to inequitable distribution of resources and differing needs) challenges have been raised about the relationship between anchors and the state, the management of complexity in multi-stakeholder partnerships and the tension between visions of anchors as social change agents or a form of neoliberal community management[104]. Other models of place-based partnerships being piloted in the UK include 'cultural compacts', which bring together business, education providers, local authorities, cultural and community leaders and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Initial reviews conducted in 2020 by the Arts Council England and in 2022 by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee suggest the initiative has added value, despite the setbacks caused by Covid-19. However, challenges have included embedding diversity and inclusion into both the Compacts themselves and their programmes of activities and integrating a range of stakeholders into partnerships[105].

95 Elstub and Escobar 2019.
96 See Baiocchi 2001, 2005 on Porto Alegre and DCLG 2011 on approaches to PB in England.
97 E.g. citizen assemblies (like the Irish Citizens' Assembly, which informed the repealing of the 8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution on abortion) or more institutionalised mechanisms (such as the 'Ostbelgien Model'; a long-term citizen council which runs in a similar way to the UK's jury service) - Bächtiger et al 2018.
98 Cornwall 2002.
99 See Dean 2018 drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism.
100 See Bua and Bussu 2023.
101 Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Bächtiger et al 2018.
102 Bussu et al 2022a.
103 Henderson et al 2021.
104 Aiken et al 2011; Hendersen et al 2021.
105 Arts Council England/BOP Consulting 2022; House of Commons DCMS 2022.

Mobilising SCIs through polycentric systems

A final set of community engagement initiatives has roots in each of the previous approaches and might be referred to as the myriad social innovations enacted by community-based actors with, within and beyond the state. Given the diversity of initiatives, which range from grassroots activism to 'hacker' and 'maker' networks, to experimentation with collective intelligence, to larger-scale social movements to state-led initiatives[106], this set of methods is less reducible to an approach in its own right. However, a common thread is the transformative agenda to democratise not just policy processes but also economic and social arrangements, which distinguishes them from self-help, charity-focused initiatives or even the mutual aid networks popularised during the pandemic. Another shared feature is a commitment to 'the commons' (defined by political economist Elinor Ostrom as set of collective resources managed by groups for wider social benefit[107]). This commitment has led to co-operative approaches to self-organised governance, which in the case of the UK's Preston Model[108] have been scaled-up to city level through networks of multi-sector co-operatives, embodying Ostrom's concept of 'polycentric governance' – a system in which different groups contribute to distinct but connected decision-making processes. In the case of the Preston Model, these included anchor institutions, co-operatives development initiatives, community and co-operative banks, educational networks and Preston City Council. Given the range of individuals, groups, institutions, networks, methods and artefacts that characterise this work, a third common feature is the celebration of diversity as a route to inclusivity as well as a resource for accessing multiple knowledges[109]. And finally, this set of initiatives also includes a commitment to learning through formal and informal education, collaborative research and the practices of citizenship itself[110]. However, once again, the extent to which localised movements can be sustainably embedded into regional or national policy depends significantly on the nature of the policy context and can be actively hindered by institutionalisation[111].

A light through the 'Dark Side of Participation': recommendations for policymakers

Given the risks of ineffectiveness and unrepresentativeness and the potential to undermine democratic processes, exacerbate inequalities and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants, how can policymakers responsibly engage communities in the governance of SCIs? Despite the complexity of the literature on SCIs and community participation, some recent consensus exists around the merits of 'systems thinking' as a guide through the complexity of spatial and temporal scales, political economies and dynamic representations of community[112]. Four principles for a systems approach include: making starting assumptions explicit; responding to context; embracing difference; and accommodating emergence[113]. The recommendations from this brief discussion paper are therefore structured along those lines:

[106] Della Porta 2020; Bussu et al 2022b; Bua and Bussu 2023
[107] Hess and Ostrom 2007; Ostrom 1990; Poteete et al 2010; Coote 2017
[108] Manley and Whyman 2021
[109] Facer and Enright 2016; Fransman et al 2021; Bussu et al 2022a
[110] Hecker et al 2018; Manley and Whyman 2021; Bua and Bussu 2023.
[111] Bussu et al 2022a; Bua and Bussu 2023.
[112] Liston 2014; Burns and Worsley 2015; Elstub and Escobar 2019; Chilvers and Kearnes 2020; Holdo 2020; Bussu 2022b; Bua and Bussu 2023.
[113] Fransman et al 2021.

Be explicit about your 'starting assumptions'

Critics have highlighted 'the paradox of participation'[114] whereby the mainstreaming of approaches into any political project regardless of ideology[115] disconnects lived-experience from the social structures in which it is embedded, undermining the potential for political reform. Policymakers should therefore acknowledge their approach to community engagement and how it fits into the broader participatory ecology, whether the approach is place-based or project-based, uses participatory action research or peer research methods; involves users in the co-production of services, or citizens in deliberative governance, develops partnerships with civil society organisations, or supports or catalyses polycentric systems. Each approach includes its own assumptions about place and scale, representations of community and standards for the methods it advocates as well as its own values and ideologies. Consider how the approach relates to other scales and representations of community and what this means for inclusivity, effectiveness and sustainability. Consider hybrid and multi-scaler adaptations which responds simultaneously to place-based contexts and the broader political economies within and surrounding them.

Respond to dynamic contexts of community engagement

The 'places' of community are constantly shifting, whether in response to administrative reform, regeneration or longer-term environmental change. Policymakers should be explicit about their contexts of engagement, the histories and how they may evolve through and beyond engagement activities. Context analysis can identify demographic distribution as well as 'gatekeepers' at different scales. Political economy analysis can show how these stakeholders relate to each other and to broader systems[116]. Cartographic methods (including GIS) can be used to engage citizen scientists with specific locations or personalised places via more symbolic maps developed through arts-based methods. Mapping can be temporal as well as spatial, through local histories and community storytelling as well as 'futures approaches' including scenario planning, speculative visioning and future-oriented urban design[117]. Such context mapping will enable policymakers to build on grassroots initiatives, networks and movements already in place and support meaningful engagement across multiple scales.

Carefully consider representation and inclusivity

Policymakers should choose an apt approach to selection and recruitment of community representatives, for example, through self-selection, sortition, purposive selection, election of a representative and hybrid combinations[118]. They should also monitor non-participation (which is chronically undocumented but vital for learning) and consider approaches targeted to traditionally excluded groups, such as 'responsive evaluation'[119], 'enclave deliberation', 'gender-responsive participatory budgeting' and 'queer participatory planning'[120], although intersectional thinking means moving beyond specific interest groups to respond to more complex and overlapping exclusions[121]. Ethical considerations also include decisions about compensation for participants or peer researchers and attention should be paid to the impact of financial renumeration on benefits in line with the latest regulations from the Department for Work and Pensions[122]. And finally, policymakers should consider an emergent approach to ethics, as in Banks and Westoby's approach to community development as "a constant process of negotiating and renegotiating consent."[123]

114 Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016.
115 Holdo 2020.
116 Whaites et al 2023.
117 Poli 2019.
118 Fung 2003; Elstub and Escobar 2019.
119 Visse et al 2014.
120 Bussu et al 2022b.
121 Wojciechowska 2019.
122 Since new restrictions have limited the use of vouchers, organisations are turning to charities such as 'Tempo Time Credits' who form partnerships with providers of goods and services to offer non-financial compensation.
123 Banks 2019: 26.

Develop capacity for responsive, adaptive and learning-oriented engagement

Participants can lack confidence in their capabilities, and peer research in particular demands significant investment in training and support[124]. Public professionals or government-based facilitators can also benefit from tailored training[125], while a perceived lack of 'in-house' capacity can lead policymakers to outsource engagement to consultancy firms[126]. However, capacity can also be developed through networked and embedded approaches to community engagement, for example, through the Preston Model's enrolment of universities and a 'co-operative education centre',[127] which support a culture of learning, reflection and research as an accompaniment to the community wealth-building objectives. While other approaches to 'popular education'[128] can build the capacity of communities to engage, policymakers can also connect with campaigns to create incentives for engagement, e.g. supporting a 4-day week, which could free up funded time for volunteering. Investment in engagement infrastructure can range from creating databases and catalysing networks of community stakeholders to the use of digital platforms and even collective intelligence (though the implications for inclusion and data-use should be carefully explored as well as the emerging literature on the use of artificial intelligence in decision-making[129]). Finally, policymakers should be mindful of the discourses produced through their engagement practices or the 'collateral realities'[130] that legitimise and reproduce certain ideas about community, participation and SCIs (such as their inherent virtue or neutrality).

This paper has shown how community engagement with its roots in specific material contexts, interactive dynamics and aspirations to social and cultural value can itself can function as a valuable SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires meaningful investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. While approaches that address the complexities of context and power can mitigate some of the 'tyrannies of participation'[131], policymakers should consider the opportunity costs of expensive and ethically contentious engagement and be transparent about their capacity to adequately address potential risks before proceeding.

124 Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021.
125 Brandsen et al 2018.
126 Raco M 2018; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.
127 Manley and Whyman 2021.
128 E.g. Freire 1970.
129 See Brandsen et al (2018) on the creation of 'algorithmic black boxes' which can limit control and Rambaldi et al 2006; Brandsen et al 2016; Banks and Westoby 2019; Tan et al 2022.
130 Law 2004.
131 Hickey and Mohan 2004.

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4 Community business as a distinct form of social infrastructure

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Abstract

Tracing the emergence of community business as a type of social infrastructure in UK policy and practice, and drawing from exemplary evidence from Scotland and selective literature, this paper aims to discuss the ways in which community businesses can create and maintain different forms of social capital in varied community contexts. In doing so, this paper aims to highlight the role of community businesses as catalysts for social capital creation, and those who run them as key 'brokers' in balancing different forms of social capital. This paper also raises provocative questions for policy and practice around the inclusivity of social infrastructure in complex social arenas to stimulate further discussion. In conclusion, we provide policy recommendations for the support of the community business and social enterprise sector, as well as the key social entrepreneurs and community actors who run them.

***Keywords*:** community business, social capital, social connection

Introduction

Defined as the 'networks of spaces, facilities, institutions and groups that create affordances for social connection',[1] social infrastructure refers to the physical spaces where people assemble and socially interact, such as libraries, community centres, cafes, parks, museums, and churches[2]. Built on social capital theory developed by writers such as Putnam (2000) and Oldenburg (1989), social infrastructure is described as the conditions that facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital, and which determine whether it can actually develop.

Increasingly in the UK, calls from researchers and policymakers are being made for a focus on community business, and social enterprises more widely, as a distinct form of social infrastructure. Deemed 'twenty-first century connecting institutions', community businesses are seen as vital shared spaces and facilities where community members can meet, mix and develop vital social capital[3].

Tracing the emergence of community business as a type of social infrastructure in UK policy and practice, and drawing from exemplary evidence from Scotland and selective literature, this paper aims to discuss the ways in which community businesses can create and maintain different forms of social capital in varied community contexts. It highlights the role of community businesses as catalysts for social capital creation, presents those who run them as key 'brokers' in balancing different forms of social capital as well as the ways in which community businesses can both generate and manage bridging and linking capital. This paper also raises questions for policy and practice around the inclusivity of social infrastructure in complex social arenas to stimulate further discussion. In conclusion, we provide policy recommendations for the support of the community business and social enterprise sector, as well as the key social entrepreneurs and community actors who run them.

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Community business

While there is no standard definition of social enterprises, the organisations are commonly described as businesses, run by communities, that trade for a social purpose, providing services that are tailored to meet local socio-economic need[4]. Typically, these organisations are set up in response to needs that are not being met by the state, for example work integration centres or community transport[5]. Through being 'purposeful' in prioritising social needs over profit maximisation[6], social enterprises can offer more innovative and responsive solutions to numerous societal challenges, most notably addressing the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged populations[7 8].

Community businesses, on the other hand, are a type of social enterprise that aggregates people who share the same place-based identity and needs within a defined geographic area, and have a broad community impact[9 10]. Even if the entire community does not participate in the community business, the common interest is still represented as the organisation works entirely for the community's benefit and every single community member is a potential beneficiary[11]. Examples include community shops, pubs, and leisure centres, which are typically owned by local community members and run as community organisations and/or development trusts. While using local resources to address local needs, community businesses have the potential to play a crucial role in creating and maintaining social capital across communities, promoting community cohesiveness and anchoring neighbourhood networks[3]. Further, as they are rooted in communities, and run by local people, they are 'vital cogs in their local ecosystem, often acting as key trusted intermediaries between residents and the statutory sector'[3].

Community business in policy and practice

The meaning, role and value of community businesses have changed over the past few decades, relative to broader policy contexts. Since the 2008 recession, community businesses, and social enterprises more widely, have become a prominent point of reference in the UK's austerity agenda and its aftermath, most notably as potential alternative public service deliverers[12]. More recently, the community sector has featured heavily in 'Levelling Up' policy frameworks under a focus on, for example, increased community ownership, building local resilience, and local regeneration partnerships[13].

Austerity strategies have focused on a broader restructuring of the state, and a move away from the state as the main provider of welfare to more market-driven service provision systems[14], leading to mass public sector budget cuts across local and central governments, and many

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8 Nicholls, A., & Teasdale, S. (2017), 'Neoliberalism by stealth? Exploring continuity and change within the UK social enterprise policy paradigm'. Policy & Politics, 45(3): 323-341.
9 Richards, L., Vascott, D., Blandon, C. and Manger, L. (2018), 'Factors that contribute to community business success'. Power to Change. Available at: https://www.youngfoundation.org/institute-for-community-studies/repository/factors-that-contribute-to-community-business-success/
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12 Hazenberg, R. and Hall, K. (2016), 'Public service mutuals: towards a theoretical understanding of the spin-out process', Policy and Politics, 44(3): 441-463.
13 UK Government (2022) Levelling Up in the United Kingdom. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
14 Milbourne, P. (2015), 'Austerity, welfare reform, and older people in rural places: Competing discourses of voluntarism and community?'. In Skinner, M., and Hanlon, N. (Eds) Ageing Resource Communities: New frontiers of rural population change, community development and voluntarism. London: Routledge, pp.74-88

public services being withdrawn, closed or pared down[15]. Policy rhetoric has increasingly focused on the empowerment of communities to address local needs that can no longer be met by the state[16 17], with a prominent example being the Conservative Party's 'Big Society', which focused on building local social capital and mobilising community action[18]. Similarly, in Scotland, the Christie Commission sought to promote community capacity building and the co-production of local health-related services by empowering community actors[19], with the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act giving new powers to communities to own and run local assets and have a say in how local services are designed and delivered[20 21]. More recent policy agendas including, for example 'Community Wealth Building' also emphasise the importance of localised power, community engagement and participation of varied stakeholders in service co-production[22 23].

In line with such policy shifts, a UK-wide focus has been drawn to the delivery of public services by non-state players, including community businesses. In particular, considerable resources have been invested in encouraging community-led third sector organisations to become more entrepreneurial[7]. Indeed, due to their ability to contribute to place-based cohesion through establishing viable businesses where markets are underserved and local economies are small and fragile, the Scottish Government presents social enterprises as the key to empowering local communities, tackling inequality and developing socially innovative solutions to major societal challenges. The policies are supported through a 10-year Government-led social enterprise strategy and inclusive growth through social enterprise action plan, and the development of the national Scottish Social Enterprise Census[24 25 26]. For these reasons, Scotland is often seen to be at the forefront of creating one of the most supportive policy environments in the world for social enterprise development[27 28].

Community connectors

Austerity measures have specifically targeted the scale-back and closure of 'softer' public services, such as libraries, family/children's centres, community centres and hubs[12]. The very value of this type of social infrastructure is not often measured or even considered until it is absent or taken away[1]. In many communities, such as in rural areas, the closure of soft services

15 O'Hara, M. (2014). 'Austerity bites: A journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK'. London: Policy Press.
16 Markantoni, M., Steiner, A., Meador, J. E., and Farmer, J. (2018), 'Do community empowerment and enabling state policies work in practice? Insights from a community development intervention in rural Scotland'. Geoforum, 97:142-154.
17 Steiner, A., and Farmer, J. (2018), 'Engage, participate, empower: Modelling power transfer in disadvantaged rural communities'. Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space, 36(1): 118-138.
18 UK Government (2010) 'Building the Big Society'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-the-big-society
19 Scottish Government (2011), 'Commission on the future delivery of public services'. Christie Commission. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/commission-future-delivery-public-services/
20 McMillan, C., Steiner, A. and Hill OConnor, C. (2020). Asset Transfer Requests: Evaluation of Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/asset-transfer-requests-evaluation-part-5-community-empowerment-scotland-act-2015/
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22 Redwood, M. E., Smith, A. M., Steiner, A., and Whittam, G. (2022), 'Community wealth building or local authority rhetoric?'. Local Economy, 37(7), 602-621.
23 UK Government (2022), '£110m fund to level up rural communities unveiled'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/110m-fund-to-level-up-rural-communities-unveiled.
24 Scottish Government. (2016), Scotland's social enterprise strategy 2016-2026. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-social-enterprise-strategy-2016-2026/
25 Scottish Government. (2021), Inclusive growth through social enterprise: Scotland's social enterprise action plan 2021-2024. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-enterprise-action-plan/documents/
26 Social Value Lab. (2021). Social enterprise in Scotland census 2021. Available at: http://socialenterprisecensus.org.uk/.
27 Roy, M. J., McHugh, N., Huckfield, L., Kay, A., and Donaldson, C. (2015). 'The most supportive environment in the world? Tracing the development of an institutional 'ecosystem' for social enterprise'. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 26: 777-800.
28 Steiner, A., and Teasdale, S. (2019), 'Unlocking the potential of rural social enterprise'. Journal of Rural Studies, 70:144-154.

has depleted the only opportunities available for sociality and connection to others across the community[5]. In areas where few social networks are able to form and there is a shortfall of social capital, there can be a lack of shared norms, and mutuality and community cohesiveness can quickly decline[29]. This can sap communities of resilience, wellbeing, trust and opportunities for community development, profoundly affecting the way that individuals and communities cope with challenges they face[30].

A reliance on spaces for community connection was exemplified during the COVID pandemic, where opportunities for social connection were lost due to restrictions such as shielding, and the temporary or permanent closure of key public services[31]. Community-led organisations, such as community businesses, were the few services able to act during the crisis due to their central place within communities, and their ability to respond quickly to the immediate needs of specific individuals and groups[32]. Community organisations delivered emergency supplies, directed volunteer efforts, supported those who were isolated and found novel ways to keep communities connected[33]. As recognised by the British Academy in their COVID Decade report, 'community-led social infrastructure has been an essential but precarious lifeline in the crisis, and its importance will only grow as we look to respond to and mitigate the long-term societal effects'[30].

In the context of post-COVID recovery, Brexit and related economic uncertainty, a key part of the UK 'Levelling Up' policy focus has been on the rebuilding of social capital that has been eroded or lost over the past decade[21]. With this in mind, calls have been made to focus on the neighbourhood level, local skills and knowledge, and community businesses as a starting point for the rebuilding of critical social infrastructure[3].

Community business and social capital

While social infrastructure facilitates the development of social capital[2], it is important to explain the meaning of the latter in the context of this paper. There are many overlapping constructs of social capital, such as social cohesion, trust and reciprocity, and its definition is widely debated. Most commonly, however, it is understood as the building and sustaining of social networks, and the ability to make social connections. Here, we outline how community businesses create and maintain three distinct types of social capital: *bonding, bridging and linking*.

Bonding capital is defined as connections within groups or communities that have similar backgrounds and characteristics, such as family, friends and neighbours[35]. This is often characterised by shared values, identity, trust, and mutuality, where members of the network know each other and frequently interact[36]. *Bridging capital* is defined as associations across divides, between people with shared interests but different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds and identities. In this way, individuals may provide new insight and information to each other that was not previously known to the other. Finally, *linking capital* is defined as

29 Kay, A. (2006), 'Social capital, the social economy and community development'. Community Development Journal, 41(2), 160-173.

30 British Academy and Power to Change (2023), 'Space for community: Strengthening our social infrastructure'. London: British Academy. Available at: Space_for_community_strengthening_our_social_infrastructure_vSUYmgW.pdf (thebritishacademy.ac.uk)

31 Currie, M., McMorran, R., Hopkins, J. et al. (2021), 'Understanding the response to Covid-19: Exploring options for a resilient social and economic recovery in Scotland's rural and island communities'. Available at: https://sefari.scot/document/rural-and-island-communities-response-to-covid-19

32 British Academy (2021), 'The COVID decade: Understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19'. London: The British Academy. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-understanding-the-long-term-societal-impacts-of-covid-19/

33 Locality (2020) 'We were built for this: how community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis- and how we can build a better future. Available at: https://locality.org.uk/assets/images/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf

34 Putnam, R. (1993), 'Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy'. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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36 Claridge, T. (2018), 'Functions of social capital–bonding, bridging, linking'. Social Capital Research, 20(1): 1-7.

relationships between individuals and groups from different social statuses or hierarchies, for example having different levels of power or wealth[32]. In this way linking capital enables people to access power, resources, skills and/or knowledge for those who may not already have it[33].

While research typically focuses on the use of social capital to mobilise social entrepreneurial activity within communities[37,10], very few studies have focused on the ways in which different types of social capital can be *generated* through social enterprise activity. As Bertotti et al.[38] underlined, the types of social capital generated by social enterprises are often just assumed rather than actually measured or fully understood. Therefore, the actual role of social enterprises, or specifically community businesses, as a form of social infrastructure is still unclear. Exploring this unknown terrain is important considering the changing political and socio-economic contexts, and the need to find new and innovative ways of supporting and strengthening community cohesion.

Building on evidence

Bonding, bridging and linking capital can exist in complex combinations, and either a lack of, or an abundance of, a particular form of social capital may or may not be problematic depending on the context. In our own research of rural community businesses in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, we identified that services such as community hubs, cafes and heritage centres were key to creating and maintaining social connections and networks across communities (see www.commonhealth.uk). Where rural community members faced significant risk factors for social isolation and loneliness, such as poor physical and social connection to others, and a lack of services and amenities, community businesses were filling these gaps. They increased opportunities for community members to meet and interact with others, and provided increased reasons and motivations for people to leave the house, leading to increased formation of social bonds and a sense of belonging to the community[5]. This led to wider impacts on the health and wellbeing of staff, volunteers and service users, such as decreasing depression, increasing confidence and self-worth, and also increased mobility for those getting out of the house.

Here we provide an example of one of the community businesses we studied, a community hub and café in a remote coastal village, which was set up to provide a central meeting place for the community where amenities had been lacking due to public service cuts. Founded and run by local community members, the hub offered activities for people of all ages and abilities, such as a craft club, music group and parent and toddler group, as well as meeting and event space. Table 1 provides examples of the types of social capital the organisation created and maintained for both staff and service users of the organisation.

Table 1: Bonding, bridging and linking social capital generated by a community business

Stakeholder group affected	Form of social capital		
	Bonding	**Bridging**	**Linking**
Service users/ customers	Meeting up with friends from the community in the café for lunch Bumping into old friends from school at events	Meeting tourists who are visiting the area and visiting the hall	Meeting councilors, MSPs and Scottish Government representatives who visit the hall during celebrations
Staff/volunteers	Working alongside friends and acquaintances from the same social circles	Bringing together people of different ages and backgrounds (e.g. intergenerational) through the provision of activities and events	Meeting with large funders and regional support agencies to develop and sustain the organisation

37 Hidalgo, G., Monticelli, J. M., and Vargas Bortolaso, I. (2021), 'Social capital as a driver of social entrepreneurship'. Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, 1-24.

38 Bertotti, M., Harden, A., Renton, A. and Sheridan, K. (2012), 'The contribution of a social enterprise to the building of social capital in a disadvantaged urban area of London', Community Development Journal, 47(2): 168-183.

While Table 1 provides a neat overview of a community hub generating ample opportunities for bonding, bridging and linking capital to form, this does not necessarily mean that each capital is created in equal measure. In their study, Bertotti et al.[35] give the example of a social enterprise café in London that, in theory, served the whole community exclusively and was open to people of all identities. Nonetheless, the study found that the bonding social capital amongst similar ethnic groups attending the community café was strong, inhibiting bridging capital across different ethnicities and increasing local racial tensions. Yet, because the social enterprise was rooted in the community, and ran by 'dynamic' community members who understood the local social and cultural context, the social enterprise staff were able to act as a 'broker [creating] relationships between different segments of the community'[35]. The latter was possible due to the social enterprise staffs' inherent knowledge of particular facilitators and barriers to social integration within the wider community context.

While the examples presented here of community businesses are explicit in their inclusivity, complexity can arise when discussing communities of interest, as opposed to geographical communities. A key recommendation of the recent British Academy programme of work is that social infrastructure 'should be open, accessible and inclusive', and that 'spaces should be welcoming to different parts of the community'[28]. This raises yet another question. *Can community spaces still be viewed as social infrastructure if they are not entirely inclusive of a whole community, and are based on the bringing together (or bonding) of people based on similarity?*

Here we give another example from our own research of Men's Sheds across urban areas of Scotland[39 40]. Men's Sheds are community-led spaces, frequently run as social enterprises, where men from across a geographic community come together to share and learn skills and socialise with other men. While men are welcome from all different ages (over the age of 18), ethnicities and backgrounds, they are not inclusive of all genders as male-only spaces. Our research showed that the social wellbeing benefits that they bring to men within communities were extensive, in particular, decreasing social isolation and loneliness and providing men with a sense of belonging to a group[36]. Much like our study of rural social enterprises, increasing social connections led to wider health and wellbeing impacts to Shed users including increased happiness, confidence and decreased sedentary behaviour[37]. The social capital created in Sheds was predominantly bonding links between similar white retired men over the age of 60.

However, much like the study by Bertotti et al.[35], the structure and governance of the Sheds meant that their potential for bridging and linking capital was always closely monitored. Sheds made a conscious effort to bridge with their wider community by engaging in community fundraising, attending local galas and fairs, producing planters and benches for local schools and nurseries, promoting intergenerational activity where possible, and helping local women to create their own Women's Sheds. Moreover, Sheds also engaged with local and national policymakers, NHS boards and large funding bodies, expanding their capacity for linking capital to be generated.

While the balance of bridging and linking capital may have lagged behind their bonding capacity, it still existed because of the volunteer efforts of the local men running the organisations as key community connectors. In this case, the question is *whether balance between the different capitals matters?* The men in our study did not previously have a male-friendly safe space to connect within their communities (outside of the local pub), yet they were widowed men, living alone, or suffering complex physical and mental health issues. Therefore, is *targeted social infrastructure with intended exclusion a better option than having social infrastructure with unintended exclusion?*

39 Kelly, D., Steiner, A., Mason, H. and Teasdale, S. (2021), 'Men's sheds as an alternative healthcare route? A qualitative study of the impact of Men's sheds on user's health improvement behaviours'. BMC Public Health, 21: 1-9.

40 Kelly, D., Teasdale, S., Steiner, A. and Mason, H. (2021b), 'Men's sheds in Scotland: the potential for improving the health of men'. Journal of Public Health Policy, 42:258-270.

While Men's Sheds are given as an example, these complexities are also applicable to other types of community-led organisations that cater for groups based on interest and identity, such as faith groups. Complexities can also occur in spaces that are in theory classed as being 'inclusive'. Take community pubs as an example. While community pubs welcome people from across entire communities, exclusion can still exist for those who cannot enter spaces with alcohol due to religious or cultural beliefs, those facing addiction issues, and those under the age of 18 can often only attend with an adult within specific time periods. As highlighted by Hollis et al.[41], it is not always the case that social infrastructure encompasses everyone, and we must always ask 'who is being excluded?' and also *why*.

Nor does the existence of the more 'open' types of social infrastructure, such as parks and libraries, necessarily guarantee equal access to or fair inclusion to all. Indeed, the creation of open public spaces alone does not guarantee that people will not feel excluded through, for example, discrimination, accessibility issues or safety concerns. In open public spaces, people's natural tendencies are to gravitate towards those who are similar, in which case bonding capital can be the easiest to form, because people can connect through shared community history, culture, and values, which makes trust and mutual understanding more inherent[27]. Bonding capital therefore requires less management or direction. Nonetheless, too much bonding capital and not enough meaningful interaction with people from different social and cultural backgrounds can constrain our trust and empathy of others, which can actually make communities more exclusionary and less tolerant of difference[35 3]. Both bridging and linking capital are associated with bringing together 'difference', not only in terms of identity (e.g. ethnicity, gender) and interests (e.g. sports, activism), but also social status and power - yet, it can be difficult to induce and sustain these forms of capitals. As such, *opportunities* and *catalysts* for the creation and maintenance of bridging and linking capital are required[27]. As outlined by Power to Change[3], 'modern Britain lacks connecting institutes' that serve the explicit purpose of 'cultivating cross community attachments, empathy and trust'. Here we argue that this is where community businesses, as a distinct form of social infrastructure, require further research and policy focus.

Emerging evidence suggests that community businesses have the ability to create and maintain both bridging and linking capital because of their governance models with specific mechanisms and rules, embedded reciprocity, and shared goals that are specific to that community[10]. Community businesses, and those that run them, are uniquely placed to manage and negotiate the development of meaningful connections across lines of difference through local knowledge and understanding of context, social networks, and cultural identities[42]. They can often have a better grasp of who might be excluded from spaces and relationships and *why*, and be able to act to address challenges such as discrimination, lack of agency or cultural difference. As shown from our own evidence, this can lead to wider impacts on both individual and community physical and mental health, as well as social wellbeing. Community businesses also operate within wider organisational and market sectors, interacting with suppliers, funders, support agencies, as well as local and national governments, often being key intermediaries between local community and those who hold power and resources[43]. Community businesses can also leverage these links to external power and resources to mobilise and create opportunities for further social innovation, local employment and giving community voice to local and regional governance[40]. Consequently, it is likely that community businesses represent a form of social infrastructure that is well-suited and highly relevant to the political, socio-economic and cultural context of the twenty-first century.

41 Hollis, H., Skropke, C., Smith, H., Harries, R. and Garling, O. (2023), 'Social infrastructure: international comparative review'. London: British Academy. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4538/Social_infrastructure_international_comparative_review.pdf

42 Borzaga, C. and Sforzi, J. (2015), 'Social capital, cooperatives and social enterprises', in Christoforou, A. and Davis, J.B. (Eds), Social Capital and Economics. Social Values, Power, and Social Identity, London: Routledge, pp. 193-214.

43 Lang, R., and Fink, M. (2016) 'Social entrepreneurs as change agents in regional development: the role of linking capital'. Available at: https://www.regionalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/RSA_2016_Lang_Fink.pdf

Conclusion

This discussion paper has highlighted the potential role of community businesses, and social enterprises more widely, as a distinct form of social infrastructure. Drawing on empirical evidence from Scotland and wider literature, emergent data suggests that through creating and maintaining different types of social capital, community businesses develop social infrastructure that addresses the needs of local communities. They do that by bringing together community energy, positive attitude and commitment to social good, and by enabling diverse community groups to meet and work together, tackling local challenges using local resources. The participation and engagement of *local* community stakeholders seems to be critical for developing different forms of social capital that are relevant to a specific community context. Importantly, whilst still remaining focused on local values and embedded in place, community businesses are able to navigate wider political, socio-economic and cultural changes. As such, we argue here that community businesses represent a flexible and adaptable social infrastructure that can respond to a turbulent and unpredictable environment.

Considering this, we make some recommendations for policy, practice and research. Firstly, as suggested by Power to Change[3], in developing policy it is important to recognise the specific role that community businesses, and social enterprises more widely, play in generating and maintaining social capital. This should also include measures to support the development and growth of these distinct connecting institutions. Whilst UK-wide policy agendas are consistent in promoting the empowerment of communities to tackle local-level challenges, own and run local assets and co-produce services, adequate policy levers and mechanisms must be in place for this to be enacted. As outlined by Power to Change[3], this includes strategic government funding to build and sustain social infrastructure that tackles local and regional disadvantage, that is both accessible to community businesses and helps to build local capacity. Lessons could be drawn from Scotland's Social Enterprise Strategy that shows a 10-year commitment and a plan supporting social and community businesses.

Secondly, considering practitioners, there must be a recognition that while high levels of social capital are inherently positive, community businesses offer relevant governance structures that ensure an appropriate balance between different forms of social capital. The latter ensures that social exclusion and 'otherness' are not further exacerbated in a wider arena of economic decline, political uncertainty and widening regional inequality. As such, we call for the strategic distribution of government funding to intermediary support organisations (e.g. Social Enterprise UK, Plunkett Foundation) to provide both targeted financial support and guidance to community entrepreneurs and key community actors who set up and run these organisations. These actors are the key brokers in creating and balancing bonding, bridging and linking capital.

In addition to plugging gaps in public service provision with limited resources at their disposal, community businesses are asked to be active partners in connecting individuals and groups across their communities and managing often complex social and cultural differences. Indeed, those running community businesses need to understand the value and skill of their work, be incentivised to take on this responsibility, and, if possible, tap into existing support structures. Community businesses operate in a precarious sector with limited access to funding or wider markets, are often run by unpaid volunteers and can have the weight of whole communities on their shoulders. As such, there must be a recognition that linking capital is a two-way street, i.e. it is not only generated through communities making connections to institutes of power and resource, but the same institutes must also actively and intently link back to the communities themselves. Policymakers should aspire to work in tandem with community businesses, thinking together in a creative and collaborative way to identify new solutions that work well for all stakeholders. Currently, however, there is a danger that community businesses sell themselves short and are left alone to deal with the consequences of the public service withdrawal, persistent social inequalities as well as a turbulent and unpredictable socio-economic environment in which they operate.

Finally, we note that there is a need to better understand different forms of community businesses, how they can be classed as social infrastructure, and the mechanisms in which different types of social capital may be generated under different circumstances, and for whom. Further research that answers some of the questions we raise on social infrastructure and inclusivity, and ways in which both bridging and linking capital can be catalysed in community environments where division and disadvantage are prevalent can assist the development of future socio-economic policies. This information is also needed to provide relevant policy support to form effective levers for community business development that are both flexible and applicable to varied and complex contexts.

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5 Playful infrastructures: building communities through social board gaming

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Abstract

Although space plays an integral role in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric, merely putting people together in the same physical environment does not necessarily bring them together socially. The paper argues for a shift in the policy focus from the provision and maintenance of physical spaces where social connections can be formed to a more nuanced understanding of how such connections can be facilitated. Drawing on a case study of social board gaming in the post-pandemic UK, the paper explores how social gatherings structured around a shared activity with a clear interaction framework, such as the one provided by board games, makes existing social and cultural infrastructures (pubs, cafes, community centres, etc.) more convivial and accessible to diverse demographics, including neurodivergent people and those struggling with loneliness and social isolation. Despite many social, economic and civic benefits of social board gaming, there are some barriers and challenges that need to be addressed to fully harness the community-building potential of this activity. The paper presents several policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising, and concludes with further recommendations for development and support of social board gaming in the UK.

***Keywords*:** board games; community building; loneliness and isolation; neurodiversity; mental health

Introduction

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy's definition of social infrastructure includes three key elements that collectively constitute this notion – "who" (members of the local community), "what" (meaningful relationships between them), and "where" (physical spaces where such relationships are formed through regular interactions).[1] But how can these relationships and interactions be facilitated? As has been established by sociologists and anthropologists, merely putting people together in the same physical space does not guarantee that they will make new social ties.[2] To quote Lisa Peattie, conviviality "cannot be coerced, but it can be encouraged" by certain props, or, as William Holly Whyte called it, "triangulators" – external stimuli providing a linkage between people and prompting strangers to talk to one another.[3] While policy literature often associates such facilitation with physical design solutions (e.g. public pianos, chatty tables or social benches),[4] meaningful connections can also be built through social events. To make social and cultural infrastructures accessible to diverse demographics, including neurodivergent people and those struggling with loneliness and social isolation, such events should be structured around a shared activity providing a clear interaction framework.

A great example of such an activity is board games. Traditionally considered a private, mainly domestic pastime for children and niche hobby groups, board gaming has now become a prominent element of the UK's social life. Over the past decade, local enthusiasts in all corners of the country have been organising social gaming events in public places ranging from pubs and church halls to dedicated board game cafes and shops.[5] Together, these spaces of play

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1 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021), Townscapes: the value of social infrastructure, *Bennett Institute for Public Policy.*

2 Small, M.L. and Adler, L. (2019), 'The Role of Space in the Formation of Social Ties', Annual Review of Sociology, 45: 111–32.

3 Peattie, L. (1998), 'Convivial cities', in M. Douglass and J. Friedmann (eds.), *Cities for Citizens* (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons), p. 248; and Whyte, W.H. (1980), *The social life of small urban spaces* (Washington, D.C., Conservation Foundation), p. 94.

4 See, e.g., Bynon, R. and Rishbeth, C. (2015), Benches for everyone, *The Young Foundation*. https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Bench-Project_single-pages.pdf.

5 According to a community-sourced, work-in-progress map maintained by the UK Games Expo, there are at least 104 tabletop gaming clubs, 40 hobby game shops and 12 board game cafes in the UK as of January 2024: https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/. However, these numbers should be treated as a very conservative estimate. For instance, a country-wide Google Maps search for board game cafes alone returns over 80 results, whereas venues hosting non-profit gaming clubs and meetups are more difficult to quantify as such events are advertised through a range of online and offline channels and thus cannot be easily collated into one list without using special data scraping tools. For more precise estimates of social board gaming activities in specific UK regions, one can use location-based search on Meetup.com and/or Facebook.

form a rich and diverse infrastructure that proved particularly important after 16 months of COVID-19 restrictions, followed by a 'second pandemic' of mental health issues[6] and the ongoing cost of living crisis. For many people, including those who had little or no prior interest in board games, social gaming became a remedy for the adverse effects of the societal and personal crises they have faced.

Between June 2021 and September 2022, I conducted a qualitative study of the UK's social board gaming scene, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which involved 50 in-depth interviews with event organisers, attendees and business owners and participant observations at 24 venues spanned across six regions of England. I also visited two roundtable discussions for community organisers at the 2022 and 2023 UK Games Expo. In this paper, I will use my research findings to demonstrate the community-building potential of social board gaming and propose policy recommendations for supporting the role of this activity in enhancing the UK's social and cultural infrastructures and strengthening the social fabric of our cities and communities. Although these recommendations are primarily intended for existing and potential event organisers (both non-profit and commercial), they will also be of interest to national and local authorities, public and private bodies, and healthcare and social service providers that can support or partner with social gaming communities (e.g. the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; the Department of Health and Social Care; the Power to Change Trust; local councils; NHS practitioners; mental health, disability and youth charities).

The rest of the paper is organised into five sections. After a brief overview of the UK's social gaming infrastructure (section 2), I will outline the social, economic and civic benefits of social board gaming (section 3) and examine the most common user barriers and challenges faced by event organisers (section 4). I will then present several policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in the fields of accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising (section 5) and conclude with five recommendations for further development and support of social gaming in the UK (section 6).

The infrastructure overview

Social board gaming events are public social gatherings where people interact through and around tabletop games. Such events can be regular or one-off, non-profit or commercial, community- or business-led. Thanks to the exceptionally wide scope of themes, genres and complexity levels of modern board games, they attract not only hobbyists but also casual players and those who have little interest in gaming per se but want to socialise. To organise a social gaming event, one needs a collection of games, a venue with tables and chairs, and at least one communication channel.

At present, the UK's social gaming infrastructure is comprised of two main categories of spaces: specialised board game cafes and shops and non-specialised venues that are also used by the wider public for other activities. Non-specialised venues include pubs, bars, cafes, community centres, village halls, sports and leisure centres, social clubs, church halls, libraries and museums. Some of them organise their own gaming events to generate more revenue and/or enhance the social life of their local communities, while others host groups led by external

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6 Gregory, A. (21 February 2022), 'Millions in England face "second pandemic" of mental health issues', *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/21/england-second-pandemic-mental-health-issues-nhs-covid.

7 UK Games Expo, (2023), Community, Available at: https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.
According to a community-sourced, work-in-progress map maintained by the UK Games Expo, there are at least 104 tabletop gaming clubs, 40 hobby game shops and 12 board game cafes in the UK as of January 2024: https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/. However, these numbers should be treated as a very conservative estimate. For instance, a country-wide Google Maps search for board game cafes alone returns over 80 results, whereas venues hosting non-profit gaming clubs and meetups are more difficult to quantify as such events are advertised through a range of online and offline channels and thus cannot be easily collated into one list without using special data scraping tools. For more precise estimates of social board gaming activities in specific UK regions, one can use location-based search on Meetup.com and/or Facebook.

organisers. These groups, often called clubs or meetups, are usually run by local enthusiasts on a non-profit basis, although more recently there have also emerged micro-enterprises organising pop-up ticketed gaming events in commercial locations like pubs and bars.

However, most hospitality businesses are equally open to non-profit gaming groups, as long as attendees buy drinks and/or food. In specialised board game cafes and shops, social gamers typically pay a fixed cover charge that gives them access to the game collection, whereas drink and food orders are optional. Non-profit group organisers may also ask the group members to make small donations towards maintenance costs.

In 2020–2021, amid COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions on socialising, some communities put their events on pause, while others continued to meet online. Although digital platforms such as Discord, Tabletop Simulator, Board Game Arena, Zoom and Google Meet helped to support and maintain existing social gaming groups, they did not replace face-to-face interaction. While digital infrastructure is an important element of the UK's social gaming scene, it is first and foremost physical spaces that form its core.

Like other community facilities, the social board gaming infrastructure is unevenly distributed across the UK. Large metropolitan areas tend to have greater numbers and varieties of gaming events and venues compared to smaller and remote towns and villages.[7] Nevertheless, the many values of social gaming can benefit all kinds of communities – and especially those in need of reinvigoration.

The benefits of social board gaming

The study has identified several ways in which social board gaming benefits local communities and the wider society. Following the Bennett Institute for Public Policy's classification of values generated by social infrastructure,[8] these benefits can be divided into three groups – social, economic and civic.

Social benefits

Facilitating social interaction

Social gaming provides an opportunity to socialise and meet new people in a fun, informal environment. But unlike some other popular social activities, such as visiting a pub, board games add focus and structure to interaction, making it easier for those who do not feel comfortable in social settings:

> If you're socially awkward and have anxiety issues, it's much easier to have a thing to focus on, and a game gives you that thing. You're still going for the pub experience, you're still going to be surrounded by people in a warm environment, but you don't have to rely on your ability to make small talk. Instead, you'll have a task that you're focused on, and there are rules, and there are turns, and you know what you're supposed to do (Katie,[9] attendee, 50).

The focused and structured character of board game-assisted social interaction is particularly appealing to people with autism and other forms of neurodivergence:[10]

> Because I'm neurodivergent, I find it difficult to socialise without some objective for the event. It gives a focus for the social endeavour, it gives structure that I can always refer back to if I get lost (Toby, attendee, 32).

8 Kelsey, M., and Kenny, T., (2012). Townscapes: The value of social infrastructure. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Available at: https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

9 All names in direct quotes have been changed.

10 See also Cross, L. and Atherton, G. (2021), 'Board gaming on the spectrum', 2nd Game in Lab Symposium. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3Fpc2mpE0s.

The facilitative effect of social gaming does not arise solely from the inherent interactivity of board games but is also largely driven by the work of event organisers. Many of them make conscious efforts to introduce and connect players to one another and support vulnerable attendees. As a result, social gaming events provide an interaction framework that enhances existing social and cultural infrastructures by making them more convivial, inclusive and open to different uses.

For instance, hosting a board game social at a library, church or sports centre creates so-called 'accidental' social infrastructure[11] in places originally intended for other purposes.

Creating a sense of community and belonging

The facilitative nature of social gaming creates an "instant community" effect that may only last for the duration of the event or develop into more meaningful relationships. New friendships and more fleeting convivial encounters facilitated by social gaming proved especially valuable for those who lost their social connections in the aftermath of COVID-19 or due to personal circumstances. For many people I interviewed, social gaming events served as a fast way to settle into a new city, town or rural community. Seasoned gamers also noted that playing board games in public places alongside non-hobbyists makes them feel more "socially accepted". This phrase, referring to the once widespread dismissal of tabletop gaming as a niche, "geeky" pursuit, illustrates yet another aspect of the community-building role of social and cultural infrastructure.

Improving mental health and wellbeing

By facilitating social interaction and creating a sense of community and belonging, social gaming events help tackle loneliness and isolation. Many interviewees also felt that board gaming alleviates the fatigue caused by the overuse of digital technology and provides a healthier alternative to more traditional forms of alcohol-focused socialising. As one participant summarised it,

> Everything we do in life now is in front of a screen – TV, computers, working, whatever. We want to get away from the screen, we want to socialise with people, but not necessarily by having large amounts of alcohol, like, "I'm gonna go to the pub and get smashed" (Evan, attendee, 40).

Other positive effects on health and wellbeing frequently mentioned by study participants included stress, anxiety and depression relief and improved cognitive abilities.

Economic benefits

In addition to strengthening the social fabric of UK cities and communities, social board gaming benefits them economically by supporting local businesses and making existing social and cultural infrastructures more versatile and up-to-date.

Supporting local businesses

Most board game cafes and some shops partner with local bakeries, coffee roasters, breweries and other food suppliers, sometimes within a 5-mile radius. Social gaming events hosted in non-specialised commercial venues – first and foremost, pubs – help them bring in and retain customers. Hospitality businesses started to recognise the value of social gaming after COVID-19 lockdowns and even more so amid the cost of living and energy crisis. While some of them are now running their own game socials, others are reaching out to local gaming groups or coming up with even more bespoke solutions. For instance, The Hop Garden pub in Birmingham invited a local award-winning board game designer Andy Hopwood to host a weekly game night as their resident "game guru".[12] According to recent market reports, mixing dining with social entertainment offers good value for money to consumers with less disposable income and appeals to younger demographics who tend to drink less than previous generations.[13]

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[11] The British Academy (2023), Space for community: strengthening our social infrastructure.

[12] Hop Garden Pub, (2022), What's on, Available at: https://sites.google.com/view/hopgardenpub/whats-on?authuser=0. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

[13] Mintel (2022), UK Leisure Outlook – Autumn 2022; Mintel (2022), Pub Visiting – UK – 2022.

Contributing to urban regeneration
Apart from driving more footfall to the high street, social gaming can bring new life into underutilised buildings. For example, the owners of the Dice Saloon shop in Brighton's London Road repurposed and refurbished a disused former church (at one point occupied by an unlicensed nightclub) and turned it into a popular gaming hub that regularly hosts beginner-friendly events and runs a kids club. Along with other creative and independent businesses operating in that neighbourhood, Dice Saloon contributes to its ongoing regeneration, both functionally and aesthetically. The owner of another gaming venue, converted from a defunct conservative club in a former navy town, pointed out the role of his business, alongside other social and cultural amenities, in youth retention in the area:

> There's nothing quite like it when it's summer and sunny and there's always stuff, little random events. Young people set roots here and then they stay, and that's helping to regenerate the city. It's the opposite of brain drain, it's retaining a lot of the students (Steve, board game cafe owner, 36).

Civic benefits

For some people, participation in social board gaming is not just a fun pastime but also a pathway to civic engagement. This mostly applies to leaders and active members of non-profit gaming groups, who can try their hand at various aspects of community organising, such as liaising with venues and sponsors, developing the group code of conduct, advertising, maintaining social media channels, volunteering at gaming events, resolving interpersonal conflicts and tackling other strategic and day-to-day tasks.

Another common form of engagement, fundraising, is accessible to a broader audience of social gamers. Thus, the Herefordshire Board Gamers community raised over £22,000 for local and national charities in a seven-year period through donations, merchandise and second-hand games sales and raffles. On top of that, they run a community lending game library, provide games and other equipment for local community-focused events and initiatives and offer support and guidance to other gaming groups across the country.[14]

Although commercial businesses are naturally more focused on generating profit, some of them also seek to improve the lives of their local communities. In 2021, the Dice Board Game Lounge in Portsmouth engaged its customers in a community outreach project that helped over 20 local schools launch tabletop game clubs. The participating schools received tailored bundles of second-hand games, donated partly by the company itself and partly by its customers and friendly game publishers, along with guidance on how to play them.

To make the benefits of social board gaming accessible to a wide range of demographics, we need to identify the barriers that keep people from participating in this activity and recognise the challenges faced by event organisers.

Barriers and challenges

Understanding the different types of user barriers and acknowledging the key challenges encountered by community organisers is crucial for the creation and maintenance of open, accessible and inclusive social and cultural infrastructure. The key barriers to participation in social board gaming range from general stereotypes about board games to more specific personal, organisational and interpersonal obstacles. The key challenges for event organisers include funding, liaising with venues, promotion and managing interpersonal relationships. These barriers and challenges are explored in turn below.

14 Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2022), Home, Available at: https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Stereotypes about board games

Despite the long-term popularity of board gaming among adults and its growing acceptance in mainstream culture, it is still often assumed to be a pastime meant either for children or for "geeks". The "geek" stereotype is twofold: on the one hand, it implies that board games are a less socially accepted form of leisure (than, for instance, sports); on the other, it makes them appear too intellectually demanding or competitive. Altogether, these assumptions can keep non-hobbyists from participating in board game socials and complicate securing administrative and financial support for social gaming initiatives.

Personal barriers

Lack of social confidence and/or gaming experience

This is the most common barrier experienced by newcomers to social gaming events, especially if they turn up on their own. For those with little prior exposure to board games, the stress of walking into a room full of strangers is often coupled with performance anxiety:

> I get so many [direct] messages about, "I'm turning up by myself, is that alright?". It's very scary, walking into a room of people you don't know, not knowing what you're playing, not feeling like you know the games. People worry so much about, "I'm slowing you guys down because I don't know the game" (Isabel, organiser, age not specified).

While most attendees tend to overcome this barrier fairly quickly, for some it can take weeks and months, if not years. Another meetup organiser, Brian (40), mentioned that the group he runs "has had some members with anxiety get as far as the front door of a pub and then walk away".

Health-related barriers

These include short- and long-term physical and mental health conditions and illnesses that directly or indirectly impair one's ability to socialise in public places. Direct barriers range from seasonal illnesses to neurological and psychiatric disorders, while the impact of indirect ones (e.g. weakened immune system) became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when many clinically vulnerable people and their family members continued to shield and isolate even after the end of general restrictions. In addition to these socialising-related barriers, board gaming involves prolonged sitting and engages sensory and cognitive skills, which may be problematic for those who have mobility issues or learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia or ADHD).

Lack of leisure time

Just like with other leisure activities, it can be difficult to carve out time for social gaming due to a lack of free time for socialising. Parents and people with caring responsibilities, especially women, are particularly affected by this issue.[15] Not only does lack of time prevent them from attending social gaming events as frequently as they would want to, but it can also stop them from taking up a more active role as an organiser or force them to step down from it, thus limiting their opportunities to influence their group's culture.

Organisational barriers

Venue issues

As interviews and observations showed, certain types of gaming venues can attract or intimidate certain groups of people. For example, cafes (both specialised and non-specialised) appear particularly appealing to women, LGBTQIA+ and BAME attendees and those who have little or no gaming experience. As one organiser put it, cafes, despite their commercial status, feel more "public" than community centres, social clubs and church halls because:

15 Pobuda, T. (7 August 2022), 'Women are too tired and time-strapped for board games due to shrinking leisure time', *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/women-are-too-tired-and-time-strapped-for-board-games-due-to-shrinking-leisure-time-186372.

> In such spaces, there's a bit less of that [social] mix, it's a bit more focused on the games and you feel a bit trapped in. It's more of a commitment, whereas if you are in a public space and you are a bit nervous about attending and you've come in on your own, you can just walk past and have a look and go, "OK, they don't look like a bunch of weirdoes, it's not gonna be just me and one old guy, it's a room full of people" (Ryan, organiser, 42).

Furthermore, cafes are more socially and culturally inclusive than pubs:

> The fact that it's a cafe really helps. As a Muslim, I don't always feel comfortable in pubs where I am limited in what is offered for me, or when people drink too much (Ariana, attendee, 38).

That said, events held in quieter, more isolated spaces such as community centres or separate function rooms at pubs better accommodate the needs of neurodivergent people who struggle with sensory overload. Overall, venue type is not always a decisive factor. Such variables as cost, location, disabled access (or lack of), layout and seating arrangement, lighting and levels of noise can also create or remove barriers for different groups and individuals.

Informational barriers
Most social gaming events are advertised exclusively through social media (and often through one given platform, e.g. Meetup or Facebook), which makes them less discoverable by non-users and less technically-savvy people. However, indoor and outdoor advertising used by some gaming venues for internally organised events can only reach existing customers/visitors and those who live or work nearby.

Interpersonal barriers

While social gaming groups generally strive to be friendly and welcoming to newcomers, they are not immune to interpersonal tensions and conflicts. Inexperienced gamers and women (who are often assumed to be newbies, regardless of their actual gaming experience) often have to contend with hostile or patronising attitudes from other group members. However, even experienced male gamers may feel like outsiders if they join an unfamiliar gaming group that fails to welcome and include them:

> There was nobody to welcome you, everyone was busy playing a game, and the person running it wasn't really running it. They'd organised a day and that was pretty much all they'd done, and that didn't feel as welcoming at all. You kind of had to fight your way in, and there were definitely cliques going on. I haven't gone back (Evan, attendee, 40).

Other issues mentioned in the interviews included (from more to less common): unwanted attention towards women (both in-person and online), microaggression (sexist, transphobic or racist comments) and aggressive play (yelling, swearing or throwing things).

The key challenges for event organisers

Funding
While community-led gaming events are often assumed to "run themselves" at no cost, their organisation requires time, transport (to and from the venue), physical work (moving tables and chairs, carrying dozens or hundreds of games), the actual games (which are prone to wear and tear) and a budget for advertising (including the cost of setting up a group page on Meetup.com, the most popular online platform for social events). Additional resources may include storage space, foldable and special needs furniture and even portable toilets for outdoor events. Commercial organisers, despite being more financially resourceful, have their own challenges of maintaining the balance between social impact and profit:

> Our [social project] now sits in a weird place because we haven't set a charity or anything up for it, and it technically runs at a loss on our books (Steve, board game cafe owner, 36).

Liaising with venues
Externally organised gaming events require a continuous negotiation between the organiser and the hosting venue. All too often gaming groups are forced out of their original space because the owners no longer can or want to accommodate them. The most common reasons for venue change include double-booking, loud music, disturbance from other customers and the pressure to buy more drinks and food.

Promotion
Increasing visibility and membership on a limited budget is the top priority for new gaming groups, especially if they are located in less populated areas or have well-established competitors.

Managing interpersonal relationships
From meeting and greeting newcomers to occasional conflict resolution, maintaining a fun, safe and inclusive environment at gaming events involves a lot of emotional labour. Supporting vulnerable attendees is a particularly challenging task that requires special knowledge, skills and, most importantly, boundaries:

> We had someone come in who had a crisis here. Luckily, one of our members is a trustee of [a mental health support organisation]. She took this gentleman to one side and had a chat, signposted and said, "You need to get help". We want to create a safe space, but we're not a support service, we're not therapy. That's not appropriate for a games night, it would cause stress for the volunteers and lower the tone for everyone (Brian, organiser, 40).

While some of the barriers and challenges discussed above are not unique to social board gaming, it is important to understand how they play out in specific contexts and what needs to be done to reduce their impact on the users and producers of social and cultural infrastructures. The next section will showcase the best practices that help strengthen the role of social board gaming in creating open, accessible and inclusive spaces for community.

Policy considerations

The following policy considerations build on the existing good practice of social board gaming, identified through the analysis of organisers' and attendees' experiences. They include general accessibility and inclusion measures suitable for most gaming groups, as well as more advanced outreach, impact generation and fundraising solutions.

Accessibility and inclusion

Policies
Having a code of conduct and a protocol for reporting and addressing unacceptable behaviour is essential for preventing and managing conflicts in gaming groups. In addition to general policies against abuse, harassment and discrimination,[16] some organisers develop guidelines that suit their specific needs. For instance, the Gamers@Hart shop in Hartlepool has a safeguarding policy in place for its children-focused events.[17] Other organisers mentioned the importance of communicating the rules in a friendly manner (i.e. avoiding too many prohibitive statements) and displaying them both online and on printed materials (e.g. posters).

Venue characteristics
While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, good practice includes disabled access, free entry or affordable/discounted prices, board game-friendly furniture, lighting and soundscape, non-alcoholic drink options and quieter chill-out zones where neurodivergent people can decompress.

[16] Dungeons & Flagons, (2022), Code of conduct, Available at: https://dungeonsandflagons.co.uk/code-of-conduct. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.
[17] Gamers @ Hart, (2022), Safeguarding, Available at: https://gamersathart.co.uk/about-us/safeguarding/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Promotion
Keeping the group's social media active (ideally on multiple platforms) helps tackle not only informational but also social confidence barriers for new members. To ensure access and inclusion for those who do not use digital technology confidently or at all, some printed alternatives should also be distributed through appropriate channels (e.g. a local community noticeboard).

Pre- and post-event support
Welcoming new members in social media groups and answering their queries in direct messages and public comments creates a friendly online environment and helps mitigate newcomer anxiety. Some groups, e.g. Portsmouth on Board, also use social media to pre-arrange games and share links to rulebooks and YouTube playthroughs. Herefordshire Board Gamers created a detailed step-by-step walkthrough guide that explains what happens at a game night and includes multiple photos of every venue they meet at, from exterior to interior, along with information on food and drink options, costs, parking and disabled access.[18] Photos from events, taken and shared on social media with attendee consent, contribute to community building and give new members an idea of the group's composition and atmosphere.

Support at events
Door-to-table support includes signage and dedicated greeters (ideally wearing distinctive shirts, vests or lanyards) who welcome attendees and help them find game partners. It is important to offer a range of games for different skills, abilities, interests and personalities, recognise potential issues and give heads-ups where necessary (e.g. certain games can be challenging for people with dyslexia, colour blindness, autism, etc.) without drawing attention to individuals. However, Herefordshire Board Gamers also offer optional name badges with blank space for preferred pronouns, disabilities, traits and other things attendees may wish to disclose. Unobtrusive monitoring of people's behaviour and interactions and quick friendly check-ins with new members should continue throughout the event.

Special events
During the COVID-19 pandemic, most gaming groups moved their meetings online, which, despite inevitable technical issues, brought people together across geographical borders and became a lifeline for those who felt the most isolated. After the end of restrictions, some organisers chose to run occasional online sessions for those who cannot attend in person. Other types of special events target people with special needs (e.g. quieter autism-friendly meetings) or shared identity (e.g. LGBTQIA+ socials) and complement gaming with other social activities (book clubs, group walks and hikes, cinema visits).

Feedback
Attendee feedback, collected both informally and through surveys, helps organisers and business owners better understand the needs of their communities, identify areas for improvement and, if necessary, gather evidence for funding bids.

Other initiatives
To better support vulnerable attendees, the organisers of Herefordshire Board Gamers took a free course in mental health first aid. They also run awareness-raising workshops on allyship and gender-inclusive language in board gaming.[19]

18 Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2022), Our venues, Available at: https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/guides/guides-hb-events/what-is-a-games-night/ ; https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/where/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

19 Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2023), Allyship & Privilege and Gender Inclusive Language, Available at: https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/allyship-privilege-and-gender-inclusive/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Outreach, impact and funding

Non-profit gaming groups seeking to expand their outreach and impact often partner with other local clubs and meetups (e.g. social anxiety and mental health support groups, "geek" and "nerd" culture communities on Meetup.com), signpost attendees to local health service providers, support relevant charities and council initiatives such as warm rooms (which also helps promote the benefits of social board gaming for health and wellbeing) and participate in local festivals, fairs and community showcase events.

On top of that, there are non-profit organisations specifically focused on using social gaming for social good. Board in the City, a community interest board game cafe in Southampton, provides a wide range of social services, from educational and mental health support to surplus food delivery and emergency housing, and partners with 30 local organisations including schools and colleges, social enterprises, charities and businesses.[20] Disability Support Project, a charity based in Redditch, runs a weekly public-facing board game cafe with free access, affordable hot meals, dedicated game buddies and more formal and tailored mentorship services for those who struggle with depression, anxiety, stress, learning difficulties and mental health disorders.[21]

As mentioned earlier, commercial board game cafes and shops have limited opportunities for community outreach and engagement, but sponsorship from and partnerships with public sector organisations can be a good solution for socially driven businesses. For example, board game cafe Socialdice recently received a grant from Swansea Council to provide free access to autism-focused and LGBTQIA+ socials and purchase more disability-friendly and educational games, while the Fan Boy Three shop in Manchester ran a series of discounted autism support sessions in conjunction with A Spectrum of Possibilities charity. The owners of Hartlepool's Gamers@Hart shop, in addition to their own social project, government-funded holiday clubs for children and youth, launched a sister community interest company People's Meeples in partnership with their regular customers, which became an outlet for other community-focused initiatives, such as Literacy Game Bundles for local families, post-COVID recovery game nights and personalised wellbeing support offered through social prescribers.

The key sources of external funding available for non-profit social gaming groups and organisations (and, in some cases, for commercial enterprises, too) include donations from businesses (UK board game publishers and other companies looking to support local community initiatives) and grants from public and private organisations (local councils, NHS, UK Community Foundations, The National Lottery Community Fund, Asda Foundation, etc.). In June 2023, Gamers@Hart and People's Meeples' directors Peter and Jeni Hart organised a seminar "Finding Funding for Community Gaming" at the UK Games Expo and shared their experience of securing nearly £200,000 for their projects since the pandemic. To conclude, even unsuccessful bids and non-monetary awards help increase the visibility and recognition of social board gaming as a community-building instrument.

20 Board in the City, (2022), About us, Available at: https://www.boardinthecity.co.uk/about/. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

21 Sanctuary Gaming Cafe, (2023), About us, Available at: https://www.sanctuarygamingcafe.co.uk. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Conclusion and further recommendations

Although space plays an integral role in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric, shifting the policy focus from "where" to "how" is necessary to ensure the best use of existing social and cultural infrastructure. The rise of social board gaming in the UK indicates a demand for placemaking solutions that facilitate meaningful connections between people from different backgrounds and walks of life. Social gaming events provide an interaction framework that makes the UK's social and cultural infrastructure more convivial, accessible, inclusive and open to different uses. However, there are barriers and challenges that need to be addressed to fully harness the social, economic and civic benefits of this activity. In addition to policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising, there are several areas for support and improvement that can be summarised in the following five further policy recommendations:

1. Both non-profit and commercial event organisers should be recognised as an asset contributing to strengthening the social fabric of their communities. Their knowledge and experience should be shared and exchanged with their peers and other social service providers (e.g. local councils; the NHS; mental health, disability and youth charities) through national and local workshops, roundtable discussions and a dedicated online resource containing, among other things, accessibility and inclusion policies, impact case studies and fundraising tips. Launching a national non-profit organisation (further referred to as NNPO) bringing together the leaders of the UK's board gaming community and dedicated to using social gaming for social good would be a helpful step in that direction.

2. More partnerships are needed between social gaming communities and local and national social care and healthcare organisations (first and foremost, the NHS and mental health charities such as Mind), particularly in the areas of social prescribing, signposting and appropriate mental health support training for organisers.

3. Non-profit organisers can benefit from bespoke training and support in social marketing, which will help them promote the benefits of social gaming. This initiative may be funded by a large UK-based or international game publisher (e.g. Asmodee or Big Potato Games) and administered by the NNPO.

4. More research is needed into the CIC model of social gaming venues and how it can be used in local urban and rural regeneration projects.

5. A location-based app or website matching event organisers (including but not necessarily limited to social gaming groups) with available venues, funded by a national grant (e.g. The National Lottery Community Fund), would allow for a more efficient use of the UK's social and cultural infrastructure.

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6 Understanding good places to meet: the role of ‘common interest infrastructures’ in promoting social cohesion in superdiverse societies

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Abstract

Social connections are central in addressing cross-cutting policy challenges around spatial inequalities, refugee integration and community cohesion in superdiverse societies. This paper draws out lessons that have emerged from the authors' research on the characteristics of places that facilitate social interaction and feelings of belonging in diverse communities. The connections between residents, including people from a migrant or refugee background, are often based on shared interests and not exclusively on shared characteristics. In reflecting "common interest infrastructures" or, more simply "good places to meet", this paper evidences the value of multifunctional, inclusive spaces such as churches, community centres and third sector hubs in offering opportunities for community connection, reciprocal care and resilience building. The paper offers critical reflections on the impact of contradictory policy narratives around community cohesion, migrant integration and place-based interventions. It proposes future directions for policymaking and local planning to tackle socio-economic deprivation as a driver of mistrust and social fragmentation. The authors argue for the sustainably funded, community-led social infrastructure in anchoring people both to new localities and their changing communities.

***Keywords*:** social connections, community development, integration, superdiversity, non-profit infrastructure

Introduction

The pivotal role of social connections in both refugee integration and community cohesion has long been recognised by academics, policymakers and practitioners in the UK. Rising global instabilities, the resultant migration 'crisis' and the fundamental super-diversification of the UK's social fabric have made migrant integration one of the most pressing policy challenges of the decade.[2] Social infrastructure has a central role in fostering positive social connections, which cultivate a sense of belonging and well-being for both migrants and other groups. Drawing on local understandings of space and the connectedness it fosters, this paper discusses the salience of particular social infrastructure that are identified by a diversity of residents as 'good places to meet' in tackling cross-cutting policy areas. It problematises the conceptual and policy reliance on social capital theory characterised by bonds, bridges and links in approaches to integration and social cohesion. Instead, it proposes the usefulness of attending to the form, function and meaning of social relationships, and to the central role of what this paper terms 'common interest infrastructures' in facilitating community cohesion, connectedness and resilience in the face of intersecting crises. In doing so, it makes recommendations for further directions in more inclusive policymaking and urban planning.

[2] Ferris, 2020

Context

Social cohesion has long held prime policy significance in the UK, sparking solutions and critiques in equal measure. The last few decades have witnessed a move away from multicultural policymaking, the introduction of the contentious securitisation of community cohesion through the Prevent Programme and more superficial 'saris, samosas and steel drums' approaches to promoting integration through allocating relatively limited funds to small-scale projects with the aim of promoting cross-cultural dialogue.[3] More recently, concerns over difference, diversity and social cohesion have been tackled by two parallel policy agendas which frame the 'problem' in contradictory terms. The *Levelling Up* White Paper sets out a vision to address spatial inequalities and 'restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost'[4] reflecting the challenges of place-based disempowerment and social disconnect within communities. In contrast, the dominant policy discourse on migrant integration largely strives to integrate new migrants into what are presumed to be already integrated receiving communities, ignoring the heterogeneity and intersectional disadvantages within receiving communities, which have been central concerns of the Levelling Up agenda.[5]

Despite considerable policy attention, the UK does not have a national policy, clear targets or monitoring mechanisms for identifying progress in the integration of migrants, nor for measuring social cohesion.[6] Nonetheless, particularly right-wing political narratives have frequently attributed the erosion of social cohesion to increased diversity brought on by migration.[7] Yet research in the UK has principally examined the relationship between social cohesion and racial or ethnic diversity, rather than between social cohesion and migration.[8] The lack of a cohesive approach does little to counter negative representations of the presumed cultural or religious incompatibilities, or the social, economic and security risks posed by immigration to the UK. Concerns over fairness and those 'left behind', which are at the heart of the Levelling Up mission, also feature strongly in regional and social divisions over Brexit and the overhaul of the UK asylum system. The often-presented binary between migrants and economically left-behind communities overlooks the reality that these are not altogether mutually exclusive groups; many migrants face multiple, heightened inequalities in relation to housing, the labour market, access to public services and social attitudes.[9] Indeed, data suggests that in the UK, income inequality and deprivation may be stronger determinants of social fragmentation than ethnic diversity.[10]

While there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the pivotal role of social connections in tackling inequalities, reducing isolation and supporting individual and community wellbeing,[11] it remains unclear how further connectedness should be forged in the present era of multiple social crises. In the next sections, we identify key features of social infrastructure which fosters cohesiveness in an era of superdiversity. In reflecting our research with diverse communities,[12] we illuminate how mechanisms of social cohesion[13] are embedded into what we refer to as 'common interest social infrastructures'. These spaces represent 'good places to meet', facilitating social connection through expressions of inclusion, solidarity and care. We argue such social infrastructures both exemplify the need to shift towards superdiverse perspectives in policymaking, and present part of the solution towards countering disempowerment within local communities, perpetuated through migration management.

3 Casey, 2016
4 HM Government, 2022
5 Schinkel, 2013
6 Cantle, 2017
7 Hickman et al., 2008
8 Demireva, 2019
9 Dustmann et al., 2022
10 Demireva, 2019
11 Baylis et al., 2019
12 This paper draws from a number of studies with diverse migrant populations in the UK, including research with: established residents, refugees and asylum seekers (2002); reunited refugee families (2019-2022); refugee survivors of torture (2018-2021); recently recognised refugees (2020-2023); migrant survivors of gender-based violence (2016-2021); Eastern European migrant children and young people (2017-2020); and migrant women and transnational families impacted by the pandemic (2021-).
13 Baylis et al., 2019

From ethnicity to superdiversity

Traditionally, there has been a strong tendency for the UK to approach social cohesion as a race relations issue. This can be seen in the Cantle Report[14] and the Casey Review[15] which positioned concerns over social cohesion in the context of segregation of migrant and ethnic minority communities, that risks fostering extremism and other behaviours incompatible with 'British culture'. This race relations narrative has seeped into policy and research,[16] which have tended to adopt a narrow gaze for considering migrant social capital; typecasting social bonds as exclusively relations between people who share the same ethnic or national origin, and social bridges as connections with people from white 'majority' populations in the UK.[17] Yet, we argue, such homogenous framings are out of touch with the superdiverse realities of localities, and the intersectional identities of those inhabiting them. Crucially, 'the bonds that tie' are not exclusively rooted in shared origins, but are heterogenous, and multiple.[18]

While our studies have consistently found that for many migrants, connections with people who share the same national or ethnic origins (and particularly those who have lived in the UK for longer) can offer vital support and comfort as well as information and advice, [19] many migrants also express ambivalence in developing strong ties with co-national communities. In particular, many displaced migrants actively avoid making close connections with co-nationals due to fear of gossip or judgement. People from shared ethnic or national origins can be a source of distrust particularly for those fleeing ethnic conflicts, gender-based violence or persecution on the grounds of sexuality, gender orientation or religion. This challenges essentialising identity politics and resultant place-based interventions, which assume people who share an ethnicity or nationality also share trusted relations premised on a homogenous set of beliefs and cultural values. In constructing homophily or similarity in narrow terms, policy has also tended to adopt a deficit model concerning immigrants' ability to mix, denigrating the bonds between migrants that do exist.[20] The role of social bonds, not only as a source of stability and security upon arrival but also in enabling wider social bridging, continues to be poorly recognised.[21]

While community connectedness, integration and feelings of belonging develop over time and in relation to places, they are not linear processes. These processes can be disrupted, halted or accelerated by changing personal and social contexts.[22] Our research with different migrant communities has shown that belongings (to an area, community, culture or nation), are actively challenged, negotiated, reforged and reshaped in response to individual and collective crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, displacement, Brexit or personal trauma. In the face of such wider forces, forging local belonging should be recognised as a process which is negotiated between people in local places. It can be mediated by shared identities, experiences and interests, and is also influenced by proximity, accessibility, willingness and opportunities for interaction between people living their lives alongside one another in a locality. Over the last two decades superdiversity[23] has been cemented as a key concept for understanding contemporary urban diversity and difference. Yet, policy has not generally incorporated a superdiverse lens for understanding social infrastructures, and their distinct functions and meanings to communities.

14 Cantle, 2001
15 Casey, 2016
16 Donoghue & Bourke, 2019
17 Baillot et al., 2023
18 Anthias, 1998:570
19 Baillot et al 2023a
20 Barwick, 2017; Kerlaff 2023; Baillot 2023b
21 Baillot et al., 2020
22 Ibid.
23 Vertovec, 2007

Characterising 'good places to meet'

In an era of superdiversity, we argue for the importance of attending to 'common-interest infrastructures.' For many migrants, common interests and aspirations, rather than necessarily ethnic or even religious affiliations, guide their journey in making a life in a new context. Our studies highlight that churches, third sector and community spaces offering activities and clubs that speak to people's personal interests are often cited as the places where migrants make new trusted connections, regardless of ethnicity. 'By and for' organisations[24] which focus on embedding relations of trust in the provision of advice services, befriending activities and peer groups, are particularly conducive spaces for forging strong bonds and countering isolation. Such spaces are by their nature often both multicultural and multilingual, precisely because shared interests (such as food, parenting or desire to acquire specific skills and knowledge), and not only shared characteristics, facilitate everyday interactions. Further, the faith venues in which many migrants find belonging do not always mirror their ethnic background or even their faith. Our research has found that many Muslims find inclusion in churches because of the way openness to difference, dialogue and respect of faith has been built into these spaces. This illustrates how communities of belonging are not simply bounded by race, ethnicity and religion. These three social dimensions are in themselves cross-cutting, and ultimately more complex than the dominant discourse on race relations makes visible.

It has been previously highlighted that the over-determination of purpose can inhibit inclusive social infrastructures.[25] Our evidence builds on this, demonstrating that migrants particularly engage with others in spaces which are responsive to the changing needs of their communities. Much like community centres, churches are characterised by their multifunctionality; in addition to faith services, migrants benefit from opportunities to make friends and volunteer at church cafés, attend church ESOL classes, and from being supported by the church community to access essentials at times of personal crises.

The multiple functionalities of these spaces are tied to their meanings; the affective quality of inclusive spaces are largely attributed to the care shown by key individuals such as pastors, members of the congregation and third sector workers.[26] This care is not only limited to expressions; churches and third sector organisations are often under-recognised for their work as nodes in social networks, signposting individuals to key organisations and local council services, and actively lobbying local public representatives to intervene in cases of discrimination and inequalities. Many participants highlighted the crucial role played by caseworkers in refugee supporting organisations who connected them outwards to other people, spaces and places, in the words of one person: acting as "a channel for me to understand." One of a number of participants who were supported by the church or mosque explained how his church pastor had lobbied the local MSP on his behalf to secure permanent accommodation in the local area where he and his family had been temporarily housed and were already settled. Although these are also spaces where some people only forge superficial relationships, we find that such acts of solidarity explain many migrants' feelings of belonging to 'a family' in such spaces. This illustrates that multifunctional social infrastructures can facilitate both bonding and bridging capital.

24 By and for organisations refer to organisations that are led, designed and delivered by and for the users and communities they serve.
25 Hollis et al., 2023
26 See, for example Käkelä et al., 2023.

'Common interest infrastructures' illuminate how reciprocity becomes embedded into places to promote both cohesion and socio-economic resilience.[27] Our research has found that strong aspirations to rebuild one's life in a new context led many migrants to engage with multifunctional social infrastructures which contribute to these ends. Key functions that support the acquisition of English language, employability skills and local knowledge, along with access to rights and essentials illustrate why refugee supporting organisations and churches are highly valued by displaced migrants, regardless of their nationality or faith, as important connections. These represent spaces of reciprocity and opportunity, which are particularly sought out by displaced migrants who see contributing to the community, and aspirations of 'giving back' as an integral part of reforging belonging and remaking their lives in new contexts.[28]

Our research has also found that 'common interest infrastructures' are often particularly cognisant of multiple inequalities that are not limited to race and ethnicity, reflected in the provision of crèches, and timing of activities to fit around school hours and family mealtimes. This highlights the importance of considering accessibility beyond location; women's participation and use of public spaces is frequently constrained by gendered household and care burdens, regardless of migrant background. Our research has found that women particularly value the social dimensions of accidental social infrastructure, such as supermarkets, stairwells and shared gardens where they could bump into neighbours or acquaintances.[29] Children can also act as a catalyst for mothers' social connectedness as children's locally-made friendships often spark friendly encounters between parents which may then deepen into bonds. Such spaces bear similarities to 'common interest infrastructures' in facilitating acts of everyday kindness and reciprocity even as simply as helping someone up the stairs with their pram. While this illuminates the value of such infrastructures for spontaneous interactions, we should be cautious when considering to what extent this reflects unequal, inherently gendered, opportunities for participation in other spaces. Likewise, while race and ethnicity may not be the primary grounds on which connections are forged, they retain salience for understanding how spaces are experienced, and how participation can be constrained. It is also important to avoid romanticising neighbourhood connectedness; many migrants, including both refugees and EU migrants, experience racialised encounters in various spaces, including abuse and attacks on their families motivated by xenophobia and racism.[30] Evidence shows that safe spaces are a prerequisite for lessening isolation and fostering interactions and place-based attachment, both for migrants and established communities.[31]

Whether we look at the examples from our studies of the migrant women and men who find belonging in Scottish Churches; the refugees who make local friends watching football in a pub; or the young mothers, migrant and non-migrant, who are connecting at leisure centres, playgrounds and women's groups; we can identify a desire to belong in a place, facilitated by 'good places to meet'; that is, accessible and inclusive 'common interest infrastructures' which enable communities to simultaneously connect and bridge ethnic, cultural and religious differences. The successes of many 'good places to meet' can be attributed to a sense of local ownership and responsiveness to the inequalities experienced by diverse communities. These spaces represent everyday interactional infrastructures that counter performative multiculturalism through responsive multifunctionality, opportunities for reciprocity and care, expressed through welcome, practical support and acts of solidarity. Such functions consolidate relations of trust, further opportunities for interaction and confidence building and, through that, individual and community resilience.

27 Baylis et al., 2019
28 Baillot et al., 2023b
29 Baillot et al., 2020
30 Sime et al., 2022
31 Spicer, 2008

Social division by design

Despite its proliferation in policy discourse, genuine attention to social cohesion has been largely absent from recent decisions impacting housing and neighbourhoods implemented at central government level. The UK Government has long recognised the role of geographical divisions in contributing to urban tensions and prejudice, as reflected way back in the response to the 2001 ethnic riots[32] and more recently in the framing of 'meaningful mixing' in the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper.[33] Connectedness, belonging and empowerment are also central tenets of the Levelling Up mission, yet we argue these ambitions are undermined by the use of unprecedented internal displacement and social segregation used as tools in migration management. We argue that this reflects policy silos, leading to unresponsiveness to the ways decisions in different policy arenas can work against each other's goals.

Regardless of the wider objectives of immigration policymaking, the enforcement of migration management sows seeds of distrust which undermine social cohesion. The national dispersal policy means that asylum claimants are most often settled on a no-choice basis, and sometimes subject to frequent dispersals.[34] The transience built into displaced migrants' integration trajectories not only undermines bonds between extended families and friends, but also exacerbates disconnect with places and tensions within communities inhabiting them. A policy focus on deterrence is now reflected in experiences of local life, as poignantly demonstrated by the recent local Council injunctions and community protests against new dispersal sites and the docking of Bibby Stockholm. Much of this mistrust is perpetuated from the top-down; for example, the Levelling Up white paper only addresses displacement in the context of crime that poses threat to local communities. Recently, the Immigration Minister stated that the values and lifestyles of channel refugees present a threat to social cohesion in the UK.[35] Yet, evidence on social fragmentation suggests that shared values and consensus in social cohesion have been overplayed at the expense of structural inequalities.[36] This is not new; a decade ago the Home Office was advised that policymakers should principally focus on socio-economic deprivation over migration in setting their responses to promoting local cohesion.[37] Yet, current policy responses do the opposite, as migrants are often housed in areas with poor quality housing stock, limited services and social infrastructure, far from existing support networks.[38] These new forms of dispersal are taking place against a backdrop of long-term patterns of spatial disinvestment in rural and coastal communities or, in some areas, the geographies of rapid top-down gentrification, both of which perpetuate the disempowerment of local communities.

Despite the Levelling Up ambition to bring decision-making back to local level, local communities lack voice in developments over their local areas, exacerbating feelings of unsafety, prejudice and unfairness. We argue that 'common interest infrastructures' present part of the solution; in bringing new and existing inhabitants together, such spaces are integral to destabilising divisive perceptions of intractable differences. These spaces provide opportunities to foster positive reciprocal interactions, reduce tensions, dispel myths and develop new communities of resilience. As already highlighted, not all such infrastructures need to be purpose-built; existing spaces in new dispersal areas which have a history of inclusion, such as churches and community centres, are well-positioned to learn from the adaptive responses taken by their counterparts in more established areas of dispersal in the UK. Importantly, reinvigorating multifunctional social infrastructure can also address perceived competition over resources by facilitating interactions across communities, common interests and social divides.

32 Eatwell, 2006. The 2001 ethnic riots (also referred to as race riots or northern riots) refer to series of riots which occurred in towns of Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford pre-dominantly between white and South Asian communities.
33 HM Government, 2018
34 Home Office, 2002
35 Syal, 2023
36 Baylis et al., 2019
37 Saggar et al., 2012
38 Hill et al., 2021; Darling 2023

In addition to challenges in new dispersal areas, many 'good places to meet' are struggling for survival in urban areas where ethnic minorities are concentrated. Closures and budget cuts to libraries, youth services, community centres and third sector hubs in times of austerity overlook the hidden value such places contribute to economic and social resilience through their multifunctionalities. For example, the work libraries do in promoting digital inclusion, literacy and health being generates £3.4bn annually in England alone.[39] This further highlights the salience of supporting 'common interest infrastructures', as such resilience functions are accentuated in times of crisis. Our research has found that third sector organisations extended their expressions of solidarity and care even further during the pandemic; providing essential welfare functions including delivering food parcels, children's activity kits and running advice and peer groups to support the most vulnerable and excluded. Yet much of this work goes unrecognised in the funding of social infrastructure. With the welfare system under pressure, such multi-functional spaces are more important than ever.

Directions for policy and placemaking

1) Long-term, sustainable investment should recognise the centrality of non-profit 'common interest infrastructures' which promote social cohesion and indirectly further socio-economic resilience.

Our research with diverse communities shows that 'good places to meet' facilitate positive interactions between superdiverse residents; fomenting social connection and cohesion in communities by providing spaces of care, inclusion and solidarity. Crucially, such spaces are a step ahead in recognising the superdiversity and needs of their communities, demonstrated through multifunctionality and reciprocity of opportunity. These infrastructures not only further dialogue and understanding, but also strengthen wellbeing, resilience and social inclusion of all members of superdiverse communities through redressing inequitable access to physical and social resources for communities of disadvantage.

We argue that the precarity of funding to support community-owned non-profit social infrastructure threaten to undermine community resilience in the long-term. In the grips of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and rapid urban transformations at a local level, this sense of precarity is becoming increasingly woven into everyday lives, fundamentally impacting interactions and fuelling a sense of competition for shrinking resources – all of which exacerbates tensions in areas of deprivation. Social infrastructure has been described as the 'scaffolding' for social capital,[40] further underscoring the urgency in sustainably funding 'common interest infrastructures' such as churches, third sector and community spaces.

[39] Gordon et al., 2023
[40] The Cares Family and Power to Change, 2021

2) The social fabric of Britain is now undeniably superdiverse; this should be reflected in policy positions on promoting social cohesion through proactive social infrastructure, by recognising the importance to all members of a community of having strong trusting relationships which are not predefined by national or ethnic affiliations.

In this paper, we have argued that reliance on fixed, narrow understandings of social bonds and bridges in the management of urban relations overlooks the value of 'common interest infrastructures' in fostering social connectedness and belonging across social divides. While trust and reciprocity, both of which are central to Putnam's strands of social capital,[41] continue to hold key relevance for understanding relationships between communities, we suggest that a superdiverse lens offers more productive directions for conceptualising social connectedness in place-based policymaking. While race and ethnicity remain central to understanding inequality in Britain, these are not always the primary social divisions along which relationships of trust are forged. The fallacy of homogenous ethnic groups as the basis of bonds overlooks not only the complexities of social connectedness and cohesion, but also, inherently, communities themselves. As we have highlighted, the recognition of the inherent heterogeneity of bonds enables a more nuanced understanding of how diverse aspirations and interests inform people's engagement with one another, facilitated by local infrastructures. Adopting a superdiverse lens in policymaking offers an opportunity to explore the axes of identities and interests along which people connect and to invest in the spaces that foment social interaction. This in turn offers greater potential for trusting relationships to develop, contributing to social cohesion and community belonging.

3) Policymaking should be supported with evidence-based measures which reflect income inequality and deprivation as drivers of social fragmentation.

It is worth reiterating the calls to direct policy and research towards greater understanding of the relationship between socio-economic deprivation and social cohesion. Not only does the existing evidence base point to the need for this,[42] but such an approach would also bring greater coherence to policymaking, measurement frameworks and the development of new social infrastructure. Building on evidence cited in the British Academy literature review, we suggest it is worth further exploring the relationships between social trust and equality of income and opportunity,[43] compared to shared ethnicity as a factor in social cohesion.

4) Decision-making which has a fundamental impact on local areas should flow through communities; new dispersal should be accompanied with community programmes that utilise social infrastructure to foster interaction, anchoring people to new localities, social contexts and their changing communities.

Tensions between cross-cutting policy fields can be observed in urban decision-making and its impact on neighbourhood interactions. Not only the pace and scale of social change, but more importantly the way this has been managed, is contributing to furthering prejudice and social disconnect. There is a need to better recognise how social cohesion is heavily influenced by top-down decision making and discourses which encourage community division and disempowerment by design. While dispersal remains the current strategy for alleviating pressure on particular areas of the UK, both established and arriving residents should be involved in developing community development programmes, tailored to meet their own needs in adapting to changes in the social fabric and pressure on resources in their local areas. We argue that 'common interest infrastructures' represent a central part of the solution as platforms for cultivating a shared sense of ownership of, and belonging to, newly shaped communities.

41 Putnam, 1995. Robert D. Putnam is a leading American social scientist whose seminal work on social capital, and its categorisation into social bonds, bridges and links, continues to inform much of contemporary scholarship and policy on community relations.
42 Donoghue & Bourke, 2019
43 Baylis et al., 2019

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7 Promoting diversity and place attachment through place-based histories: hybrid material-digital infrastructures and the public realm

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Abstract

This paper explores place-based histories – especially those co-produced with communities, using digital platforms – arguing that they should be considered as an important form of social and cultural infrastructure. Developed with, by and for communities, these place-based histories have the potential to support greater inclusivity, diversity, and community ownership over the material-digital public realm. The paper showcases best practice in the co-production of place-based histories, featuring a range of projects including Know Your Place, Layers of London, Islington's Pride and HistoryPoints. As well as diversifying historical narratives and stories about place, these projects can make an important contribution to local policy making, contributing to Historic Environment Records, democratising access to data and supporting informed debate about local place policy. They can also support a sense of belonging, participation in place, and community pride, and can offer a structured context for engaging with potentially divisive issues such as public monuments and street naming. Realising the potential of these digital projects has required proactive methods to reach and involve a diverse and inclusive range of communities. Like other forms of social infrastructure, hybrid place-based histories need resources to support their development and ongoing maintenance. The digital cannot work alone, but in conjunction with other forms of outreach and engagement.

***Keywords*:** place, history, co-production, digital community

Introduction

In what ways can we understand place-based histories – especially those created with and by local communities – as a form of social and cultural infrastructure? How can making diverse histories visible and accessible in the public realm promote inclusion, widen and diversify participation, and strengthen place attachment, ownership and pride in place among varied community groups? In a digital age, do we need to expand and re-imagine our idea of the public realm itself?

This paper picks up on needs and opportunities identified in the British Academy's *Space for Community: strengthening our social infrastructure* report, including research findings around the 'importance that participants placed on spaces that promoted inclusivity and diversity' and the need for people to feel that spaces 'could be made their "own"'. It also responds to the recommendation that 'social infrastructure in places needs to be mapped and recorded', especially at a local or 'community scale', exploring models for thinking about both 'infrastructure' and 'mapping' in more capacious and ambitious ways for our emerging hybrid material-digital public realm.[1]

Understanding concepts: infrastructure, place-based histories, and co-production

Infrastructure

While 'infrastructure' has typically been understood in terms of physical, material assets and resources, a number of recent projects and publications have proposed a more capacious definition, encompassing both material and other social, cultural and digital systems and structures. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy, for example, has defined social infrastructure as 'those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of a community, and where meaningful relationships, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity are inculcated among local people.'[2] The British Academy and Power to Change report promoted a more flexible understanding of social and cultural infrastructure,

1 British Academy and Power to Change (2023), *Space for Community: Strengthening our social infrastructure* (London: British Academy).

2 Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021), Townscapes: The value of social infrastructure (Cambridge: Bennett Institute for Public Policy), p.11.

comprising physical sites where communities interact (such as libraries, community centres, lidos) as well as other kinds of social networks and practices. For example, the report pointed to the ways both material and virtual infrastructure – such as the neighbourhood park and local WhatsApp group – came together in response to the Covid-19 crisis. According to the report, to be classed as social infrastructure, an asset should be generally easily accessible, contribute to stronger, more cohesive communities, and be open to a range of activities.

Place-based histories

This paper will make the case for place-based histories as a form of social and cultural infrastructure. Place-based histories are best understood as an ecosystem of practices, projects, networks, and outputs which explore history and heritage through the focus of place. This may include the built environment, as well as intangible heritage such as stories and traditions. Place-based histories may be undertaken by professionals, or by grassroots community groups, or a combination of both. The relationship between place and history is complex and rich. Every place is a 'conjunction of many histories and many spaces': the stories of diverse groups and communities.[3] Local place-based histories are valuable as they present an opportunity to surface marginalised voices and tell minority or less dominant and well-established stories about place.[4] Recent research has shown that engagement with place-based history and heritage can deepen place attachment and contribute to pride in place.[5]

Co-production

The language of co-production, or co-creation, first emerged in the context of public service delivery, as a description for a process in which service providers and users work together to design and deliver outcomes.[6] In the context of place-based research, it refers to working '*with* rather than *on* people'[7]: for example, involving local communities in place-based research, place-based research designed and led by grassroots groups, or community-led forms of social and cultural infrastructure, in conjunction with other professional collaboration and support, such as that from local government, Higher Education institutions, local archives and museums and so on. A related term, used in this paper, is *crowdsourcing*, typically used to describe the production and provision of data or content by publics and wider communities, rather than by a small group of project leads or experts.

Case-study projects

This paper grounds its evidence in a selection of place-based, co-produced, digital projects across the UK. We might think of them as infrastructure for a number of reasons, which will be explored through this paper. Fundamentally, they align with the features of social infrastructure identified in the British Academy report: they are generally easily accessible (with some qualifications), they contribute to stronger, more cohesive communities, and they are open to a range of different activities. These highlighted projects offer models of best practice in engaging and involving local communities (including under-represented groups), insights into how place-based histories can be integrated into policy making, and approaches to making diverse stories visible in place. They illustrate opportunities, challenges and risks. They also open up questions about how individuals and communities participate in place both physically and digitally, and how we might re-imagine the public realm as a hybrid material-digital space.

3 Massey, D. (1995), 'Places and their pasts', *History Workshop Journal*, 39: 182–192 (p.191).

4 Driver, F. and Samuel, R. (1995), 'Rethinking the idea of place,' *History Workshop Journal*, 39: v–vii.

5 Madgin, R. (2021), *Why Do Historic Places Matter? Emotional attachments to urban heritage,* project report (Glasgow: University of Glasgow).

6 Gibbons, M. (1994), *The New Production of Knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies* (London: Sage).

7 Pente, E., Ward, P., Brown, M. and Sahota, H. (2015), 'The co-production of historical knowledge: implications for the history of identities', *Identity Papers: A journal of British and Irish studies, 1*(1): 32-53 (p.33).

The coverage of these kind of place-based, co-produced, digital projects across the UK is uneven. Mostly, they are concentrated in metropolitan and larger urban areas, reflecting needs in terms of investment and supporting infrastructure, and raising questions around scale, efficiency and sustainability which will be addressed later in this paper.

Know Your Place

Launched in 2011 in Bristol, Know Your Place (KYP) now covers a wide geography across the west of England, with additional websites covering Somerset, Devon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. The Bristol website regularly receives 6,000 unique page visits per month. The project describes itself as 'a digital heritage mapping resource to help you to explore your neighbourhood online through historic maps, collections and linked information'. It was founded by Pete Insole, Urban Design Team Manager at Bristol City Council, initially as a resource to help satisfy statutory Historic Environment Record obligations and inform planning processes and decision-making. It remains part planning tool, part co-produced place-based history. In addition to its core funding from local government in Bristol and South Gloucestershire, the expanding project has received additional funding from sources including the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and local history and archaeology societies. KYP has also received in-kind support from a wide range of museums, archives, collections, and local councils across the west of England, and has regular volunteer support from over 100 volunteers.

Know Your Place is a teaching resource, a volunteer project, and a space where diverse groups and communities within the local area are represented and brought together. It is also a platform for transparent and accessible data, and publicly-available evidence for policy and procedural discussions (for example, around conservation, planning, and development). KYP models an integrated approach to material and digital in the public realm: a crowdsourced website which represents the historic environment and its histories, and which in turn informs planning and policy decisions.

The KYP website includes a variety of different 'Information Layers' of place-based data, some produced by local government officers, some by local archives and collections, and others contributed by local communities. Its place-based histories include the stories of minority and under-represented groups: a collection on the city's 'Historic Jewish Population', for example, and crowdsourced contributions which map 'LGBT life' in the city, as well as a wide range of 'Oral histories'.

Real-world activities have been essential to establishing and sustaining the project: building public awareness, recognition and participation. These activities include walks, talks, and workshops. Social media has also been effective in making the project visible and discoverable online, alongside print newsletters and weekly face-to-face meetings for volunteers. While crowdsourcing is central to the project, it requires custodianship – moderation of submissions, technical support – promotion, and ongoing funding.[8]

Layers of London

Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (2016-20) and fully launched in 2020, Layers of London brings together 'digitised historic maps, photos and crowd-sourced histories provided by the public and key partners across London'. Based at the Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London, the project is directed by Professor Matthew Davies (Birkbeck, University of London), and involves numerous institutional partners including the British Library, The London Metropolitan Archives, Historic England, The National Archives, MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), as well as a very wide range of community groups and individuals.

[8] Insole, P. (2017), 'Crowdsourcing the story of Bristol' in Baugher, S., Appler, D. and Moss, W. (eds) Urban Archaeology, Municipal Government and Local Planning (Springer: Cham); Nourse, N., Insole, P. and Warren, J. (2017), 'Having a l ovely time: localized crowdsourcing to create a 1900s street view of Bristol from a digitized postcard collection' in Roued-Cunliffe, H. and Copeland, A. (eds) Participatory Heritage (London: Facet).

As of June 2023, Layers of London comprises around 12,500 individual records, pinned to the map. Over 170,000 users have accessed the site and 4,480 participants have taken part in activities. While the development of the platform was technically complex and costly (£1.5m in total, using the map-based platform developed by Humap), the project has achieved a user-friendly interface, sectoral collaboration, conservation of original documents, and democratisation of data. Perhaps most importantly, it has enabled individuals and community groups to take on an active role as creators, disseminators, and decision-makers on aspects of heritage, based on meanings and values that are important to them. Centrally-coordinated projects have included documenting Windrush Arrivals and the Blue Plaques of Black Londoners, while independent use of the platform (that is, originated, devised and delivered by local community groups) has helped share diverse stories including Mapping the Bengali East End, Feminist Walks and the Hackney 'Local List' (listed buildings / built environment features).

Layers of London's co-produced and crowdsourced place-based histories relied on extensive outreach and engagement, including volunteering opportunities, teacher training, webinars, community visits and contributions, and school activities. The project's co-production model assures quality through guidance for contributors, rather than teams of editors evaluating and moderating content.[9]

Islington's Pride

Islington's Pride is another project built on the Humap mapping platform developed commercially by the technical partner of the Layers of London project. The project aims to create a dedicated LGBTQ+ archive at Islington Local History Centre, along with educational resources, and again uses a map-based platform to locate and make visible histories in place. Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Islington Council, Islington's Pride is a grassroots project devised and led by the local community. The project highlights Islington's influential role 'in the growth of the LGBTQ+ community, its organisations and rights through the 20th and into the 21st century'. Its collections and map-based resources cluster around five themes: Campaigning / Politics, Social life, Health / Well-being, Discrimination, and Development of the community.

Islington's Pride offers a valuable model for integrating digital place-based histories into the material environment. The project developed a heritage trail which combines the digital and online map-based archive with fifty pink heritage plaques across the borough. Each pink plaque, at a site significant for the history of LGBTQ+ communities in Islington, corresponds to a 'pin' on the digital map. The plaque features introductory text, and a QR code directs the viewer to the fuller content on the online map. The plaques serve to make the online map discoverable in physical place, linking together material and digital elements within the public realm, and forming a point of entry to the digital resource.

HistoryPoints

With a focus and reach across Wales, HistoryPoints delivers historical information to the public using QR codes at 1,400 places of interest, including buildings, other structures, parks, memorials, art installations and more. These QR codes link to information about place-based histories on the project website. It is primarily a voluntary project, set up by volunteers in 2012, offering 'a platform for non-profit groups'. Content is submitted to the website by volunteer and public-sector groups and organisations, including Women's Archive Wales, local history societies, archaeological trusts, museums and communities of interest (for example the Welsh Place-Name Society). Some content is commissioned. The content of the website's place-based histories is wide-ranging. Elements which foreground minority histories or support inclusion and diversity include content on women's archive materials, and histories of slavery. The project presents content in a range of different linguistic formats: all pages are in English, some are translated into Welsh (and other languages), and in Conwy the QR codes also link to British Sign language videos with voiceover and subtitles.

[9] Cullum, A., Jarvis, P. and Unitt, C. (2020), Layers of London: Evaluation report (London: Institute of Historical Research).

As with the digital place-based history projects discussed already, HistoryPoints offers a platform to smaller community and special-interest groups which would not be able to develop a substantial online presence of their own. It achieves a significant multiplier effect in bringing together many groups and content contributions. It also employs a clear strategy for making its digital map-based resources discoverable in the public realm, again using QR codes.

Other example projects across the UK

A number of other co-produced place-based histories, delivered through online mapping platforms, exist or are in various stages of development. With a local focus, Coventry City of Culture Trust's Coventry Atlas (again using the Humap platform) brings together archive and museum collections with crowdsourced histories to showcase the city's cultural and heritage, as part of the city's tenure of the UK 'City of Culture' title. Created by Coventry Digital (the University of Coventry's online repository) and Culture Coventry (the Transport Museum, the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, the Coventry Archive, the Roman Lunt Fort, and more), with local community groups and participants, the project currently comprises 5,581 records, 176 collections, 40 historical map overlays, and eight walkable trails. Varied records and collections (themed groups of records) have a focus on tangible and intangible culture, ranging from histories of buildings (present, former, and at risk) to locations associated with Coventry comedian Guz Khan, 'Rap, Hip Hop and Grime', the Diwali-inspired 'Carnival of Lights', and 'Caribbean Reggae Fever', co-created with Coventry Caribbean Association, ArawaK Community Trust and ArawaK Radio.

The Everyday Muslim Heritage and Archive Initiative, which aims to create a British Muslim presence in the archive world, is in the early stages of developing plans (and seeking funding) for a 'Muslim History Maps' project. This aims to digitally map archival material relating to the Muslim community in Britain, including material held in existing archives (such as the British Library and Wellcome Trust) as well as cultural institutions and mosques, together with crowdsourced personal and community histories. This resource would enable place-based Muslim histories to be linked to locations across the UK.

The Victoria County History of England project (VCH), based at the Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London, has been producing histories of places across England since 1899, covering all aspects of their history from the earliest times to the present day. Increasingly, VCH histories are co-produced with local community groups right across England. The VCH smartphone app 'A History of English Places', launched in 2020, made many of these histories available, accessed for the first time from a map-based platform and geolocated, meaning that they are discoverable (for app subscription users) in place.

In Scotland, several projects offer elements of digital place-based infrastructure, with varying focuses and varying degrees of participatory or co-produced content. The People's Parish aims 'to inspire and support creative neighbourhood projects in each of Scotland's 871 civil parishes, connecting local stories, traditions and cultural memory with the distinct local voices, culture and creativity of our places today'. The project is currently active in 14 communities across Scotland, including smaller market towns and more rural locations such as Dumbarton and Kilwinning, based on the principle that the civil parish – as a historical unit of place and government – is 'a useful starting point to describe the scale at which people feel a sense of familiarity, ownership and belonging'. Scotland's Places has wide reach across the nation, bringing together place-based collections and resources from Historic Environment Scotland, National Records of Scotland, and the National Library of Scotland, though the co-produced dimension is limited to opportunities for document transcription by the public. Other resources, such as Understanding Scottish Places, provide place-based and demographic data, but without community-led or co-produced elements. Future Museum was a regional collaboration between a consortium of museums in south-west Scotland (Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway), which digitised collections in a place-based format (maps) and pointed towards ambitions for interactivity, However, the project now appears inactive, and website functionality lost.

The case-study projects highlighted here represent a range of institutions and organisations supporting place-based histories, from local government to Higher Education to the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector, to charities, grassroots communities and community-interest groups, and SMEs. The co-produced digital projects they have created all bear the crucial features of social infrastructure, as identified by the British Academy report: they are generally easily accessible, they contribute to stronger, more cohesive communities, and they are open to a range of different activities – though their nature as digital, crowdsourced platforms means that some of these categories require nuance and re-imagining.

It is significant that the geographical coverage of digital place-based projects – especially those involving co-creation with communities – across the UK is uneven. It is unsurprising that most of these projects are concentrated in higher-population urban and metropolitan areas, with the notable exceptions of the Know Your Place extensions beyond Bristol into the more rural counties of the south-west of England (through the support of a consortium of local councils), and The People's Parish in Scotland. Reflecting on the location and geographical range of these projects raises important questions of scale. On the one hand it appears, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the viability of these projects is linked to the scale of investment, local infrastructure, and size of local communities able to engage. Yet, alongside this, it is notable that several projects choose to structure their resources by place-based units at the smallest scale: for example, in the case of the Victoria County History and The People's Parish, the historic parish.

Place-based histories as social infrastructure for diversity and participation

The digital place-based histories explored in this paper can all be understood as forms of social infrastructure which promote widening participation in place, and make visible diverse histories and community heritages. Importantly, these digital platforms, and their crowdsourcing or co-production methodologies, have created a space for diverse communities to tell their own stories. They offer a high-profile, wider-reaching platform for minority groups and smaller or special-interest communities to share their place-based histories. There is evidence that communities have formed around the digital resources themselves: for example, the volunteers who continue to develop Know Your Place, or the community groups who have engaged with and contributed to Layers of London, to showcase their own histories. There is also clear evidence that different community groups make use of these place-based history platforms for their own purposes and needs: the resources are flexible, adaptable, and extensible. We might imagine them as virtual community centres which provide opportunities for intergenerational contact, cultural exchange, and performance or exhibition.

The projects also offer important models of best practice for engagement and inclusion. They employ imaginative methodologies and approaches for reaching and involving different community groups. For example, the Coventry Atlas successfully included Caribbean communities via a showcase on reggae music, with partnership from ArawaK radio and the ArawaK community group. Layers of London made visible the heritage of Greek-Cypriot communities by curating a co-produced collection on local and family-run restaurants (Greek and Greek Cypriot Gastronomy in London).

There are rich opportunities to draw on these community-led place-based histories to inform interventions in the public realm which make diverse communities and histories more visible: for example, to suggest monuments and art installations, or to inform the choice of street names and building names in new developments.

Place-based histories and policy

These digital projects present clear models for involving local communities in policy-making, and for mobilising place-based histories to inform policy and decision-making, especially around planning, development and regeneration. While the movement online has often been seen to have erased the local – in media, in the public sphere, in democratic participation – these community-led digital mappings have proven potential to renew and revitalise engagement with localities and neighbourhoods. Know Your Place is the clearest example of incorporating place-based histories into policy-making, with the crowdsourced histories directly linked to the Historic Environment Record and managed by Bristol City Council as a resource to inform planning and conservation. The project embodies an intrinsic inter-relationship of material and digital realms in place. The Layers of London collection Hackney's Local List was created by a local community group concerned about the area's regeneration and development and keen to see listed buildings celebrated and protected: a grassroots intervention in local place policy and management of the historic environment. The co-produced nature of these digital place-based histories, bringing together grassroots groups and institutions such as museums and archives, means that data is made accessible and democratised, opening and informing debate. There are clear further opportunities for drawing on this community-led, place-based infrastructure in planning and development, for example in neighbourhood plans and design codes.

Needs and risks

Digital place-based histories have a range of support and resourcing needs which must be an important consideration. While these are virtual, online projects, they require – as with any form of social infrastructure – funding and sustained investment. The success of such projects relies on real-world engagement and outreach as well as digital tools. While the crowdsourcing model centres volunteers, the need for leadership and management (and, often, volunteer training and support) remains. There are inherent vulnerabilities for any projects powered largely by volunteer labour and driven by charismatic leadership or individual vision. There is a tension between place-based identities and notions of belonging, which are often experienced and expressed at a hyper-local scale, and the resource requirements for digital infrastructure, which often make projects viable only at a large scale, with substantial investment and backing. Digital projects present additional needs and risks in terms of sustainability, with requirements for development and testing, then ongoing hosting, maintenance, security and upgrades. But the need for continuing, reliable funding is of course not a concern only for digital projects. As with any community-based project, 'cliff-edge' funding cut-offs and funding gaps can compromise the long-term relationships and trust built with local communities, and can jeopardise engagement with (and especially contribution to) resources.

Social infrastructure in a hybrid public realm: digital and material

How can we draw and build on the evidence of the case-study projects to extend and deepen our understanding of relationships between the physical or material and digital in place? First, the accessibility of digital social infrastructure is key. While the case-study projects pay serious attention to 'meeting people where they are' in the physical world (community centres, cafes, cultural sites), this ethos could fruitfully be extended to the digital world, also, with an emphasis (resource dependent) on linking websites to the online spaces where target communities and user constituencies spend time, enhancing discoverability and participation. It is important to note that wider barriers exist to digital participation among adults across the UK.[10] The greatest potential for bringing digital infrastructure for place-based history and the real-world environment together is in resources which are easily accessed and used on mobile devices (that is, 'mobile-friendly' digital design), as well as resources which use geolocation to link content to geographical sites.

[10] Ofcom, (2022), Digital Exclusion: *A review of Ofcom's research on digital exclusion among adults in the UK* (London: Ofcom).

The case-study projects analysed here show that the digital cannot work alone: it can only be successful in conjunction with in-person, real-world activities and infrastructure. The digital must be discoverable, both online and in the public realm, through a range of tools including events, signs, QR codes, links, print information, and exhibitions. We might begin to think of the connection points between the digital and physical in the public realm as 'portals': signposts and gateways which allow individuals to move between the virtual and material in place. These portals encompass both physical infrastructure (plaques, signage) and practices (engagement, outreach). The enhancement of place through the use of online content and Augmented Reality is an established methodology in heritage interpretation,[11] but there are under-exploited opportunities for virtual and digital material to be integrated in the public realm more widely, as part of a more holistic material-digital infrastructure for place and place-making.

While such a vision of a hybrid material-digital public realm may sound ambitious or specialist, wide adoption of a range of technologies shows that people already have the skills to move seamlessly between online and physical worlds in their navigation and experience of place. Many people now use Google Maps as their primary tool for finding their way in place, engaging also with its recommendations, information, and other interpretative content. In the context of wider pressures on local High Streets, the Covid-19 crisis pushed local councils, innovators and entrepreneurs to develop forms of 'virtual High Street' which preserve the geographical relationship of businesses while providing online discoverability and retail platforms. Many – though far from all – individuals are now adept at moving intuitively between material and digital realms.

Re-imagining the public realm as a hybrid material-digital space opens up new opportunities for strengthening participation and diversity in place, and for thinking more capaciously and creatively about forms of social infrastructure. We might understand all these digital place-based histories as social infrastructure which is overlaid, in place, onto physical, real-world environments. A hybrid material-digital public realm – in which there are ready points of crossover, or portals, between the two – offers more varied sites for engagement and participation. It also presents significant additional opportunities for making diverse and often hidden histories visible and present in place, and for showcasing the contributions of diverse communities.

Implications for policymakers

Place-based policy and development is a complex area in which policy-makers and agencies at different tiers are engaged: in England, local governments as well as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (and others), with similar complexities in the devolved nations (for example, local authorities in Wales as well as Communities and Housing, and Local Government in the Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament). There are always risks that responsibility and resourcing may fall through the cracks, or that approaches are fragmented. While many interventions proposed here are at a local level – and are contingent on local community priorities – there are obvious needs for higher-level government policy commitments: around digital access and inclusion in the public realm, resourcing, supporting and widening participation in democratic processes, and connecting and sharing best practice in place-based social infrastructure.

- Co-produced place-based histories, together with their digital platforms, can be understood as a form of social infrastructure.
- Co-produced place-based histories can involve people in place and place-making, including development strategies and programmes. They can open up and democratise bureaucratic processes.

[11] tom Dieck, M. C. and Jung, T. H. (2017), 'Value of augmented reality at cultural heritage sites: A stakeholder approach', *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, *6*(2): 110-117.

- Community-led and co-created place-based history has important potential for widening participation in place, making diversity visible, and renewing and revitalising the civic.
- Place-based histories have direct value in terms of identifying policy needs, informing policy interventions at a granular local level (such as planning and development policy, neighbourhood plans and design codes), and informing public realm design interventions to make diversity visible (for example, monuments, installations and street names).
- Like built social infrastructure, digital infrastructure has ongoing resource and investment needs. There is an urgent need to think about how the historical materials gathered as part of some of the projects described here can be maintained and archived for future generations.
- There are challenges around scale and geographical coverage. Current geographical coverage of digital place-based history infrastructure (especially resources involving community co-creation) is uneven across the UK. The greater concentration of these projects in high-population urban areas reflects investment needs and issues around viability. Yet place-identity is often experienced and expressed at a hyper-local scale. A major and transformative policy intervention would be creation of a nationwide digital infrastructure for place-based histories, which could be accessed and used by communities across the UK.
- Digital infrastructure does not work on its own, but needs strategies for discoverability and sites or practices of connection between material and online worlds (‘portals’).
- Policymakers should think capaciously about the public realm as a hybrid material-digital space, in which physical and online / virtual content interacts.
- Policymakers should anticipate divergent views when initiating conversations about how histories are made visible in the public realm, whether through street names, monuments, or digital infrastructure. They should develop strategies for facilitating constructive debate and ensuring all voices are welcomed and heard.

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tom Dieck, M. C., and Jung, T. H. (2017), 'Value of augmented reality at cultural heritage sites: A stakeholder approach', *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 6*(2): 110-117.

8 Lives online: digital social infrastructures

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Abstract

The roles that online spaces now play in our democracy and our societies make it crucial that digital social infrastructures are acknowledged and governed effectively. This paper reframes the concept of 'space for community' through the lens of digital social infrastructures, and the challenges and opportunities of this development. Ensuring that policies support the strengthening of digital social infrastructure is imperative to the UK's social and cultural fabric. To consider how to wrestle with the challenges and opportunities presented by digital social infrastructure, we need to consider how policy levers can be used. This concept paper argues that we need a policy framework that specifically acknowledges three key ways that online spaces are providing important social infrastructure for communities' economic and social development. Firstly, this paper explores how societies can build capacity to ensure a coherent approach across government to the policy challenges of digital social infrastructures. Secondly, the paper examines how social digital infrastructures can be strengthened, and ensure these spaces best serve users. Finally, the paper examines how we can ensure online environments are safe for all users.

***Keywords*:** Digital, online, democracy, policy, social

Introduction

People increasingly rely on online tools for connecting with and building community. Apps and online services now supplement what were once publicly provided goods and services. At times, these goods and services compete with or substitute for the public provision of them. Online spaces are now crucial facets of social and cultural infrastructure. From online interactions during the Covid-19 pandemic, to flourishing digital public spaces, the role that digital technology plays in communities today often intertwines both social and cultural infrastructure. The term 'digital social infrastructures' has been used to describe the relationship between the digital sphere and social infrastructure.[1] In this paper, we use this definition to highlight the increasingly significant role that online spaces play in society, often as tools for both social and cultural interventions. In using the term 'digital social infrastructures' in this paper, our aim is to question how strengthening online social infrastructures might better support prosocial interactions, social cohesion and cultural interventions.

In its 2022 *Levelling Up* white paper, the UK government emphasised the significant role that digital technologies play in society.[2] The *Levelling Up* white paper focussed on the physical capital benefits of digital technologies, for example, how investment in broadband infrastructure and digital skills helps communities grow economically. We focus here on another role for digital technologies to play: providing a key aspect of social infrastructure through their impact on social capital and community building.

This concept paper argues that we need a policy framework that specifically acknowledges three key ways that online spaces are providing important social infrastructure for communities' economic and social development. Firstly, digital tools and services play an increasingly important role in building and maintaining social fabric. Secondly, online spaces are critical for democratic participation, but they are affected by the dual nature of online social infrastructure as both public and private. Thirdly, societies increasingly rely on digital connections for social infrastructure, more generally, which presents both challenges and opportunities.

[1] Yann P. M. Rees, Kurtenbach, S, Rosenberger, K and Küchler, A, Towards Digital Social Infrastructure? Digital Neighborly Connectedness as a Social Resource, *Urban Planning*, (Vol 7, No 4) (2022): Localizing Social Infrastructures: Welfare, Equity, and Community)

[2] Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, pxxi, accessed 10/08/2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

This paper provides a series of provocations for policymakers on the concept of 'digital social infrastructures'. Building on the key terminology and language of the *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure* report,[3] our paper reframes the concept of 'space for community' through the lens of digital social infrastructures, and the challenges and opportunities of this development. Doing so, we think, will advance policy thinking in three key ways. Firstly, it will highlight how government and policy making capacity can be served by accounting for the role that digital social infrastructure plays in our lives. Secondly, attention to online social infrastructure is needed in the UK so that policy makers, governments, civil society, industries and communities can strengthen and expand this key resource. Finally, this will help ensure that people work to make digital social infrastructures safe for all users, as social inclusion will increasingly rely on this infrastructure.

The shift to a sense of publicness online has not been met with a thoughtful framework for policies that could help civil society and governments address what is necessary for supporting good societies in the digital era. We need policy frameworks that adequately acknowledge the role platforms play in influencing society.

Space for community: The role of digital in building and maintaining social fabric

The 'online' is now our public square, our town hall, government office, and community bulletin board. In recent decades, digital technologies have become a mainstay for many traditional high street services within the community. For example, the rise and growth of digital banking has been seen by the UK Government to have increased access to financial services for many individuals.[4]

Digital spaces have become an integral part of our social ecosystem and must be recognised for this contribution. As crucial forums for social interaction and cohesion, online spaces must be considered as places, with equal consideration as physical spaces in the offline world. Eli Pariser and Talia Stroud have termed these 'digital public spaces' and argued that 'thriving societies require flourishing public spaces, offline and online.'[5] Through careful qualitative and quantitative research they identified the 14 'civil signals' that matter most for platforms to serve as public spaces: 'A flourishing digital public space should be welcoming and safe to all, help us understand and make sense of the world, connect people near and far across hierarchies and divides, and enable us to act together.'[6]

In the *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure* report, the authors describe how social infrastructure is integral to social capital.[7] The *Levelling Up* white paper also emphasised the importance of social capital, defined as: 'the strength of communities, relationships and trust.'[8] Digital technologies and online platforms were not considered in this section of the white paper. In considering digital technological benefits to communities through a purely physical capital lens, rather than as social capital, the white paper was a missed opportunity to shine a light on the role that online spaces play as the contemporary infrastructure through which social capital is accrued, maintained and shared, and how digital

3 *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure*, British Academy
4 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, pxxi, accessed 10/08/2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf
5 New Public, 'Purpose' https://newpublic.org/purpose
6 New Public, 'Interactive' https://newpublic.org/interactive
7 Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure, British Academy, p10
8 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, pxv, accessed 10/08/2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

social infrastructures can help people strengthen communities, build relationships and develop trust—or the opposite.

The use of digital social infrastructure was particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many types of social connections relied exclusively on online spaces.[9] While platforms, websites and other forms of online media were not equally available to all, they provide acute examples of the role that digital social infrastructure played in creating viable alternatives to physical infrastructure for some communities. For example, Facebook has been seen to be a valuable asset for community driven interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing a space for 'digital citizens' to continue building social communities during a time when physical interaction was limited.[10] While interaction will flux and change again now the pandemic is over, there will be many new groups, communities and types of interaction born out of the pandemic that will be reliant on online spaces, further embedding them into communities around the world. The pandemic has cemented our reliance on online spaces for community engagement, and must be met with policy levers that reflect that, and which will benefit the social fabric.

Democracy, online spaces and the social fabric

Social infrastructures are vital to supporting democracy, and the spaces used for interaction matter for both how people connect with one another, and how society functions.[11] As online platforms become increasingly embedded as social infrastructure, the impact that this will have on our democracies must be acknowledged.

Researchers have referred to our recent political era as 'platform society', where platform companies, users, advertisers, governments, and other political actors are all key actors in the contemporary world of political influence.[12] For example, at numerous times in the last decade, Twitter was referred to by both employees and the media as the 'global town square', or in other descriptive terms that implied it as holding a significant role in the public sphere.[13] Whether or not this was true, it demonstrates the way that digital platforms and digital spaces have been adopted informally across society as an extension of the public realm, for a multitude of purposes. Significant proportion of our digital sphere is privately owned, meaning that very often people do not have a choice in how they access online communities through private platforms. The recent takeover of Twitter and the change in the platform's governance[14] has highlighted the precarity of such online spaces. Furthermore, some researchers now see platforms as political actors in their own right, instead of intermediaries and facilitators of free speech.[15]

This has led some researchers to call for publicly owned or maintained spaces. As Ethan Zuckerman of the University of Massachusetts Initiative for Public Digital Infrastructure argues, 'The real civic impact of a wave of innovation in special-purpose social networks would go beyond learning about how online communities can be better managed… to contemplate the true integration of online and offline civic processes.[16]

Regardless of the mechanism for strengthening online social infrastructures, the roles that

9 Yann P. M. Rees, Kurtenbach, S, Rosenberger, K and Küchler, A, Towards Digital Social Infrastructure? Digital Neighborly Connectedness as a Social Resource, Urban Planning, (Vol 7, No 4) (2022): Localizing Social Infrastructures: Welfare, Equity, and Community) https://www.cogitatiopress.com/urbanplanning/article/view/5773

10 Nandy, R. Facebook and the Covid-19 Crisis: Building Solidarity Through Community Feeling. Hu Arenas 5, 609–619 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00171-1

11 Klinenberg E. *Palaces for the People,* Penguin (2019).

12 Gowra, R, What is Platform Governance? Information, Communication & Society Volume 22, 2019 - Issue 6: AoIR Special Issue, Pages 854-871

13 How Twitter lost its place as the global town square, Taylor Lorenz, Washington Post, accessed August 2023 https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/07/twitter-dead-musk-tiktok-public-square/

14 Elon Musk Completes $44 Billion Deal to Own Twitter, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/27/technology/elon-musk-twitter-deal-complete.html accessed 17/08/2023

15 Helberger, Natali, The Political Power of Platforms: How Current Attempts to Regulate Misinformation Amplify Opinion Power, Digital Journalism Volume 8, 2020. Pages 842-854

16 Zuckerman, Ethan. 2020. "The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure." Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University. Retrieved November 20, 2023 (http://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure).

online spaces now play in our democracy and our societies make it crucial that digital social infrastructures are acknowledged and governed effectively.

Challenges and opportunities of societies' increasing reliance on digital connections for social infrastructure

The growth of digital connections as a form of social infrastructure presents many challenges and opportunities for governments and regulators, to ensure effective community development, social cohesion and to protect and defend democracy in the online age. In the following section, we will examine some of the opportunities and challenges, including the offline impact of online interaction, the importance of digital social infrastructure in delivering public services and examine the bias embedded in online spaces.

Opportunities

1) Offline benefits of online interaction

Online interaction is not limited to the online space where it takes place, and can have significant impacts in the offline world. The earliest debates about internet use were on how social capital created online might augment or substitute for so-called offline connections.[17] Since then, scholars have recognised that online interaction can take many forms, including participation in community groups and online forums. Pendry and Salvatore have noted the significant benefits that can come from participation in online forums, that extends in the offline world. They argue that not only does participation in online forums increase user well-being, but can also lead to engagement with civic offline interaction.[18] By acknowledging the reality and importance of digital social infrastructures, they can be used to effectively benefit society offline.

2) Increasingly effective delivery of public services

Ensuring delivery of public services is a crucial facet of the social contract between government and citizens, and digital tools are becoming essential to being able to deliver this effectively.[19] The UK Government's Levelling Up white paper makes reference to the need for digital connectivity to ensure our communities thrive.[20] In 2022, a report from the OECD stated that digital adaptation was essential to delivering public services that are 'user-driven, inclusive, resilient, innovative and trustworthy'.[21] This presents an opportunity for governments to use the capabilities of digital social infrastructure to create increasingly effective governance structures that better suit communities and citizens. How governments and regulators adopt frameworks that utilise digital social infrastructure will be crucial in maintaining the social fabric in years to come.

Challenges

1) Platform governance and regulation

With the integral role that platforms now play in shaping democracy, we need to ensure that systems of platform governance are sufficient to deal with the role that online spaces play as digital social infrastructure.

Platforms are facing a renewed wave of legislation globally that will likely impact how these businesses operate in the next few years. From the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA) in Europe, the Online Safety Bill in the UK and California's Age-Appropriate

17 Smith, Marc A., Steven M. Drucker, Robert Kraut, and Barry Wellman. 1999. "Counting on Community in Cyberspace." P. 87 in CHI '*99 extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems - CHI* '99. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: ACM Press.

18 Louise F. Pendry, Jessica Salvatore, Computers in Human Behavior Volume 50, September 2015, Pages 211-220 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.067

19 Welby, B. and E. Hui Yan Tan (2022), "Designing and delivering public services in the digital age", *OECD Going Digital Toolkit Notes,* No. 22, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e056ef99-en.

20 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, pxxi, accessed 10/08/2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052706/Levelling_Up_WP_HRES.pdf

21 Welby, B. and E. Hui Yan Tan (2022), "Designing and delivering public services in the digital age", *OECD Going Digital Toolkit Notes,* No. 22, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e056ef99-en.

Design Code Act, there are many recent examples of how governments and regulators are legislating this area.

Some of these legislative developments have taken a catch-all approach, such as the Online Safety Bill in the UK, where broad brush legislation is being used to cover a multitude of different online topics.[22] These includes advertising, content moderation and child safety, and individual politicians' pet projects around topics such as immigration.[23] Others have taken more specific approaches, such as the splitting out of the topic in Europe through the DSA and DMA.[24] The different approaches offer a stark issue, that platforms will likely continue to be legislated differently in jurisdictions globally. This will have ramifications for platform governance over the next few years, and this will be a challenge for governments and regulators, and also for communities as they navigate and build new online social spaces.

Furthermore, legislative developments are placing significant responsibility on platforms and users themselves. The role of platforms and users in platform governance must be considered through a lens of the platforms' role as digital social infrastructure. For example, the Online Safety Bill in the UK currently puts significant responsibility on platforms to provide users with empowerment tools to tailor the type of content they see.[25] Placing the onus on the end user and platform will mean legislators will continue to have less opportunity to facilitate and administer platforms in their valuable role as digital social infrastructures.

When users do connect, how they navigate these private spaces often entails considerations that prioritise individuals and individual choice over public and social values. Thus, protecting public and social life becomes a vital role that policy should consider in evaluating digital infrastructures. If government policy continues to place responsibility with platforms and users, this is likely to mean that decision-making on online spaces that acts as key digital social infrastructures are by private individuals and corporations.

2) Bias in digital systems

As more and more of human communication, interaction and community building moves online, considering how bias is entrenched in these systems is crucial to ensuring that communities engaging with platforms can thrive online. For example, there is evidence that social platforms, quickly becoming major tools for job searches and advertisements, have been producing biased results.[26] We need internet infrastructure that does not reinforce inequality.[27] How we can account for bias in these systems will become crucial to maintaining the social fabric.

Meredith Broussard has shown how many digital systems reinforce inequality, with racism and sexism built in, in services including mortgage lending and medical diagnostics.[28] Such technologies are becoming vital facets of social infrastructure, and policy levers must ensure that these systems are equitable. There is significant evidence of the entrenched racial bias in emerging and existing digital technologies, that can replicate social divisions.[29] Safiya Noble has explored how a multitude of oppressive conditions through the internet and its infrastructure impact Black life in the US and in the African diaspora.[30] Tackling racial bias is crucial to

[22] A guide to the Online Safety Bill https://www.gov.uk/guidance/a-guide-to-the-online-safety-bill accessed 15/08/2023

[23] Scott M, and Dickson, A, *How UK's Online Safety Bill fell victim to never-ending political crisis,* Politico.EU https://www.politico.eu/article/online-safety-bill-uk-westminster-politics/ accessed 15/09/2023

[24] The Digital Services Act package, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package, accessed 15/08/2023

[25] A guide to the Online Safety Bill https://www.gov.uk/guidance/a-guide-to-the-online-safety-bill accessed 16/08/2023

[26] UNESCO, OECD, ID (2022). The Effects of AI on the Working Lives of Women, p46

[27] Paris, B. S., Cath, C., & West, S. M. (2023). Radical infrastructure: Building beyond the failures of past imaginaries for networked communication. New Media & Society, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231152546

[28] Broussard, M, *More than a Glitch Confronting Race, Gender, and Ability Bias in Tech*, MIT Press

[29] Benjamin R (2019b) *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code.* 1st ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[30] Noble SU (2016) A future for intersectional black feminist technology studies. *Scholar & Feminist Online* 13(3): 1–2. Available at: https://sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/safiya-umoja-noble-a-future-for-intersectional-black-feminist-technology-studies/

ensuring that online spaces play a positive role in the social fabric.

3) Offline impact of online interaction

Online spaces can have real world consequences for individuals offline. Online harms against women have a chilling effect, with much evidence that it has the potential to impact women offline.[31] For example, a study of over 900 journalists and media workers in 125 countries by UNESCO found that 73 percent of women surveyed had experienced online violence, and 20 percent said that they had experienced physical attacks or had been abused offline in connection to online abuse.[32] This highlights not only the link between the online and offline worlds, but also the risks specifically facing women online.

Solutions

Ensuring that policies support the strengthening digital social infrastructure is imperative to the UK's social and cultural fabric. To consider how to wrestle with the challenges and opportunities presented by digital social infrastructure, we need to consider how policy levers can be used. In this, we present three provocations:

1) Building capacity: how we can ensure a coherent approach across government to the policy challenges of digital social infrastructures

2) Strengthening social digital infrastructures: how we can ensure these spaces best serve users

3) Ensuring the freedom to participate: how we can ensure online spaces are safe for all users.

Recommendation 1: Building capacity

First, we need to build significant capacity in social policy to address the scope, scale and speed needed for good digital policies for social infrastructure. To do so will require policy coherence in Whitehall.

Currently, multiple government departments are responsible for delivering major priorities across digital policies and digital infrastructures. The newly minted Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has responsibility for digital infrastructure development and online legislation such as the Online Safety Bill.[33] The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, supports community groups and the broader levelling up agenda as set out in the *Levelling Up* white paper.[34] Good social policy should always consider digital social infrastructures, and doing so can help cut across functional lines in UK policy, especially between digital and community policy.

31 Neff, G, The Internet Is at Risk of Driving Women Away, *WIRED*, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/women-internet-harassment accessed 16/08/2023

32 UNESCO, OECD, ID (2022). The Effects of AI on the Working Lives of Women, p57

33 About us, *Department for Science, Innovation and Technology*, https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-science-innovation-and-technology/about accessed 16/08/2023

34 Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-levelling-up-housing-and-communities accessed 16/08/2023

We call for a cross-departmental working group to consider digital social infrastructures, and how best Whitehall structures can facilitate their growth in a way that accurately reflects the role of digital social infrastructures in society. Furthermore, there is also a role for local government to play in translating the role of local community groups into complementary online spaces.

Recommendation 2: Strengthening social digital infrastructures

We need platform governance frameworks that work in the benefit of communities and users. Strengthening trust in digital systems will be crucial to maintaining the social fabric in years to come. To take an example from business, when online systems create trust and build to embed users in successful online communities, results have shown that customers derive value and perceive the sponsoring organisation in a positive light.[35] While this is just one example, if governments take the lead in germinating strong communities online, this could have benefits across society and the social fabric.

The need for top-down regulation around online communities is likely to become more acute in the next decade as metaverse technologies continue to develop. For example, the 'physicalised nature' of metaverse environments poses new risks to users who are operating in extended reality and virtual reality online spaces.[36] We need systems of platform governance that work in the interest of the communities they serve. While many platforms may do this already, many do not. We propose the creation of a 'digital social code' of values for best practice across digital social infrastructures. Similar codes, such as codes of conduct, are implemented across many online and offline community-driven enterprises. Such a framework could be replicated effectively top-down from government, to ensure consistent values are at the heart of online spaces that play a role in our social fabric.

We also need clearly articulated principles of safety-by-design for any system operating as a form of digital social infrastructure.[37] Safety-by-design is a preventative way to use platform design to reduce the risks of harms to users. This will help ensure digital systems are safe and trustworthy.[38]

Recommendation 3: Ensuring the freedom to participate

As digital social infrastructures play increasingly important roles in how our society communicates and interacts, we need to ensure that everyone has equal freedom to participate in safe online environments.

One recommendation from the British Academy's report, *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure* was that social infrastructure needed to be open, accessible, and inclusive.[39] Digital spaces are an acute example that demonstrates the social ramifications when principles of openness, accessibility and inclusivity are not adhered to. Different groups within a community value, experience and interact differently within the same digital social and cultural infrastructure. For example, women and marginalised people experience online harms more 'chronically' than other people do.[40] This means that there is often a tension between ensuring freedom of expression online and people's freedom of participation in online digital communities.

[35] C E Porter and N Donthu, Cultivating Trust and Harvesting Value in Virtual Communities, *Management Science*, Vol. 54, No. 1 https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1070.0765

[36] S, Pierson, Securing the Metaverse, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, 2023, https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.99564 p3

[37] Written evidence: Safety-by-Design in the Draft Online Safety Bill, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, https://www.mctd.ac.uk/written-evidence-safety-by-design-in-the-draft-online-safety-bill/, accessed 17/08/2023

[38] *Principles of safer online platform design*, UK Government https://www.gov.uk/guidance/principles-of-safer-online-platform-design accessed 17/08/2023

[39] Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure, *British Academy*, p7

[40] Neff G and Chowdhury R. Platforms Are Fighting Online Abuse—but Not the Right Kind. *Wired* 28 Feb 2023.

It is important that governments regulate socially harmful online speech to ensure that everyone has the freedom to participate. We need to create online social spaces that have freedom of participation at their heart. The creation of such environments where everyone is entitled to participate in a safe and open space is crucial to maintaining the social fabric in our societies.

Freedom to participate also requires access. This paper has brought forward a number of examples of online platforms and the role they play in developing today's social fabric. We acknowledge that these platforms are not available to all. Ensuring that everyone can participate in online spaces will require new ways of considering how integral digital social infrastructure is both governed and distributed. Ofcom's 2023 Technology Tracker reports that 7% of households still lack access to internet in the home on any device, with this rising to almost 20% for households with people over 65 or with incomes less than £15,000.[41] Equitable access for many groups across society will be needed before digital social infrastructure can be relied upon solely as places for social cohesion and community building for everyone.

Conclusion

In conclusion, online spaces have become key assets in our social capital. The levelling up agenda needs to be reframed to ensure that digital technologies are considered part of our social fabric, rather than just intermediary technology that provides physical capital.

Social infrastructures present many opportunities and challenges to society, which make it imperative that digital social infrastructures are recognised for the value they provide. For example, the offline impact of online interaction has benefits, but also can have tremendous negative impact on members of our society. The private nature of many of these spaces demonstrates the precarity and governance risks of online spaces, for communities and democracy. We need government legislation that protects and enhances these key facets of social infrastructure. The bias of many online systems also requires to be adequately recognised to ensure online spaces contribute positively to the social fabric.

Capacity must be built in government to consider online spaces as social infrastructure, and a cross-departmental working group in Whitehall could help to do this. Thinking about community led policy through the lens of digital social infrastructure will ensure that values-led participation is considered in both digital and community policy. We also need to strengthen our social digital infrastructure. The creation of a 'digital social code' of values for best practice across digital social infrastructures could ensure consistent values are at the heart of online spaces that play a role in our social fabric.

41 OfCom Technology Tracker 2023 Data tables, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/262510/technology-tracker-2023-data-tables.pdf#page=217

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9 Digital place making – strengthening social fabric connecting people, places and spaces

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Abstract

Using 'digital place making' as the conceptual framework, I propose that digital space can strengthen social connections as a digital social infrastructure. With a conceptual discussion on space, place and people interacting within them as well as a review of existing evidence, I offer three policy insights on digital place making as below:

First, digital place as a social infrastructure can act as a bridge between different physical spaces improving inclusivity and strengthening the social fabric tying together diverse groups within communities. For example, community apps such as NextDoor help to facilitate interactions in physical spaces. Policies on digital social infrastructure building should focus on its constructive role in creating bridges between physical spaces instead of substituting digital for physical space. Secondly, for digital infrastructure to be a social infrastructure to strengthen social cohesion, it should bridge people within the spaces. The increasing salience of digitalisation has created problems of exclusivity. Rural communities or older people, for example, may be less likely to find digital social infrastructure accessible. Policymakers should tackle the 'digital divide' that makes some community members less able to access digital tools and services to utilise digital social infrastructure to strengthen communities and places. Lastly, policymaking on digital social infrastructure needs to consider how to bridge different levels of resources for a shared goal and learning. National level of policy strategy can focus on combining evidence and good practice at local level with provision of appropriate resources such as guidance, toolkit and platforms for knowledge sharing.

***Keywords*:** digital place making, digital social infrastructure, bridging role of digital space

Introduction

This paper aims to further develop discussion on the overarching question of the British Academy's previous work on 'how can policy interventions support the role of social and cultural infrastructures in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric?' by focusing on digital aspects that were not explicitly covered in this first phase of work and have thus been identified as one of the areas which future research could develop further.[1] Specifically, this paper proposes 'Digital Place Making' as part of the developing policy agenda of '*Valuing people, places and spaces*', the British Academy's new strand of policy work exploring social and cultural infrastructure. In one of the British Academy's Social and Cultural Infrastructure programme publications, '*Community perceptions of social infrastructure*'[2], social infrastructure refers to those spaces (both physical and digital) that bring people together and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of communities through community cohesion and empowerment. Their report, *Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure*'[3] summarises policy considerations based on findings of the programme's research projects.

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1 Baylis, I., Beider, H. and Hardy, M. (2019) Cohesive societies literature review, the British Academy, Available: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-literature-review/

2 Zia, N., Barke, J., Garling, O. and Harries, R. (2023) Community perceptions of social infrastructure, the British Academy, Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/community-perceptions-of-social-infrastructure/

3 The British Academy and Power to Change (2023) Space for Community: Strengthening our Social Infrastructure, the British Academy, Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/space-for-community-strengthening-our-social-infrastructure/

Digital space as social and cultural infrastructure can connect physical spaces, providing a more accessible engagement space within a community (e.g., community social media such as *Nextdoor*). In this way it can create opportunities for inclusivity, strengthening social fabric across diverse groups of community members (e.g., people who experience difficulties in accessing physical community space). Several cities and regions have explicitly included the digital sector as a key strategic sector to drive inclusive growth, particularly as a part of creative industry (e.g., Bristol+Bath Creative R+D[4]). At the same time, digital space can also create exclusion for certain communities or members of communities, such as people in rural communities[5] or older people[6] who have less available technology or the required IT skills to access and utilise it. For these people, increasing 'digital by default' in basic public services and jobs can create barriers to access or add additional financial cost.[7] The new department, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) also sets 'Access to Physical and Digital Infrastructure' as one of its key 10 strategic frameworks.

Using 'digital place making' as the conceptual framework for the discussion, I argue that it needs to address social perspectives and approaches as well as technological ones. To develop this argument, this paper firstly sets the conceptual boundary and scope for how digital place making can contribute to developing *Space for Community* and to *Strengthening our Social Infrastructure* through discussions on digital space, digital place and digital place making. This paper then delves deeper into the findings and outcomes of the previous work of the British Academy, '*Cohesive Societies*', and discusses the potential implications of digital space as a social infrastructure on strengthening (or weakening) the cohesion and social fabric of communities. Finally, this paper offers three policy insights for 'digital place making' as a bridge to connect and strengthen social infrastructure by introducing some cases of digital place making. These insights are:

- Bridging physical and digital space
- Bridging people in the spaces in the process of digital place making
- Bridging different levels of resources for shared goals and learning.

Discussion on *Space for Community and Strengthening our Social Infrastructure*

I start this paper by reviewing how space and place are related to each other, as well as their implication in shaping the scope of community for discussions on *Space for Community*. As a geographical concept, 'place' emphasises people and their interaction with each other and other physical elements in the given 'space'.[8] Here, Agnew's[9] well-known three elements of place below are helpful for understanding the dynamic between people, spaces and places:

- *Locale:* the settings in which social relations are constituted
- *Location*, the geographical area or space encompassing these settings of social relations
- *Sense of place*, the local 'structure of feeling'[10], which refers to "sensual experiences, spatial imaginaries and practical activities of local communities within socio-material infrastructures"[11].

4 Bristol+Bath Creative R+D (n.d.) What is digital placemaking? Bristol+Bath Creative. Available at: https://bristolbathcreative.org/article/about-digital-placemaking

5 Philip, L. and Williams, F. (2019) Remote rural home-based businesses and digital inequalities: Understanding needs and expectations in a digitally underserved community, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, pp.306-318

6 Choudrie, J., Obuekwe, C. and Zamani, E. (2022) Bridging the digital divide in ethnic minority older adults: an organisational qualitative study. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 24 (4). pp. 1355-1375; Davidson, S. (2018) Digital Inclusion Evidence Review 2018, AgeUK

7 The British Academy (2022) Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/understanding-digital-poverty-and-inequality-in-the-uk/

8 Basaraba, N. (2023) The emergence of creative and digital place-making: A scoping review across disciplines, *New Media and Society*, 25(6):1470-1497; Harrison, S. and Dourish, P. (1996), 'Re-Place-ing Space: The Roles of Place and Space in Collaborative Systems, CSCW '96: Proceedings of the 1996 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work, November 1996 Pages 67–76, https://doi.org/10.1145/240080.240193; Please also see Hetherington, K. (1998) 'In Place of Geometry: The Materiality of Place', The Sociological Review, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp.183-199, describing space as something that "has tended to be associated with materials and their (often Euclidean) geometrical arrangements", p.184

9 Agnew, J. A. (1987). *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society.* Boston: Allen & Unwin

10 Gustafson, P. (2001) Meaning of Place: Everyday experience and theoretical conceptualisations, Journal of Environmental Psychology, 21, pp.5-16

11 Vanke, A. (2023) Co-existing structures of feeling: Senses and Imaginaries of industrial neighbourhoods, The Sociological Review, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221149540

Following Agnew's definition, place incorporates both 'space' and 'people in the space'. Thus, digital *place* making in this paper refers to the process of developing a place within and/or through digital space for people and their interaction as a social and cultural infrastructure. Here, taking the conceptual relationship between space, place and people as a complex 'topological folding together'[12], I acknowledge that:

- Digital place making involves developing digital space as infrastructure (e.g., technology, education and physical infrastructure)
- The interaction amongst agents in the digital space will create digital place
- The social power in the digital place can create both opportunities for communities and challenges such as the exclusion of certain communities (e.g., rural communities) or certain members of a community (e.g., aged members).

How then are space, place and people related to the community and how would the scope of a community be defined? Community can also be defined in terms of both spatiality and territoriality while reflecting the complex relationship between space, place and people[13]. For example, the easiest way to define communities would be to follow the rule of distance and jurisdiction of cities, regions and nations. At the same time, community (or other similar concepts such as neighbourhood) is often associated with subjective notions such as identity and sense of belonging. People within a community are not only under the same regulations/legislations within the territory (e.g., speed limit; councils; planning regulations) but also under shared notions of who are neighbours vs. strangers (e.g., different schools, residential blocs; industry districts). The availability, access and distribution of resources also depend not only on the relevant policy but also on the community members and their interaction. The growing interaction in virtual spaces means that the locale, the setting of interaction and the location, where people interact, are also changing. This will inevitably affect people's sense of place, "the sense of belonging, community and communality associated with the place"[14].

The relevance of digital place making to the discussion of strengthening 'social infrastructure' lies in the 'people' that are involved in this process. Introducing changes (i.e., strengthening) to 'social' infrastructure depends on strengthening the UK's social fabric through exploring how people's identity and sense of place is shaped and to what extent this sense is shared (e.g., sense of belonging) by relations with others and the surrounding environment. Here, I borrow Hetherington's concept of 'placing' to define place making. Hetherington emphasises that place is not a static notion and that it is shaped by 'ordering of spaces' as the subjective process that people engage in as participants in place making:

> "Places are not fixed by the geometry of space but are free to move across the boundaries of geometry[15]... Places are ways of making sense of these heterogeneous placings and their spatial, temporal and material arrangements ... (places are) *being in the process of being placed in relation to* (original emphasis) rather than being there[16]"

Based on these concepts, 'place making' is the process of shaping a place. This process of 'making sense of places' is influenced by the individuals' experience, understanding and perception of place. As a result, digital place making involves the process of creating a setting for interaction as well as building a sense of place within a digital location (space) which has different spatial, temporal and material arrangements from physical locations.[17]

12 Hetherington, K. (1998), p.184
13 Sack, R. D. (1993) 'The Power of Place and Space', Geographical Review, Vol. 83, No. 3, (July, 1993), pages 326-329
14 Pringle, D.G. (2003) Classics in human geography revisited, Progress in Human Geography, 27, 5 pp.605-614
15 Hetherington, K. (1998), p.187
16 ibid, p.188
17 Pringle, D.G. (2003)

However, although the materiality of the digital space differs from that of a physical space, its process of placing and place making shares resemblances to the real world, as the former is created with reference to the latter. Equally, digital place (compared to digital space) and digital place making as a social infrastructure to strengthen the community also require close attention to social aspects such as people and their interaction alongside the technological development. As Harrison and Dourish emphasise, designers (e.g., policy makers, engineers, technology developers) of digital space (technological structure) should focus enhancing support for the occupants to build places, rather than building the places for the occupants.[18] Therefore, connecting physical and digital space, and people and communities within these spaces is an important policy consideration in relation to digital place making.

Cohesive Society and Digital Place Making

For effective digital place making, discussion on social cohesion is important as the 'sense of belonging' is something that makes a place become a community as an agreed place.[19] The meaning of place is created from interaction between *self, others* and *environment.* Thus, the emotion of *longing* to *'be'* (identity) as an individual (self), as a relative positioning of self to others within the given environment, shapes individuals' relationships with and perception of the space, and their behaviour towards each other and the space. Based on Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory, the strength of one's social identity, namely, "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership"[20] is determined by how one categorises him/herself in the relevant social group (Self-categorisation theory). This 'self-categorisation' within a certain social group is based on how accessible the membership is and how one evaluates the degree of the fitness of him/herself to the group[21]. Thus, individuals' perception of a space, their relations with others and positioning themselves within the space will in turn, constitute the collective meaning of the space as a place, eventually forming a community – i.e., placing or place making. Indeed, a recent British Academy research report on '*Cohesive Societies*'[22] also identifies 'Identity and belonging' as one of the significant factors affecting the cohesion of communities both online and offline.

The question is to what extent this sense of belonging can be formed in a digital space. This question comes partly from the fluid boundary of digital space and the added relational complexity between digital vs. physical space and place. Here, the aforementioned British Academy's research series discussion on 'social cohesion' is useful. The reports raise the following questions: 1) how can 'cohesion' in society (including communities) strengthen social fabric; and 2) to what extent can social infrastructure contribute to developing cohesive societies, or can a lack of it affect fragmented/divided societies. These questions are equally applicable to implications of digital place making: 1) whether and how cohesion within the digital place can be formed to strengthen social fabric amongst the members of the given community; and 2) to what extent and in what way digital infrastructure can affect developing cohesive societies.

Digital space can create opportunities for inclusivity by extending the scope of community, linking people from distant physical spaces and including people who have physical barriers to accessing certain spaces. During the Covid lockdown, the role of digital space in workplaces and schools' virtual learning environments was critical to sustaining these communities. People also found new ways of creating a 'sense of belonging' even with those from geographically distant places through a virtual choir, music band, orchestra etc. when they were physically most isolated.

18 Harrison, S. and Dourish, P. (1996), p.74
19 Gustafson, P. (2001)
20 Trajfel (1972), p.292 cited in Abrams D., Hogg M. A. (2010). Social identity and self-categorization. In Dovidio J. F., Hewstone M., Glick P., Esses E. M. (Eds.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* (pp. 179–193). SAGE.
21 Abrams and Hogg (2010).
22 Baylis et al. (2019)

However, digital spaces can equally exclude as technical and educational infrastructure is required to access them. Covid lockdown examples also show this contrasting case of exclusion widening the digital divide and socio-economic gap within communities,[23] inevitably weakening the social fabric further. While digital spaces can connect geographically distanced people, this broadened scope of the reach of people involved in the place making of a space can create mis-presented/misunderstood place identity by those less involved in the physicality of the space, loosening the social fabric of the group. A good example is tourists' co-production and co-performance of place making through social media[24] particularly when the experiences of tourists and local people in the location differs (e.g., protests against tourists in popular tourist destinations[25] or digital nomadism[26] due to rising house prices for local people). Therefore, addressing digital inequality issues, both those existing and potentially arising in the process of digital place making, is another important consideration for policy design.

Boundary and Scale of Digital Place Making

The discussions above lead to a further question on the scale of the digital place making. Amongst the key elements of place (self, others and environments), it is the environmental elements such as the boundary and scale of place at the local, regional and national level that shape meaning in other categories.[27] This applies to both the physical and the digital environment.

In the recent British Academy's summary report of two landscape reviews[28] on 'how societies can remain cohesive in the face of rapid political, social, economic and technological change', it reports an oral response given to the Scoping Seminar for the series on two contrasting metaphors of societal cohesion – e.g., glue or sugar:

> "These metaphors represent the extreme ends of a continuum from a conception of societal cohesion as something that is relatively static, macro, societal (glue) to a conception of societal cohesion as something flexible, micro and neighbourly (sugar)".[29]

Cohesion resembling *glue* holds the society together with common goals and similar values and thus has more visibility. Cohesion resembling *sugar* might be less visible but relies on people's trust in small and everyday things as a community. Hence, the suggestion of the oral response is to maintain conceptual flexibility to allow policy development and adjustment at the relevant level (e.g., macro/micro, societal/neighbourly) when needed, based on the scope of society to pursue cohesion. When understanding the cohesion as social fabric, this suggestion of conceptual flexibility is particularly useful. Both too loose and too rigid structures of fabric are vulnerable to external pressure – this is equally applicable to the relationship between social cohesion and fabric.

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23 "Pay the wi-fi or feed the children": Coronavirus has intensified the UK's digital divide, the University of Cambridge, https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide; Beaunoyer, E., Dupere, S., and Guitton, M.J. (2020) Covid-19 and digital inequalities: Reciprocal impacts and mitigation strategies, Computer Human Behaviour, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106424; The British Academy Digital Society (2022)

24 Lew, A.A. (2017) Tourism planning and place making: place-making or placemaking? *Tourism Geographies* 19(3): 448–466.

25 Coldwell, W. (2017) First Venice and Barcelona: now anti-tourism marches spread across Europe, Guardian, 10 Aug 2017, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2017/aug/10/anti-tourism-marches-spread-across-europe-venice-barcelona,

26 Cook, D. (2023) Remote working: How a surge in digital nomads is pricing out local communities around the world, The Conversation, 31 March 2023, available at: https://theconversation.com/remote-working-how-a-surge-in-digital-nomads-is-pricing-out-local-communities-around-the-world-200670

27 Gustafson, P. (2001)

28 The British Academy (2019) Cohesive Societies: Scoping Concepts and Priorities, Available: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-scoping-concepts-priorities/

29 Ibid, p.7

Applying the metaphor of social cohesion as glue and sugar to our policy discussion, it might be relatively more challenging to achieve a macro and static level of social cohesion (*glue*) in the digital environment. Nonetheless, at the local level, local authorities can combine resources together for a cohesive plan to create digital place effectively linked to their strategic priorities, as can be seen in Bristol+Bath Creative R&D project[30]. It is a partnership project funded under the Creative Clusters programme including local universities. This is a part of Bristol City Council's 'Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth Strategy' under its 'One City Approach'. The activities of the project include digital place making, connections and networks in culture and creative industry. This case shows the potential for strengthening the cohesion of a community through inclusive economic, cultural and social infrastructure building under a local authority's strategy.

It is also possible to achieve a more flexible and granular level of social cohesion (sugar) through digital place making by using a bottom-up approach. For example, *Wired Sussex*[31] is a regional peer-to-peer network of firms in digital, media and technology sectors across Sussex and Brighton. It has developed a 'Skills and Talent Manifesto' amongst network members and the members use the platform to share best practice for supporting skills and talent in the Greater Brighton region through inclusive and diverse recruitment and workplace culture in the digital sector. This case shows an example where bottom-up and network-based initiatives can bring positive implications for inclusivity to a wider community.

At the same time, it is still challenging to weave the social fabric around people and spaces when they co-exist socially in different places. As discussed in previous sections, place making largely depends on people who are in the space and place.[32] Hence, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of participatory place making.[33] For this, digital spaces and other digital installations have been used as supporting tools in the place making process (e.g., digital storytelling, interactive corners in museums[34]). There are other positive cases where digital infrastructure is used to create this sense of connectivity or togetherness amongst the members of the community. One good example can be a commissioned artwork by Naho Matsuda's *every thing every time*.[35] This artwork "transforms data streams from the city into poetic narratives, captured on a split dot displayed and presented in several locations across Manchester" (the artist's words). Here, the data streams are statistic and real-time smart city data from people's interactions in Manchester but the artwork transforms and displays this data into new stories about these people, the city and their daily life.

This discussion on digital place making can offer a more concrete aim to achieve policy developments in the design of digital space and infrastructure, that is part of DSIT's key strategic frameworks, by considering 'placeness' – i.e., digital spaces can be created as fundamental structure by being designed 'for' it to fulfil its full potential of 'digital place making' (make places in the space).[36] For this, the direction of impact between the meaning attributed to the social cohesion and the *mechanisms* to enhance it goes bilaterally.[37] In digital place making, the role of the designing side (be it technology or policy) of the digital infrastructure such as digital space is not to create place itself but to support the people to make the place.[38]

30 Bristol+Bath Creative R+D (n.d.) What is digital placemaking? Bristol+Bath Creative. Available at: https://bristolbathcreative.org/article/about-digital-placemaking
31 https://www.wiredsussex.com/
32 Hollis, H., Skropke, C., Smith, H., Harries, R. and Garling, O. (2023) Social infrastructure: international comparative review, the British Academy, Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure-international-comparative-review/
33 E.g., Cilliers, E.J. and Timmermans, W. (2014) The importance of creative participatory planning in the public place-making process. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design 41*(3): 413–429; Gille Z and Riain SÓ (2002) Global ethnography. Annual Review of Sociology 28(1): 271–295
34 Basaraba (2023)
35 Portfolio/Naho Matsuda: every thing every time, Available at: https://futureeverything.org/portfolio/entry/naho-matsuda-every-thing-every-time-cityverve/
36 Harrison, S. and Dourish, P. (1996)
37 Baylis et al. (2019)
38 Harrison, S. and Dourish, P. (1996)

Conclusion: Policy Insights on Digital Place Making

Combining the discussions so far, this paper offers the following policy insights:

Policy insight 1: Bridging physical and digital space.

At the local and regional level, digital place making policy should ensure the mechanism of the digital infrastructure 1) to serve as social infrastructure and 2) to provide a channel for people to access social infrastructure to strengthen the local and neighbourhood level of interaction, access and sharing of resources. The intersection between physical and digital space in digital place making is critical for the social fabric to be maintained and strengthened at the local and regional level. Supporting regeneration of the high street through digital tools/initiatives, rather than substituting with digital space, is a good example[39]. In their case analysis of Social Street project in Italy, Mosconi et al.[40] used the term, 'networked public' instead of community, highlighting that effective digital place making should embed the digital and place-based communities together.[41]

Policy insight 2: Bridging people in the spaces in the process of digital place making.

At the granular level, digital place making policy should enhance people's trust within the physical and digital space in their communities and neighbourhoods. For this, tackling the digital divide is fundamental as inequality and exclusion can create distrust amongst people, loosening (or even tearing) the social fabric. This policy insight is applicable at both the local/regional and the national level. In the House of Lords Business report, 'Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World'[42], the Covid-19 Committee suggested the Government develop a new hybrid strategy in the following areas that can impact on individuals and their interaction in a hybrid society:

- Digital inequality;
- Skills and training;
- Data and research;
- Co-operation;
- Resilience;
- Regulation and rights; and
- Online harms.

At the same time, a recent evidence report by the British Academy Digital Society hub on digital poverty suggested that policy to tackle poverty requires place-based policy interventions to empower people and places beyond developing technical infrastructure (e.g., access to internet). As cohesion at the granular level relies on people's trust in small and everyday things as community, digital place making policy should start from creating an inclusive and safe digital environment.

39 Some positive cases can be found in Morrison, J. (2019), Available: https://calvium.com/can-digital-placemaking-save-high-street/

40 Mosconi, G., Korn, M., Reuter, C. and Pipek, V. (2017) From Facebook to the Neighbourhood: Infrastructuring of Hybrid Community Engagement, Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), 26(2):1-45, here, the authors refer to a 'community' as something that evokes homogeneity and small-scale interaction.

41 Baylis et al. (2019)

42 House of Lords (2021), Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World, Covid-19 Committee, 1st Report of session 2019-2021, HL Paper 263, Available at:House of Lords - Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World - COVID-19 Committee (parliament.uk)

Policy insight 3: Bridging different levels of resources for a shared goal and learning.

At the national level, digital place making policy and strategy can focus on combining evidence and good practice at a local level, while providing appropriate resources such as guidance, toolkits and platforms for knowledge sharing. Local level learning is already happening, as can be seen in the example of Brighton Fuse[43], an initiative by *Wired Sussex*, having inspired Bristol and Newcastle to take their own initiatives. A national level of platform can gather these efforts in a more comprehensive way for more effective learning. Development and provision of guidelines and/or toolkits for designing and monitoring digital place making, based on collective evidence, is also an important groundwork that can be offered at the national and strategic level.

This digital place making will create communities that are both diverse and cohesive and that can be encouraged by convivial, commonplace interactions between neighbours.[44] In this way, social fabric that weaves social infrastructure can be developed as a flexible but durable fabric.[45]

43 https://www.wiredsussex.com/initiative/1048159/brighton-fuse
44 The British Academy Cohesive Societies (2019) Cohesive Societies: Scoping Concepts and Priorities, the British Academy, Available: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cohesive-societies-scoping-concepts-priorities/
45 ibid

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