

Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure

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Foreword

Social infrastructure matters. The spaces and places that connect us and strengthen our social ties have proved vital to the resilience and recovery of our communities through the challenges of recent years. And they are helping to build better and more vibrant places for people to live, work, and visit. But these spaces have also been eroded in the last few years, with the traditional stewardship models of community spaces – such as by local government – becoming less viable due to ever tighter fiscal constraints. It is therefore crucial that we find ways to safeguard these spaces for the long term and give greater ownership and control of them to the communities that they benefit

In January 2023, along with the British Academy and the Institute for Community Studies, we jointly published *Space for Communities*, in which we shared the main findings of a research project examining the role of social infrastructure in people's lives and in their communities. One of the key themes emerging from this work was the importance of privately-owned spaces that function as social infrastructure.

During the course of the project, we observed that citizens are not especially sensitive to the question of whether valuable amenities, spaces and places are provided by the public or private sectors, but do place considerable value on whether and how well they serve local community needs. Shopping centres, garden centres and arcades, as well as supermarkets - especially those with in-house cafes - and pubs, all provide important spaces where people can gather, mix, and connect, in much the same way as community centres, libraries, or public parks. We also found that privately-owned spaces can end up playing valuable roles in a community, or providing considerable civic benefits, even if that was not their intended purpose.

And so, we set out to investigate further the role and potential value of forms of social infrastructure that are, in essence, "unplanned". This also led us to consider those examples of good community-level infrastructure that were, in contrast, deliberately planned – typically by private developers and other asset-owners. This enquiry led us to look closely at the motivations of these actors,

and to consider what might be needed to enable more of this kind of provision, at a time when public investment is highly constrained.

This report brings together these two interests. It also reflects the insights we gained from many different conversations with private developers, town centre asset managers, local authorities and community businesses working as community developers. One of the key findings thrown up by these engagements is that an increasing number of private owners believe that there is considerable economic, as well as social, value in creating or maintaining good-quality social infrastructure, and many are keen to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with communities and local authorities to deliver this.

Currently, however, the importance of this kind of provision is not widely understood, and the potential for the private sector to make more of a contribution to improving the built environment and amenities of places remains largely untapped.

Many of our towns and neighbourhoods have suffered in the difficult economic circumstances of recent years, and the current fiscal environment means that public investment in these kinds of asset is going to be in limited supply, while many local councils in England are being drawn towards selling off green spaces, buildings and other amenities. This report argues that catalysing new kinds of partnership between private owners and communities in this area of provision could well deliver sustained economic and social benefits in many communities, and that tangible benefits can be attained without relying on significant increases in public spending.

We urge national and local policymakers to consider carefully how such an approach could help many of the people and places they serve. This report advances a number of concrete proposals designed to facilitate better and more cooperation between private actors and local councils, and to tackle the obstacles that currently stand in the way of this model of partnership.



Executive summary

The state of community space in England has significantly deteriorated in recent years, with hundreds of libraries, community centres, and youth clubs closing due to cuts in public spending.¹ And yet, as our 'Space for Community' report found, the private sector plays a key, yet underappreciated, role in the provision of social infrastructure, defined here as "those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of the community."² As such, the important contribution of the private sector to the provision of social infrastructure – and its ability to do so without large-scale public investment – warrants greater examination. By drawing on evidence of collaboration between private companies, the public sector, and community organisations, this report argues for a cohesive, cross-sector approach to the delivery of social infrastructure that benefits all those involved.

This is a timely inquiry. The election of a new government provides a renewed impetus for the re-examination of the relationship between the state, community, and the private sector. In this report, we argue that policymakers should better understand how the assets of the private sector, alongside the skills of the public sector, and the in-depth knowledge and understanding of communities, can be harnessed to tackle the pressing social challenges faced by the country.

Understanding private sector social infrastructure

To understand the wide-ranging role of the private sector, this report explores two ways in which spaces in private ownership function as social infrastructure: 'unplanned' social infrastructure and 'planned' social infrastructure.

1. 'Unplanned' social infrastructure

'Unplanned' social infrastructure refers to those spaces whose primary purpose is not to create social connection but which nevertheless do, such as shops, hairdressers, and gyms. While these

spaces are often, though not exclusively, privately owned and have the primary aim of making profit, they are still hugely valued by people as spaces that create opportunities for diverse social interactions, and should be recognised as important social infrastructure.

2. 'Planned' social infrastructure

Planned social infrastructure, on the other hand, refers to those assets that intentionally function as social infrastructure, such as community centres, youth clubs, and parks. Traditionally, these spaces have been delivered and managed by the public sector or community organisations. But increasingly, many private asset owners and developers are providing communities with space to use as social infrastructure to diversify their offer and create vibrant places.

As with all such concepts, the boundaries between unplanned and planned social infrastructure are fluid and their contributions to social outcomes may vary. However, we find this framework serves to highlight the latent possibility of infrastructural assets to shift between the two categories as well as the diverse roles that the private sector plays in providing social infrastructure.

What motivates the private sector to provide social infrastructure?

The report also explores the motivations that lead the private sector to provide social infrastructure, with a particular focus on the retail and property development industries. There is a wide range of motivations for companies in these sectors to deliver social infrastructure, from the fulfilment of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) objectives to a deep commitment to delivering social value for the places and communities in which they work.

Ultimately, however, most private companies are characterised by the aim of making profit, albeit to differing extents. Therefore, the most effective

1. For examples, see Local Trust, 'Policy Spotlight 1: How social infrastructure improves outcomes', 2023. <https://squidex.mkmaps.com/api/assets/ipm/social-infrastructure-local-trust.pdf>; Dan Gregory, 'Skittled Out?', 2018. <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/essays/skittled-out-an-essay-by-dan-gregory/>.

2. Owen Garling et al., 'Space for Community', 2023. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/space-for-community-strengthening-our-social-infrastructure/>; Kelsey, T. & Kenny, M. (2021). 'Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure'. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/>.



incentive for the private sector would be for social infrastructure to improve financial returns. In fact, an increasing number of companies are recognising the dual financial and social benefits of delivering social infrastructure for them and local communities. For retailers, offering social benefits to customers and establishing strong links with the community fosters trust, sustains customer loyalty, and increases sales while providing the business with a better understanding of their clientele. Similarly, within the property development industry there is growing recognition that there is a strong business case for creating social infrastructure because it energises an area, attracts footfall, and encourages people to spend time and money at surrounding businesses. Delivering social infrastructure through meaningful partnerships with local communities, moreover, not only results in spaces tailored to specific local needs but also ensures the long-term sustainability and commercial viability of the spaces created.

Many private sector organisations do not strengthen their social role merely for charitable reasons, then, but because they understand the commercial value of doing so. This is important for policymakers to recognise because at a moment when the public sector has scarce financial and human resources, private sector social infrastructure presents an important yet underappreciated opportunity. Without needing large injections of public investment, policymakers could work with local communities and the private

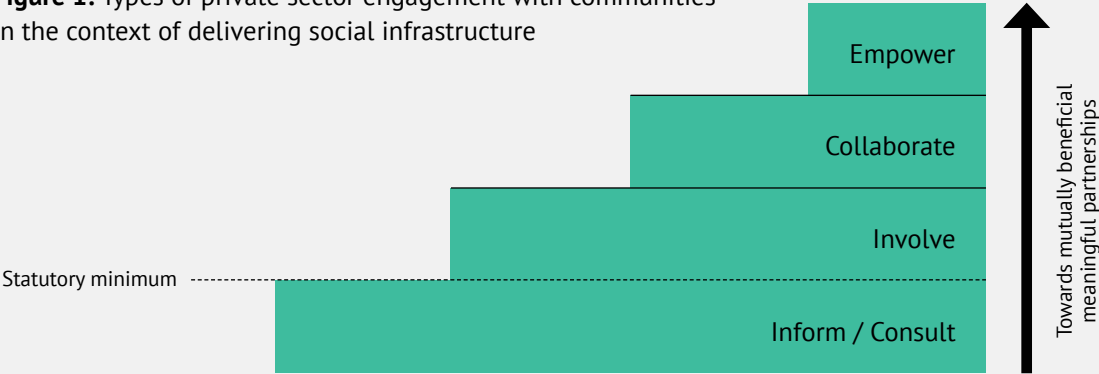
sector to attract private investment and deliver much-needed social infrastructure to help tackle major public policy issues and contribute to the creation of happy and healthy places.

Engaging communities

Private sector organisations looking to provide social infrastructure – whether that be for altruistic or profit-driven motivations – cannot do so alone, and engagement with local communities and the public sector is key. For example, supermarkets may work with community organisations or local public services to strengthen the social function of their shops and deliver community benefits. For developers and asset owners, community engagement is even more important in order to deliver planned social infrastructure, given that it is created with the purpose to function as such. There are a wide range of ways in which they might do this, the most basic and widespread being community consultation, which is a statutory requirement as part of certain parts of the planning process.

However, meaningful partnerships and collaboration with local communities are more likely to ensure the creation of social infrastructure that is desired, well-used, and sustainable. These partnerships can benefit all parties involved, such as by facilitating access to a greater range of funding sources or bringing distinct expertise to the project in question. A more collaborative,

Figure 1: Types of private sector engagement with communities in the context of delivering social infrastructure



Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation’s ‘Spectrum of Public Participation’. (https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf)



partnership-based approach also accounts for the long-term sustainability of social infrastructure, often resulting in the transfer of ownership or management responsibilities to the community. However, these partnerships must be designed with a thorough understanding of the inherent power dynamics between partners and require a long time to develop as they can only move at “the pace of the community and the capacity that exists”.³ The ability of local communities to shape the future of their area and take on assets, too, is to a large extent dependent on their capacity and more needs to be done by both the private and public sectors to support this.

In this report, we set out a model for understanding the different levels of engagement that can take place between the public and private sectors and communities in a place to deliver planned social infrastructure.

Principles for developing and managing social infrastructure

In this report we demonstrate the contribution of the private sector to the provision and maintenance of social infrastructure and also highlight the key role of communities in shaping privately owned spaces for social benefit.

Through our research we have identified a series of principles for all partners to consider in their approach to developing and maintaining social infrastructure in place.

Principles for developing and managing social infrastructure	
Establish meaningful partnerships for the development and management of social infrastructure	
	Meaningful partnerships between the private sector, public sector, and local communities are key to the successful provision of social infrastructure because they enable a greater understanding of what spaces are needed and account for their long-term maintenance and management.
Adopt a placemaking approach	
	The provision and maintenance of social infrastructure requires a holistic, place-making approach underpinned by a broad definition of social infrastructure that takes into account the range of spaces that communities value, including those that are privately owned.
Develop social infrastructure with sustainability and long-term maintenance in mind	
	Greater attention must be paid to the long-term maintenance of social infrastructure from the outset, with early consideration of how these spaces are funded and managed and how their function as social infrastructure can be safeguarded in the long-term.
Deliver economic and social value through social infrastructure	
	Social infrastructure can lead to greater and more sustainable financial returns and should therefore be understood as not just of social value but of significant potential commercial value too.

3. Roundtable 2.



Policy recommendations

Recommendations for asset owners and developers

Working with communities to develop social infrastructure can enhance the vitality and viability of these spaces in the long-term, delivering economic benefits for asset owners and more secure and sustainable spaces for communities. To unlock the power of partnerships with communities, asset owners and developers should:

1. Work with community organisations to shape and create spaces as social infrastructure

At the earliest possible stage in a development or regeneration project, private asset owners and developers should identify trusted community organisations and work with them consistently and equitably to develop and deliver social infrastructure that responds to local need.

2. Consider community stewardship and ownership of social infrastructure to embed long-term sustainability

Community organisations should be seen as a natural partner in managing and preserving social infrastructure. Community use, management, or ownership of private assets can be mutually beneficial for both the private developer or owner and the local community and ensures the long-term sustainability of the asset.

Recommendations for local authorities

Local authorities have a key role in facilitating partnership approaches for the development and maintenance of social infrastructure in their place. To ensure communities can play a key role in social infrastructure delivery alongside the public and private sectors, local authorities should:

1. Take a convening role to help to shape a 'whole place' approach

While certainly not the only place leaders, local authorities do have a unique convening power which they should utilise to bring together the private and public sectors with communities to build a collective vision for place development and ensure alignment

across stakeholders' approach to and investment in assets.

2. Adopt a comprehensive community asset strategy and make communities the 'first resort' for asset stewardship

All local authorities should adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer strategy which prioritises facilitating community ownership of failing public assets to preserve their vital function as social infrastructure.

3. Use existing financial and policy levers to build community capacity to steward social infrastructure

Local authorities should use provisions of planning policy such as the Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 agreements to commission community organisations to engage local people and manage assets as social infrastructure for the long term.

Recommendations for central government

Social infrastructure is vital to strengthening our communities and their local economies, but has suffered underinvestment. To address the public policy neglect of social infrastructure and deliver space for communities, the new government must:

1. Adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure

Central government should adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure to shape a coherent approach to policymaking, funding, and other support for social infrastructure, across government and between different levels of government.

2. Align funding to facilitate community asset ownership and long-term management

This strategy should also guide the government's approach to investing in community assets, ensuring funds like the Community Ownership Fund and the dormant assets scheme are used to support communities to acquire assets from the public and private sectors and to equip them with the capabilities to manage these assets in the long-term.



Introduction

When we think about social infrastructure, we typically think of those publicly owned spaces that are designed to bring communities together and create a sense of belonging, such as village halls, community centres, parks, and libraries. But the social fabric of a place is made up of a much greater range of spaces that enable social interactions and create a sense of community. As the seminal author Jane Jacobs wrote:

“The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts. It grows out of people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery and nodding hello to the two boys drinking pop on the stoop... hearing about a job from the hardware man and borrowing a dollar from the druggist, admiring the new babies and sympathizing over the way a coat faded... Most of it is ostensibly utterly trivial but the sum is not trivial at all. The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level – most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone – is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need.”⁴

Supporting Jacobs’ observation, recent research by the Bennett Institute of Public Policy and the Institute for Community Studies funded by Power to Change and the British Academy revealed the diversity of spaces in which people socialised, including many that were privately owned. The overarching report, ‘Space for Community’, recommended that the “role that the private sector plays in the provision of spaces that can be used as social infrastructure needs to be recognised and reflected in future strategic planning and policymaking.”⁵

In response, we have researched how the private sector provides social infrastructure and how

communities can play a role in shaping these spaces. Through desk-based research, interviews with experts, and two stakeholder roundtables attended by policymakers, private businesses, and community organisations, we have identified important examples and key lessons for those involved in the creation of social infrastructure.

What is social infrastructure?

The term ‘social infrastructure’ has become increasingly commonplace among academics and policymakers in recent years, appearing almost 50 times in the previous Government’s 2022 Levelling Up White Paper. The white paper also proposed a Community Spaces and Relationships Strategy to lay out how to strengthen social infrastructure, though this was ultimately not delivered. With the rise of the concept’s popularity, a number of definitions have emerged. For the purpose of continuity with our previous research, we have used the definition proposed by Tom Kelsey and Michael Kenny, which states that social infrastructure constitutes “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.”⁶

Our ‘Space for Community’ report set out several important points when trying to understand social infrastructure. It showed that social infrastructure should be treated as a form of infrastructure by building on the work of American lawyer Brett Frischmann, arguing that an asset operates as social infrastructure if it is used as an input into goods and services that support the creation and maintenance of public and social goods.⁷ The report also identified three key characteristics that assets must fulfil in order to classify as social infrastructure: they must be accessible (physically, financially, and psychologically); used for a range of different activities; and contribute to achieving social goals, whether that be strengthening community resilience or improving public health.

4. Jane Jacobs, ‘The Death and Life of Great American Cities’ (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 56.

5. Garling et al., ‘Space for Community’.

6. Tom Kelsey and Michael Kenny, ‘Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure’, 2021. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/>.

7. Brett Frischmann, ‘Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).





Union Street Party, Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth.

But social infrastructure cannot be understood without a consideration of purpose, too. Given that infrastructure is used as an input into other activities and its purpose is decided by its users, it is not always possible for the owners of infrastructural assets to determine the purposes to which they are put. Purpose is not just ascribed by the owners of infrastructural assets. Rather, people “ascribe their own purpose to the different social infrastructures that they engage with”.⁸ To identify whether assets constitute social infrastructure, we therefore need to consider how people use them in reality rather than just the purpose ascribed to them by their owners or managers.

This applies not just to publicly owned but also privately owned assets. While there are often no clear boundaries between the private sector, public sector, and civil society, the private sector is generally defined as the part of the economy owned and run by private groups and individuals largely with the aim of making profit. Aside from

their objective to make a profit, however, private sector businesses also have a corporate purpose – the non-financial goals that the corporation should actively pursue. But they also have a social impact, whether intentional or not.⁹ While a business has sole control over their corporate purpose, their social impact is only realised in conjunction with those outside of the organisation. Even if a retailer’s primary aim is to make profits and provide a wide variety of products to consumers, for example, it will also have a broader social purpose attributed to it by its customers and other external actors.

Planned and unplanned social infrastructure

In our previous research, we found that participants rarely distinguished between spaces with a specific purpose to operate as social infrastructure and spaces where the social outcomes generated were secondary to their main purpose.¹⁰ Based on this finding and the knowledge that the purpose of a space is not exclusively defined by its owner,

8. Garling et al., ‘Space for Community’, p. 18.

9. Nien-He Hsieh et al., ‘The Social Purpose of Corporations’, *Journal of the British Academy* (2018), Vol. 6, Supplementary Issue 1, 49-73.

10. Nora Zia et al., ‘Community perceptions of social infrastructure’, 2023.



we make the distinction between what we call 'planned' and 'unplanned' social infrastructure in this report.

The former refers to those assets that have the specific purpose to function as social infrastructure, such as community centres, youth clubs, and parks. Traditionally, planned social infrastructure is delivered and managed by the public sector or community organisations, but it can also be constructed or owned by the private sector. Private developers, for example, build social infrastructure as part of redevelopment projects, often subsequently managing these spaces or transferring this responsibility to a private management company. With the decline of retail and the growth of vacant space on high streets and in town centres in recent years, many asset owners too, are providing community organisations with space to use as social infrastructure in an attempt to diversify their offer. Moreover, as local authorities attempt to plug their funding shortfalls by selling public assets, ever more community spaces are being purchased by the private sector, who may or may not retain their function as social infrastructure.

Unplanned social infrastructure, on the other hand, constitutes those spaces whose primary aim is not to facilitate social connection but nevertheless do so, such as shops, gyms, hairdressers, or music venues. These spaces are often, though not exclusively, privately owned and commercial, with the principal purpose of making profit. But they also deliver social benefits, many of which may not be intended by their owners. As one of the key theorists of social infrastructure, Eric Klinenberg, argues: "Entrepreneurs typically start these kinds of businesses because they want to generate income. But in the process, as close observers of the city such as Jane Jacobs and the Yale ethnographer Elijah Anderson have discovered, they help produce the material foundations for social life."¹¹ Given communities use unplanned social infrastructure for a variety of purposes, their exact social impact is difficult to determine. There is also a much weaker evidence base on the ways in which unplanned social infrastructure contributes to the creation of

strong communities compared to the contribution of planned social infrastructure. Some spaces have been researched, notably pubs and, to an extent, cafes and restaurants, though others, especially those with a less obvious socialising purpose, have not.¹² Nevertheless, the research that has been done, however limited, shows that these spaces are crucial to an area's social fabric, facilitating a range of interactions with many social benefits.

As with all such concepts, the boundaries between these two categories are fluid and their contributions to social outcomes may vary. There are also other ways of framing this distinction, such as through the term 'accidental' social infrastructure, which we have used in previous research. However, we prefer 'planned' and 'unplanned' for this report, as it highlights the latent possibility of infrastructural assets to shift between the two categories – to what extent can unplanned social infrastructure become planned social infrastructure?

Furthermore, using this framework to analyse the existing evidence also reveals the significant and wide-ranging role that the private sector plays in the provision of social infrastructure. While public sector resources for the creation and maintenance of social infrastructure have declined in the context of austerity, the private sector can play a thus far underestimated role in providing the social infrastructure necessary to bring together communities. But it is only by working with local communities that the public and private sectors can create social infrastructure that is popular, impactful, and long-lasting.

Structure of the report

This report uses the framework of unplanned and planned social infrastructure to explore the ways in which the private sector works with communities to provide social infrastructure. It reveals examples of good practice and draws out key lessons for the private sector, policymakers, and local communities when approaching how to create and maintain social infrastructure.

11. Eric Klinenberg, 'Palaces for the people: how to build a more equal and united society' (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 16.

12. For examples, see Rick Muir, 'Pubs and places: The social value of community pubs', 2012. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/pubs-and-places-the-social-value-of-community-pubs>; Mitchell Duneier, 'Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Hannah Jones et al., 'Urban Multiculture and Everyday Encounters in Semi-Public, Franchised Spaces', *The Sociological Review* (2015), Vol. 63, No. 3, 644-661; Suzanne Hall, 'Being at Home: Space for Belonging in a London Caff', *Open House International* (2009), Vol. 34, No. 3, 81-87.



Section one looks at how privately owned commercial spaces function as unplanned social infrastructure, with a particular focus on retail-oriented places, notably shopping centres, markets, supermarkets, and convenience stores. Given that the social function of retailers and other commercial spaces is not well understood, this chapter uses the framework of strong and weak ties to explore the wide range of social interactions that occur in these spaces and the numerous benefits they offer for individuals and communities. The chapter also reveals the fluidity of the categories of planned and unplanned social infrastructure in reality, demonstrating how retailers can and do strengthen their social role, thus in some ways becoming a form of planned social infrastructure for the benefit of both the community and the business.

The value of planned social infrastructure, on the other hand, is already well-accepted. The role of the private sector in delivering such spaces, however, is not widely recognised. Chapter two therefore

focuses on how the private sector intentionally provides spaces that have the specific purpose to operate as social infrastructure, primarily in an urban context, and the motivations behind doing so. It explores how developers and private property owners work with communities to create social infrastructure either temporarily or on a more permanent basis and highlights the wide spectrum of engagement and collaboration that exists between the private sector, local government, and communities.

The final chapter brings these two categories of private sector social infrastructure together, identifying key principles for best practice for all partners to consider in their approach to delivering social infrastructure: partnerships, place-making, long-term sustainability, and delivering economic and social value. We also provide recommendations to asset owners and developers as well as local, regional, and central government on how to work with communities to create, safeguard, and maintain social infrastructure.



The Shop on the Square, run by Future Wolverton, Wolverton, Milton Keynes.



Unplanned social infrastructure

Most discussions around social infrastructure focus on spaces with the specific objective to bring communities together and create a sense of belonging. Yet in reality, a far wider range of spaces contribute to an area's social fabric. Those spaces that inadvertently enable social interactions, such as shops, hairdressers, and gyms, constitute what we call 'unplanned' social infrastructure. While these spaces are often, though not exclusively, privately owned and have the primary aim of making profit, they are still hugely valued by people as social spaces and are crucial for happy, healthy, and resilient communities. They should therefore be recognised as an important form of social infrastructure.

This section focuses on the example of privately-owned physical retailers to demonstrate that, in contrast to most policy analysis that concentrates on publicly provided or planned social infrastructure, privately-owned commercial spaces can also function as social infrastructure in unplanned ways. Though there are many other types of unplanned social infrastructure, physical retailers are a particularly important but under-recognised form of social infrastructure with important social and community elements, as the peer research for our 'Community Perceptions' report revealed.¹³ Shopping itself is an integral part of everyday life, with supermarkets, shopping centres, markets and other retail spaces acting as important anchor institutions, embedded within the local community. Though social interactions in these spaces are often unintentional and are not always present in all retailers, these environments nevertheless present endless opportunities for social contact, given over 50 million retail transactions occur in UK shops every day.¹⁴

By exploring how communities use and value retail spaces, as well as how retailers themselves are strengthening their social function and the potential value of this for the public sector, this chapter problematises policymakers' narrow definitions of social infrastructure and shows that

we should start defining these and other privately-owned spaces as central to ecosystems of social infrastructure.

Retail as unplanned social infrastructure

Retail is defined by policymakers as "any business or individual involved with selling products directly to consumers", including "shops, department stores, supermarkets, market stalls, door-to-door salespeople and internet retailers".¹⁵ Retailers are not, of course, exclusively private companies nor solely for profit. Some certainly are, but many others recognise their social value and actively curate this alongside their commercial purpose. They may also be community owned or not-for-profit community businesses, whose primary objective is to deliver positive impact for the local community.

The economic significance of this diverse sector is well understood; in 2022 alone, retail contributed over £112 billion to the economy and provided almost three million jobs.¹⁶ However, physical retail has declined considerably in recent years, most obviously due to the explosion of online shopping, which was already growing before 2020 but was given an extra boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it reached 37 per cent of all sales.¹⁷ Though this figure subsequently declined, online retail nevertheless remains more popular than before the pandemic, hovering at around 26 per cent of all sales.¹⁸

The social significance of retail, however, is not well understood. In 2014, research by Jonathan Schifferes found that there was little existing research or policy analysis on the relationship between large retailers and local communities and how this could be strengthened.¹⁹ More recently, a scoping review of the community-oriented actions of supermarkets by Caroline Lee et al revealed that there was still little understanding of the role

13. Zia et al., 'Community perceptions of social infrastructure'.

14. British Retail Consortium, 'Payments Survey 2023', 2023. <https://brc.org.uk/media/683937/payment-survey-2023.pdf>.

15. Ward, M. (2024). Retail sector in the UK. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06186/>.

16. Ward, M. (2024). Retail sector in the UK. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06186/>.

17. Ward, M. (2024). Retail sector in the UK. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06186/>.

18. ONS, 'Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales', 2024. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/timeseries/j4mc/drsl>.

19. Jonathan Schifferes, '2020 Retail: Shopping for Shared Value', 2014. https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_2020-retail-shopping-for-shared-value.pdf.



and impact of retailers in addressing inequalities despite their significant potential in supporting public health issues and community wellbeing.²⁰

The concept of strong and weak ties allows us to use what research exists on the social role of retail spaces to demonstrate the ways in which they function as unplanned social infrastructure and the numerous positive social benefits they generate. The strength of a personal tie is determined by the “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie”.²¹ Strong ties, which are generally with those similar to oneself, are well understood to be important to one’s wellbeing and are crucial to people’s support networks.²² Casual connections – described as weak ties – have extensive value too. As Mark Granovetter, the key theorist of this concept, argued, weak ties provide individuals with access to a greater range of resources and contribute to social cohesion by cultivating tolerance and trust.²³ More recent research has also demonstrated the centrality of weak ties to support networks, wellbeing, and our sense of belonging.²⁴ Given around 60 per cent of our daily interactions take the form of weak ties, it is no wonder they play such a significant role in our everyday lives.²⁵

First, however, it is important to note that high streets, and shops and markets more specifically, enable people to maintain their strong ties. For many, these are places in which existing relationships are intentionally strengthened, such

as by carrying out activities with those they know well; a recent poll of shoppers in town centres revealed that over 85 per cent of respondents were accompanied by friends and family.²⁶ Evidence also shows that people use supermarkets, small shops, and markets to socialise with friends. In Grainger Market in Newcastle, over half of customers aged 70 years or above arranged to meet people they knew at the market.²⁷ Research carried out by Social Life in Hackney found that 88 per cent of those interviewed cited local shops, markets, and high streets as important places for spending time with people they knew.²⁸

Retail spaces also facilitate chance encounters with those we know. A survey of shoppers in Coventry, Sheffield, and Tooting found that around 95 per cent of those interviewed said that they usually bump into people they know in the shopping area.²⁹ In markets, these incidental encounters are particularly common, with 74 per cent of respondents at Bury Market reporting to regularly run into people they knew at the market.³⁰ The ability to strengthen relationships in these spaces is enhanced by the presence of a cafe either in store or nearby, which enables older customers in particular to spend prolonged time with friends in a quieter space close to where they shop.³¹

Alongside these encounters with people who know one another, retail spaces also facilitate weak ties by inadvertently encouraging informal, incidental and often brief interactions, such as short conversations with members of staff or the

20. Caroline Lee et al., ‘Community-oriented actions by food retailers to support community well-being: a systematic scoping review’, *Public Health* (2021), Vol. 201, 115-124.
21. Mark Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology* (1973), Vol. 78, No. 6, 1360-1380 at p. 1361.
22. Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn, ‘Social interactions and well-being: The surprising power of weak ties’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2014), Vol. 40, No. 7, 910-922.
23. Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, p. 1371 and p. 1378.
24. Joshua Moreton, ‘Social support from weak ties: Insight from the literature on minimal social interactions’, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (2023), Vol. 17, No. 3, e12729; Sandstrom and Dunn, ‘Social interactions and well-being’; Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn, ‘Is Efficiency Overrated? Minimal Social Interactions Lead to Belonging and Positive Affect’, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2014), Vol. 5, No. 4, 437-442.
25. Sandstrom and Dunn, ‘Social interactions and well-being’.
26. Poll by Ellandi in James Wallace, ‘Beyond Retail: Ellandi identifies ingredients to for community shopping centre survival’, *Beyond Retail* (2019).
27. Andy Newing et al., ‘The role of traditional retail markets in addressing urban food deserts’, *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (2023), Vol. 33, No. 4, 347-370.
28. Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Homerton: How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities’, 2020. http://www.social-life.co/publication/everyday_life_in_homerton/. See also Sophie Yarker, ‘Ageing in Place for Minority Ethnic Communities: The importance of social infrastructure’, 2020. <https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/ageinginplace/>.
29. Ken Worpole and Katharine Knox, ‘The social value of public spaces’, 2007. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/the-social-value-of-public-spaces#:~:text=It%20found%20that%20public%20spaces,places%20for%20mothers%20and%20children..>
30. Myfanway Taylor et al., ‘Developing markets as community hubs for inclusive economies: a best practice handbook for market operators’, 2022. <https://trmcommunityvalue.leeds.ac.uk/download/operatorhandbook/>.
31. Thomas Neumark et al., ‘The Community Footprint: shared value for business and communities’, 2012. [https://www.thersa.org/reports/the-community-footprint-shared-value-for-business-and-communities#:~:text=By%20undertaking%20community%20impact%20assessments,this%20impact%20the%20community%20footprint.](https://www.thersa.org/reports/the-community-footprint-shared-value-for-business-and-communities#:~:text=By%20undertaking%20community%20impact%20assessments,this%20impact%20the%20community%20footprint.;); Sophie Watson, ‘The Magic of the Marketplace: Sociality in a Neglected Public Space’, *Urban Studies* (2009), Vol. 46, No. 8, 1577-1591.





Camden High Street.



Locals browse stalls at a street market.



mutual acknowledgement of other customers. These weak ties occur in all brick-and-mortar shops from small rural stores, where two-thirds of customers occasionally or often chat with the owners or workers, to supermarkets and large retailers, such as B&Q, in which up to 40 per cent of shoppers were found to have a conversation with others while in store.³² These weak ties may also lead to the development of more substantial relationships. Markets, with their loyal customer base, consistency of stalls, and ease of conversation, offer opportunities to transform weak ties into strong relationships by providing a long period of time over which to foster connections between customers and traders; returning to Grainger Market, more than 60 per cent of customers were found to have been visiting the market for over twenty years.³³

It is undoubtedly difficult to ascertain the extent to which people verbally interact or form strong connections when visiting retail spaces, particularly with those from different backgrounds from themselves. However, research has demonstrated that weak ties, which can include merely sharing the same space as strangers, have important benefits, strongly suggesting that the unplanned social function of physical retailers can have a positive social impact.

For example, weak ties have been shown to reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing, even as much as strong ties.³⁴ In retail spaces, this is particularly apparent for older people, with studies finding that socialising is a primary motive of visiting food stores for this demographic as it enables them to feel connected to the outside world and, for older people living alone, breaks their social isolation.³⁵

As one elderly interviewee told Simone Pettigrew et al., “I look on shopping sometimes as a social outing as well. Because I live on my own, it’s nice to go out and talk to people.”³⁶ Markets, too, are “crucial...in the daily life of older people – more than for any other group”, according to Watson and Studdert.³⁷ This assertion is supported by evidence from Grainger Market, where 95 per cent of customers aged 70 or over reported to feel less lonely when at the market.³⁸ Supermarkets, markets, and other food stores became especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic as they were one of the few places for elderly and vulnerable people to have contact with others.³⁹

Retailers also expose people to those from different backgrounds from themselves at a time when there are few such public spaces that do so.⁴⁰ Large shops, markets, and local businesses have been shown to be used by a diverse range of people. Jonathan Rowson et al. for example, identified the local Sainsbury’s in New Cross Gate as a rare space shared by a range of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, Neumark et al. found that since the Sutton Housing Partnership had started giving new council house tenants vouchers to spend in the store, the Sutton branch of B&Q had become a unique space in the community shared by customers with both high and low levels of social capital. Interviews undertaken by Social Life in Hackney revealed that the local Tesco superstore had a diverse client base and was considered by residents to be a key “bumping place”.⁴¹ Local businesses were also widely described by residents of both Hackney and Catford as places where they spent time with people from different backgrounds.⁴² These examples support the conclusions of Maxim Massenkoff and Nathan

32. Neumark et al., ‘The Community Footprint’; Association of Convenience Stores, ‘The Local Shop Report 2023’, 2023. <https://www.acs.org.uk/research/local-shop-report>.

33. Watson, ‘The Magic of the Marketplace’; Newing et al., ‘The role of traditional retail markets in addressing urban food deserts’.

34. Sandstrom and Dunn, ‘Social interactions and well-being’; Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn, ‘Is Efficiency Overrated?’; Gul Gunaydin et al., ‘Minimal social interactions with strangers predict greater subjective well-being’, *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being* (2021), Vol. 22, No. 4, 1839-1853; Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder, ‘Mistakenly seeking solitude’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2014), Vol. 143, No. 5, 1980-1999.

35. Birgitta Sidenvall et al., ‘Managing food shopping and cooking: the experiences of older Swedish women’, *Ageing & Society* (2001), Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 151-68; Caroline Lee and Marina Buswell, ‘Supermarket Support to Older People in Local Communities: Final report of a scoping study’, 2022 (unpublished); Emma Bowkett, ‘Could casual daily interactions help you to lead a happier and healthier life?’, 2022. <https://www.neighbourlylab.com/post/could-casual-daily-interactions-help-you-to-lead-a-happier-and-healthier-life>.

36. Simone Pettigrew et al., ‘The role of food shopping in later life’, *Appetite* (2017), Vol. 11, 71-78 at p. 73.

37. Sophie Watson and David Studdert quoted in Worpole and Knox, ‘The social value of public spaces’, p. 6.

38. Newing et al., ‘The role of traditional retail markets in addressing urban food deserts’.

39. Lena Hansson et al., ‘Reorganising grocery shopping practices – the case of elderly consumers’, *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (2002), Vol. 32, No. 4, 351-360.

40. Neumark et al., ‘The Community Footprint’.



Wilmers as well as Susan Athey et al. in the US, whose research has shown that “commercial places, like restaurants and retail shops, are a particularly strong force pulling against segregation.”⁴³

Markets may be even more effective at facilitating frequent encounters between diverse people, with Myfanwy Taylor et al. finding that 81 per cent of market users at Bury Market interacted with traders from a different ethnic or cultural background to themselves.⁴⁴ Though the extent of interaction among these different people is unclear, studies suggest that exposure to those different from oneself can create more cohesive and integrated communities. As Fulford research on markets found, first-hand experience of people from different backgrounds within markets helps break down stereotypes.⁴⁵ Watson came to a similar conclusion in her research of eight markets, including Ridley Road Market in London, which aided the creation of social connections between the established Jewish families and more recent Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities in Hackney.⁴⁶

Through their facilitation of weak ties, retail spaces also have the potential to enhance social inclusion and aid the development of informal social support networks. As Watson argues, the care of marginalised individuals, especially elderly and disabled people, can actively be enacted in retail spaces, particularly markets, due to the range of users, numerous informal interactions, community spirit, and inclusive feel; 99 per cent of market users at Bury Market thought it was an open and welcoming space for all.⁴⁷ Traders and retail staff

are particularly important for providing support to customers, commonly listening empathetically to customers, expressing concern, and providing advice.⁴⁸ Interactions such as these have some distinct advantages over those with close friends or family, as they can provide a measure of anonymity and confidentiality for customers, thereby enhancing the ability of staff to give advice.⁴⁹ Watson found that market traders perform care work daily, acting as a focal point for the local community by watching out for elderly and disabled customers and passing on information about people’s health. This research aligns with studies of weak ties, which demonstrate that they are a crucial, and often preferred, source of support, especially in times of difficulty.⁵⁰

Informal support networks embedded within retail-oriented spaces have developed not just for elderly and disabled people, but also for people from minority ethnic backgrounds and migrant communities. Research undertaken for the London School of Economics’ ‘Super-diverse Streets’ project uncovered an extensive network of infrastructure embedded within Leicester and Birmingham’s multicultural high streets. Here, independent retailers were found to provide support far beyond their commercial purpose, helping migrant communities to navigate complex bureaucratic processes and creating community meeting spaces in the back of shops.⁵¹ The now-demolished Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre represented a comparable support network for the Latin American community in London, with traders daily providing information, helping with translations

41. Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Homerton’, p. 27.

42. Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Homerton’; Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Catford: How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities’, 2020. http://www.social-life.co/publication/everyday_life_in_catford/.

43. Maxim Massenkoff and Nathan Wilmers, ‘Rubbing Shoulders: Class Segregation in Daily Activities’, 2023. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4516850; Susan Athey et al., ‘Estimating experienced racial segregation in US cities using large-scale GPS data’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021), Vol. 118, No. 46, 1-9 at p. 9. Interestingly, Athey et al. show that churches and schools tend to remain more segregated than commercial spaces, with implications for policies around inequality and segregation. Massenkoff and Wilmers find that some privately owned, commercial establishments exacerbate segregation (such as dollar stores) while others, including limited- and full-service restaurants, encourage socio-economic mixing.

44. Taylor et al., ‘Developing markets as community hubs for inclusive economies’.

45. Will Fulford in Greater London Authority, ‘Understanding London’s Markets’, 2017. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_markets_report_web.pdf.

46. Watson, ‘The Magic of the Marketplace’.

47. Watson, ‘The Magic of the Marketplace’; Taylor et al., ‘Developing markets as community hubs for inclusive economies’.

48. Nancy Ridgway and Yong-Soon Kang, ‘The Importance of Consumer Market Interactions as a Form of Social Support for Elderly Consumers’, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (1994), Vol. 15, No. 1, 108-117.

49. Mara Adelman et al., ‘Beyond Smiling: Social Support and Service Quality’ in Roland Rust and Richard Oliver (eds.), *Service Quality: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 139-171.

50. Moreton, ‘Social support from weak ties’.

51. Suzanne Hall et al., ‘Migrant Infrastructure: transaction economies in Birmingham and Leicester, UK’, *Urban Studies* (2017), Vol. 54, No. 6, 1311-1327; Social Life, ‘Supporting ethnic minority traders and businesses in local high streets and centres: Report of Social Life’s work with the “Super-diverse streets” ESRC research project’, 2016. http://www.social-life.co/publication/supporting_ethnic_minority_traders/.



and phone calls, and directing new arrivals towards jobs and accommodation.⁵² Similarly, interviews by Social Life in Catford and Hackney revealed that local businesses regularly supported customers, particularly those in financial hardship, by offering discounts and extending lines of credit. These activities were underpinned by a high degree of trust between customers and staff; as one business owner remarked, “ninety percent of [customers] I know by their first name and sixty percent of them I have known all my life.”⁵³ However, despite the social value of these retail spaces to minority communities across the country, they are vulnerable to closure in the midst of widespread urban regeneration and gentrification. The Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre is a case in point: its demolition removed a key support system and social hub for the Latin American community.⁵⁴

Beyond its social role, shops are strongly linked to people’s cultural identity and sense of place.⁵⁵ As providers of culturally specific products and services serving the needs of particular minority ethnic groups, specialist retailers and market stalls are important social and cultural infrastructure for these communities, enhancing their cultural identity by connecting people to others of a similar background and giving them a sense of connection to their heritage, as well as a visible presence in the wider community.⁵⁶ Furthermore, local residents often develop long-term, strong, positive attachments to commercial spaces, which often serve as anchor sites and reference points embedded within the local community.⁵⁷ This is evident in the strong emotional reactions many

retail closures provoke.⁵⁸ As one Sheffield resident commented with regard to the closure of the city’s only John Lewis, this was where she had “bought every significant item” throughout her life, where she had met friends and chatted to staff, and where her 85-year-old mother had visited weekly to make her feel like she was “still in society”.⁵⁹ Though little research has been undertaken into how these attachments are formed, the repeated, cumulative use of local retailers, the regular social interactions that take place, and the memories and experiences built up in these spaces may engender local attachments and reinforce a collective sense of belonging to a place.⁶⁰

Strengthening their function as social infrastructure – moving from ‘unplanned’ to ‘planned’

Evidently, retail spaces function as unplanned social infrastructure in ways that are unintended by their owners and contribute to a range of positive social outcomes. But business owners or managers may adapt their spaces to actively encourage social interactions and integration, thus shifting their asset towards a form of planned social infrastructure. This demonstrates how, in reality, spaces may constitute both planned and unplanned social infrastructure or transition from one to the other.

Given the diverse nature of the sector, there are a range of reasons why owners and managers of retail space might want to strengthen their social function. Some retailers are increasingly

52. Julia King et al., ‘Socio-Economic Value at the Elephant & Castle’, 2018. https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Socio-economic_value_at_the_Elephant_and_Castle/9464105/1; Social Life, ‘Trading Places: Research at the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre’, 2014. http://www.social-life.co/project/Trading_Places_Elephant_and_Castle_regen/; Will Noble, ‘Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre Is Set To Shut in July...But A Local Protest Group Has Other Ideas’, 2020. https://londonist.com/london/news/elephant-and-castle-shopping-centre-closing-july-2020?ref=related_links.
53. Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Catford’; Social Life, ‘Everyday life in Homerton’, p. 27.
54. Social Life, ‘Supporting ethnic minority traders and businesses in local high streets and centres’.
55. Kitty Ussher et al., ‘Everyday places: Creating strong locations to support daily life in Britain’, 2021. <https://demos.co.uk/research/everyday-places-creating-strong-locations-to-support-daily-life-in-britain/>.
56. Yarker, ‘Ageing in Place for Minority Ethnic Communities’.
57. Greater London Authority, ‘Understanding London’s Markets’; Vidhya Alakeson and Will Brett, ‘Take Back the High Street: Putting communities in charge of their own town centres – Power to Change’, 2020. <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/research/take-back-high-street/>.
58. Alain Debenedetti et al., ‘Place Attachment in Commercial Settings: A Gift Economy Perspective’, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2014), Vol. 40, No. 5, 904-923; Julie Horáková et al., ‘Does the digitalization of retailing disrupt consumers’ attachment to retail places?’, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (2022), No. 67, Article 102958.
59. Clea Skopeliti, ‘“You’d come out feeling better”: shoppers on changes at John Lewis’, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/mar/25/changes-john-lewis-sheffield-mourns-loss>.
60. Lucy Faire and Denise McHugh, ‘Sensory and emotional histories of the high street’, *Institute of Historic Building Conservation* (2022), Vol. 171. <https://ihbconline.co.uk/context/171/2/#zoom=true>.



concerned with demonstrating their social value. Activities that enhance their role as a form of social infrastructure and that contribute to the range of social outcomes outlined above increase their social value and could be included in their ESG reporting or contribute towards demonstrating their corporate social responsibility. However, an increasing number of retailers are also recognising that it is mutually advantageous for them to improve their engagement with the local community. Studies have shown that retailers who offer social benefits to customers and establish strong links with the community foster trust, sustain customer loyalty, and increase sales while giving businesses a better understanding of their clientele.⁶¹ B&Q's staff-run DIY classes, *You Can Do It*, for example, not only increased the likelihood of participants visiting the store by making it feel more friendly, but also encouraged them to buy products; the better someone is at DIY, the more likely they are to purchase related products.⁶² Organising and hosting activities for the local community can also increase footfall and encourage the use of nearby retailers, as occurred in Prospect Shopping Centre in Hull, which ran creative workshops in 2022 to the benefit of its arts and crafts shops.⁶³ Clearly many owners and managers of retail space do not strengthen their social role merely for charitable reasons but rather because they understand the commercial value of doing so. Particular examples of the ways in which supermarkets and shopping centres have done this, and the significance of these activities for policymakers, are set out below.

Supermarkets

Large food retailers frequently organise and participate in community-oriented initiatives, including supporting community regeneration programmes such as affordable housing and local

employment initiatives, organising environmental protection activities, and promoting public health through in-store vaccination hubs and awareness-raising and educational programmes.⁶⁴ Major supermarket chains have dedicated 'community champions', full- or part-time members of staff who engage with the local community by volunteering in the local area, distributing resources, whether that be emergency donations or surplus food, and mobilising physical space in store. This may include providing rooms for community groups and MPs' surgeries free of charge, demarcating parts of the store cafe for lunch clubs for older people, and coordinating with local services to utilise the foyer space to improve awareness and outreach.⁶⁵

As part of its Community Life programme launched in 2012, for example, Asda's community champions offered community organisations the use of its training and meetings rooms. For the first half of 2013, 85 per cent of stores had at least one external group use their rooms, and within nine months, they had been used over 23,000 times by organisations ranging from support groups for victims of domestic abuse to beekeeping clubs.⁶⁶ Last year, Asda also restarted their 'Community Cuppa' campaign, providing space and unlimited free tea and coffee for community groups who would otherwise struggle to meet due to high rental and energy costs over the winter.⁶⁷ The programme accompanied Asda's 'Winter Warmer' initiative, which offered a meal of soup, bread, and unlimited tea and coffee for £1 in its cafes to those over the age of 60-years who had been impacted by escalating living costs.⁶⁸

61. Neumark et al., 'The Community Footprint'; Ridgway and Kang, 'The Importance of Consumer Market Interactions as a Form of Social Support for Elderly Consumers'.

62. Neumark et al., 'The Community Footprint'.

63. Workman, 'Social value programmes – Prospect Shopping Centre, Hull', 2023. <https://www.workman.co.uk/social-value-programmes-hull/>.

64. Lee et al., 'Community-oriented actions by food retailers to support community well-being'; See, for example, Asda, 'Asda unveils plans for a significant Mixed-Use Redevelopment creating a new town centre and new homes in London', 2024. <https://corporate.asda.com/newsroom/2024/13/05/asda-unveils-plans-for-a-significant-mixed-use-redevelopment-creating-a-new-town-centre-and-new-homes-in-london>.

65. Caroline Lee and Catherine Hammant, 'How could businesses with anchor positioning contribute to community wellbeing? A study of supermarket community support actions in the UK', *Wellbeing, Space and Society* (2024), Vol. 6, 100188; Caroline Lee and Marina Buswell, 'Supermarket Support to Older People in Local Communities: Final report of a scoping study' (November 2022; unpublished).

66. Schifferes, '2020 Retail'.

67. Kate Lally, 'Asda Cafe offering £1 meals for millions of people in UK', 2023. <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/newsliverpool/asda-caf%C3%A9-offering-1-meals-for-millions-of-people-in-uk/ar-AA1j50eH>.

68. Asda, 'Asda Cafe's bring back £1 'winter warmer' initiatives for over 60s', 2023. <https://corporate.asda.com/newsroom/2024/13/05/asda-unveils-plans-for-a-significant-mixed-use-redevelopment-creating-a-new-town-centre-and-new-homes-in-london>; Lally, 'Asda Cafe offering £1 meals for millions of people in UK'.



Case Study 1 – Neighbourly Lab’s retail experiment

As part of a series of projects funded by the National Lottery Community Fund entitled ‘Essential Mix’, which aims to increase social interactions between key workers and their communities, the research organisation, Neighbourly Lab, has sought to unlock the power of retail as a form of social infrastructure.

Having identified retail environments as having a particular ability to bring communities together and provide a touchpoint for support, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis, Neighbourly Lab collaborated with Tesco in Glasgow to transform two superstores into spaces of “information, resource and connection”. Over several weeks, local community organisations, ranging from suicide prevention groups to charities offering free health checks, were invited to set up stalls in the superstores’ unused space, engage with customers, and raise awareness among staff. All three stakeholder groups reported benefiting from the initiative: the community organisations improved their outreach with service users; staff gained knowledge about community resources and were better able to signpost customers; and the customers themselves were able to access services in a familiar and non-stigmatising setting without the anxiety attached to initially reaching out. Many involved emphasised the need for this kind of engagement to become more commonplace, with one organisation praising how the initiative normalised “the access of services in everyday spaces”.

Building on the learning from this project, Neighbourly Lab is implementing a new programme set to run until 2025 to explore not only how large retailers can create spaces in-store for community groups but also how small local shops, with their trusted relationships with regular customers, can connect people to support services and to one another. The ultimate aim of the programme is to develop an effective framework that retailers and communities across the country can adopt that will help shops build community resilience and reduce loneliness through social connection.⁶⁹

But the spaces and initiatives that make supermarkets and other retailers a form of social infrastructure are vulnerable. The trend towards digitalisation and push to make every space in store profitable through the removal of checkouts and installation of self-service machines may threaten to diminish supermarkets’ social role. As current prices escalate, investment decisions around communities have been invariably affected in this highly competitive sector and particular spaces and activities through which large retailers support communities have become susceptible to cuts.

Morrisons, for example, slashed the budget and time allocated to its community champions in 2023, with implications for local communities across the country who benefited from this scheme.⁷⁰ The previous year, Sainsbury’s announced the closure of 200 in-store cafes as part of a broader restructuring strategy aimed at combating escalating costs and competing with Aldi and Lidl. In their place, Sainsbury’s has opened several food stalls, but the new establishments on offer, such as GBK and Ed’s Diner, are often double the price if not more than in-store cafes, which remain popular during the

69. Grainne O’Dwyer, ‘Introducing our latest social innovation project: increasing social-connection through shops’, 2023. <https://www.neighbourlylab.com/post/introducing-our-latest-social-innovation-project-increasing-social-connection-through-shops>; National Development Team for Inclusion, ‘Bringing People Together Learning Partner: Year 1 report from NDTI’, 2023. <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/BPT-Year-1-report-FINAL-090523.pdf?mtime=20230524133154&focal=none>.

70. Natasha Meek, ‘Morrisons issues statement on changes to Community Champion roles’, 2023. <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/23259679.morrisons-issues-statement-changes-community-champion-roles/>; Kristian Bayford, ‘Morrisons to cut budgets and working hours for some instore staff’, 2023. <https://www.grocerygazette.co.uk/2023/01/17/morrisons-community-champions/>.



cost-of-living crisis.⁷¹ Alongside affecting around 2,000 members of staff, this move will reduce the ability for customers, particularly the elderly and other vulnerable people, to spend time with others and access inexpensive food in a familiar and easily accessible environment.

Shopping centres

Some owners and managers of shopping centres have also sought to engage with the local community for community and commercial benefits. The property management firm, Workman, for example, has organised family-friendly entertainment during the summer holidays at Silverburn Shopping Centre in Glasgow and Crystal Peaks Shopping Centre in Sheffield.⁷² The initiative at the latter included free skateboarding lessons and bouncy castles and evolved into a more permanent game space in the shopping centre, with the equipment and facility funded by the property's owner, Hermes Investment Management.⁷³ Touchwood Shopping Centre in Solihull, owned by the Ardent Companies and managed by Workman, has cultivated strong links with local schools, in partnership with Solihull Council, running competitions and providing work experience for students with special learning needs.⁷⁴ Some shopping centres have even undertaken a civic role, with Newlands Shopping Centre in Kettering hosting meetings between members of the public and councillors from the North Northamptonshire Council and Kettering Town Council.⁷⁵

The significance for public policy

Many retailers are well-placed to work with policymakers to help tackle local social issues given the ease with which their spaces can be

adapted to become planned social infrastructure and their embeddedness within the local community. Existing research has also suggested that retail and other commercial spaces (and their staff) embedded within people's daily lives may engender a sense of trust and comfort that some other social infrastructure does not. Support groups using meeting rooms at Asda as part of its Community Life programme reported that the space was "neutral in relation to associations to sensitive issues" and thus people could attend "without feeling stigmatised that they are in a location for people in need".⁷⁶ As such, some domestic violence support groups held at Asda were the most accessed in the area. Research undertaken by Social Life revealed that young people, in particular, were likely to use 'informal social infrastructure' – a category which included such spaces as cafes, markets, and shops – when seeking advice.⁷⁷ The trust that young people have with staff in these spaces can be employed to tackle social issues, as has occurred with the Lions Society, a network of barbershops in Croydon founded in 2017 to provide counselling and support to young people at risk of becoming involved in knife crime. While not retail exactly, the organisation demonstrates the potential of commercial spaces and the people within them to engage with young people who may be unwilling to work with formal services.

In its 2012 Retail Sector Strategy, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills recognised the potential of retailers to address public policy issues, stating, "[b]eyond its purely economic value as a sector in itself, retail underpins local economies and plays a vital role in delivering public policy (and providing social value) in areas such as public health, employment and skills, environmental sustainability and community cohesion."⁷⁸ But

71. BBC, 'Sainsbury's to close 200 cafes putting 2,000 jobs at risk', 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60574697>.

72. Workman, 'Building Community the Workman Way', 2022. <https://www.workman.co.uk/building-community-places-that-matter/>.

73. Workman, 'Every Little Helps: Building the Social Value of Retail', 2023. <https://www.workman.co.uk/building-social-value-retail/>; Workman, 'Social Value: The Impact is Clear at Crystal Peaks', 2023. <https://www.workman.co.uk/impact-clear-at-crystal-peaks/>.

74. Workman, 'Building Community: For Places that Matter to People', 2022. <https://www.workman.co.uk/building-community-places-that-matter/>.

75. Workman, 'Every Little Helps'.

76. Schifferes, '2020 Retail'.

77. Mayor of London, 'Connective Social Infrastructure: How London's Social Spaces and Networks Help Us Live Well Together', 2022. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/connective_social_infrastructure_0_0.pdf.

78. Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 'BIS Retail Strategy', 2012. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a750f9ce5274a3cb2869581/12-1197-bis-retail-strategy.pdf>, p. 3.



little has been done to realise this role despite the capacity of retail to support many policy goals. A handful of local authorities have recognised the potential of retail spaces, taking advantage of their ownership of local markets to deliver council services, such as library hubs or skills training, in a central accessible location with a large existing customer base.⁷⁹ But comparative initiatives in privately-owned spaces are far

rarer. Given the unique social characteristics of retail and the willingness of many retailers to enhance their social role both for commercial and community benefit, greater collaboration between the government and retailers could significantly support a range of public policy objectives.

Case Study 2 – ‘Chat checkouts’, the Netherlands

Klets-kassa, or ‘chat checkouts’ as they are known in English, are an excellent example of a partnership between the government and a retailer to fulfil important policy objectives.

In 2019, as part of the Dutch government’s ‘One Against Loneliness’ campaign to tackle the country’s ‘loneliness epidemic’, the supermarket, Jumbo, introduced chat checkouts at one of its stores. These *klets-kassa* aimed to increase social interactions between customers and staff by slowing down the checkout process and encouraging conversation. In-store coffee corners were also set up, providing a space for elderly customers to connect with other locals, community volunteers, and support services. The ‘chat checkouts’ were soon expanded to other stores in areas where loneliness was identified as a particularly significant issue.

Commenting on the success of the scheme, Jumbo’s chief commercial officer, Colette Cloosterman-van Eerd, remarked, “[m]any people, especially the elderly, sometimes feel lonely. As a family business and supermarket chain, we are at the heart of society. Our shops are an important meeting place for many people, and we want to play a role in identifying and reducing loneliness.”⁸⁰

79 Taylor et al., ‘Developing markets as community hubs for inclusive economies’: Examples include Leeds City Council introducing a library hub in Kirk-gate Market and Newcastle City Council running dementia awareness activities and projects in Grainger Market, which has a large number of elderly customers.

80. Louise Grimmer, ‘Feeling lonely? Too many of us are. Here’s what our supermarkets can do to help’, 2023. <http://theconversation.com/feeling-lonely-too-many-of-us-are-heres-what-our-supermarkets-can-do-to-help-211126>; Aditi Bora, ‘Dutch supermarket introduces unique slow checkout lane for lonely seniors who want to have a chat’, 2023. <https://scoop.upworthy.com/dutch-supermarket-introduces-a-unique-slow-checkout-lane-to-help-fight-loneliness-595693-595693-595693>.



Planned social infrastructure

Unlike much unplanned social infrastructure, the social value of planned social infrastructure – those spaces that are specifically designed to foster social connections – is widely recognised. What is less well understood, however, is the ways in which the private sector intentionally provides this planned social infrastructure. While planned social infrastructure is generally seen to be delivered, managed, and maintained by the public or community organisations, it can also be constructed or owned by the private sector. There are a wide range of ways in which this can happen, from the creation of community facilities in new residential developments to the management of pre-existing public spaces.

But what motivates the private sector to provide planned social infrastructure? Given the diversity of the property development sector, there are a wide range of motivations. One motivation is social value, particularly as there has been an increase in awareness within the industry around the social impact of their activities over the last ten years. However, while some companies are genuinely interested in their social impact, for many others, the rise of ESG, corporate social responsibility, and other frameworks for assessing social impact mean it becomes a form of ‘community washing’ or at best a tick box exercise.⁸¹

Ultimately, however, what motivates most private property owners, developers, and investors is the aim of making profit, albeit to differing extents. Therefore, the most effective incentives for the private sector to partner with local authorities and communities to create social infrastructure would be to demonstrate how it can contribute to improving their financial returns. Indeed, there is a strong business case behind cultivating enjoyable, unique places and strong local communities, to which social infrastructure is a key contributor. Though social infrastructure is unlikely to deliver direct financial return on investment, it energises an area, attracting footfall and encouraging people to spend time and

money at surrounding businesses. Some companies are increasingly recognising this, particularly those that are - or are funded by - institutional investors who, with a view to long-term returns, have greater scope to consider social value and have a stake in the long-term success of an area or an asset.

With these motivations in mind, we focus on how the private sector provides planned social infrastructure in existing urban contexts, through the repurposing of vacant buildings and the construction of new spaces within urban developments, to explore the range of ways in which the private sector works with local communities and the public sector to deliver social infrastructure.

How the private sector provides planned social infrastructure

1. Repurposing empty space

One of the consequences of the so-called ‘death of the high street’ has been the increase in the number of empty spaces in high streets across the country. Recent research has shown that since 2022, closures and vacancy rates have reached very high levels across the country, with the latter hovering around 14 per cent nationally and reaching 16.7 per cent in the North East. And the ownership of these spaces is particularly complicated, with private individuals and companies owning up to 80 per cent of vacant high street properties.⁸²

The government has increasingly recognised this need to transform high streets and town centres, as reflected in the establishment of the High Streets Task Force in 2019 and, more recently, the High Street Accelerator Pilots and High Street Rental Auctions.⁸³ When it comes to bringing empty buildings back into use, however, much of the government’s emphasis is on the conversion of high street buildings to residential use, as set out in the Build Back Better High Streets Strategy (2021) and the Long-Term Plan for Towns (2023).⁸⁴ But this

81. For a social value-driven developer, see TOWN, a ‘profit with purpose developer’ who undertakes mostly smaller-scale projects often co-created with local communities. <https://www.waaretown.co.uk/>.
82. Jessica Craig et al., ‘Community-powered high streets: how community businesses will build town centres fit for the future’, 2023. <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Power-To-Change-Community-powered-high-streets-how-community-businesses-will-build-town-centres-fit-for-the-future.pdf>.
83. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, ‘New levelling up powers to fill empty shops across England’, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-levelling-up-powers-to-fill-empty-shops-across-england>.
84. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, ‘Build Back Better High Streets Strategy’, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/build-back-better-high-streets>; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, ‘Long-Term Plan for Towns’, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/long-term-plan-for-towns>.



narrow focus overlooks the significant opportunity that the current situation offers for the planned provision of social infrastructure, which could bring new social and economic activities to the high street and contribute to the development of stronger communities.

Some private asset owners are already providing space for communities to use as social infrastructure through a range of different approaches from 'meanwhile spaces' through to the more permanent use of spaces by community groups and others.

'Meanwhile space'

Many property owners are providing community groups with space to use on a 'meanwhile' basis. This enables the owners to keep their assets in use without impacting any future alternative use of the space while also activating an area by increasing footfall and money spent in the area, making commercial activities in the building more viable. At the same time, meanwhile use allows community businesses, organisations, and charities to test a business plan, provide important services, and improve their outreach in accessible town centre locations while paying no or below-market rent.⁸⁵ Meanwhile use also enables the reactivation of important anchor buildings that would otherwise be left derelict and contribute to the decline of pride in place.⁸⁶ In Bristol, for example, the community business Artspace Lifespace has taken on an empty M&S on a meanwhile basis, turning each of the store's departments into an installation, stall, or workshop designed to encourage visitors to take action on climate and inequality.⁸⁷

Towards long-term use

Property owners may also offer communities space to be used as social infrastructure on a more permanent basis through longer leases. In fact, organisations initially occupying a space temporarily

sometimes transition to long-term leases, demonstrating the potential value of meanwhile use if done well. Similar to meanwhile use, communities using these spaces as social infrastructure can activate an area and drive up footfall. This is particularly relevant for the owners and managers of shopping centres, which have experienced some of the highest vacancy rates of all retail, reaching 18.2 per cent in 2023, and who are therefore increasingly recognising the need to provide a wider range of uses.⁸⁸ This offers community organisations an important opportunity to turn these commercial spaces into social infrastructure. Take Railpen's Cascades Shopping Centre in Portsmouth, for example. Here, the asset manager sought to diversify the offer to attract footfall by offering a permanent unit to the previously pop-up Library of Things, a popular volunteer-run social enterprise with branches across the country, where customers can borrow infrequently used items such as DIY tools.⁸⁹

Alongside large-scale property owners, smaller, independent property owners – such as local department store owners – are recognising the value of leasing to community organisations as a way to reactivate their property. There are some interesting examples of independent department stores turning to community businesses, charities, and other community organisations to bring their vacant store back into use, with benefits for the owners as well as the local area.⁹⁰

After closing their department store in 2017, Nigel and Paul Haven leased the Grade-II listed building to Age Concern Southend, who have turned it into the Haven Community Hub, with a cafe, dementia day care centre, and host of other activities from health treatments to support groups, which have generated much-needed footfall along the neglected high street.⁹¹ In the Isle of Wight, the Shademakers, a local community business, has acquired a 40-year lease for a department store and are converting it into a new cultural centre, with community

85. Roundtable 2.

86. For more detail on the relationship between the high street and pride in place, see Jack Shaw et al., 'Townscapes: Pride in Place', 2022. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Pride-in-Place-Report.pdf>.

87. <https://sparksbristol.co.uk/>.

88. British Retail Consortium, 'Payments Survey 2023'.

89. Joe Buncl, 'Shops in Portsmouth: Cascades Shopping Centre manager says centre must offer "more than retail" to attract shoppers', 2023. <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/business/shops-in-portsmouth-cascades-shopping-centre-manager-says-city-centre-must-offer-more-than-retail-to-attract-shoppers-4344878>.

90. Sarah Butler, 'Empty department stores are being transformed into places for young entrepreneurs and social projects', 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/01/doors-open-for-uk-community-projects-as-retail-chains-fold>.

91. Interview with Age Concern Southend.





Sparks Bristol, a collaboration between ArtSpace LifeSpace and Global Goals Centre in a former Marks and Spencers store.

activities, creative workspaces, and a cafe, which has inspired other organisations to explore using other empty buildings in the surrounding area.⁹² Crucial to the success of these projects are the private owners, who have been easy to identify and approach with an idea and keen to use the property for the benefit of the community rather than for purely commercial or residential use in part due to their attachment to the building and local area.

In contrast to these examples, the government has been exploring how to convert the large number of vacant department stores into housing. But given the design of department stores, this would potentially be impractical and expensive and potentially deaden high streets and town centres further.⁹³ Repurposing large vacant retail spaces into planned social infrastructure would provide new community spaces, diversify and reactivate urban centres, and preserve iconic buildings that

are often central to local identity and have a significant impact on local feeling about a place.

However, many community organisations and businesses face difficulties when trying to access privately-owned space to use as social infrastructure. Finding a suitable property at an affordable price is a significant challenge, particularly given the difficulty of identifying high street and town centre property owners. There is very limited information available regarding property ownership due to the historic lack of data and rise in fragmentation of ownership, which poses a key barrier to the repurposing of property and inhibits the coordinated management of urban centres. A fuller understanding of property ownership among key local stakeholders is crucial to the repurposing and diversification of urban centres in a community-led way.⁹⁴

92. Interview with Shademakers.

93. Hugo Clark et al., 'What next for the high street? Part two: A revival', 2021. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/consumer-business/deloitte-uk-what-next-for-the-high-street-part2.pdf>.

94. Allison Orr and Joanna Stewart, 'Property use diversity and spatial accessibility within urban retailing centres: drivers of retail rents', *Journal of Property Research* (2022), Vol. 39, No. 4, 365-392.



Case Study 3 – The Dolphin Shopping Centre



Independent businesses at Kingland Crescent, Poole.

In 2020, Legal & General Investment Management (LGIM) realised they needed to radically change their management strategy at the Dolphin Shopping Centre in Poole, where vacancy rates were escalating. They therefore adopted a place-based strategy to rejuvenate the shopping centre and surrounding area.

Within the shopping centre itself, LGIM shifted away from a retail-dominated model, instead aiming for 35 per cent of floorspace to be used for alternative uses. They installed a co-working facility, community events space, an adult learning centre, an NHS diagnostics clinic, and a wellbeing

hub. At the same time, LGIM provided ten small independent businesses with a retail unit on nearby Kingland Crescent for two years without rent or business rates. This was accompanied by public realm improvements, such as regular makers markets and other curated events.

As part of their place-based strategy, LGIM also created a Community Partnership to provide ongoing communication with stakeholders. The partnership consists of charities, local education institutions, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, NHS Dorset, and others, and has enabled local stakeholders and LGIM to identify how the Dolphin Shopping Centre and LGIM can help tackle local issues. The new community wellbeing hub was a direct result of this partnership.

Together, these initiatives have created a vibrant ecosystem in and around the shopping centre. LGIM found that 59 per cent of patients at the NHS clinic visited other operators when at the shopping centre and the adult education centre and community events space have also generated footfalls of 42,000 and 21,600 per annum respectively. The local businesses on Kingland Crescent have flourished, driving up footfall in a place that many locals had previously avoided and giving the regeneration of Poole a strong sense of momentum.

What LGIM has done in Poole is a key example of how creating social infrastructure through cross-sectoral collaboration not only increases social impact but generates positive, long-term, commercial outcomes, too.⁹⁵

2. Social infrastructure in urban redevelopments

In recent decades, many town and city centres have experienced extensive redevelopment projects. Since the 1970s, regeneration has been a major element of British urban policy, with successive governments introducing a range of initiatives, many of which relied upon public-private partnerships and led to the large-scale privatisation of land and property in urban centres. Major developments have taken place and continue to do so in London, such as in Canary Wharf, King's Cross, and more recently, Brent

Cross and Nine Elms, with high profile projects taking place in other English cities including Brindleyplace in Birmingham and Liverpool One. Most regeneration projects are either partially or completely dependent on private developers to deliver the development, though there is often a key role for local authorities here too, particularly in developments undertaken through joint ventures between the council and private developer.⁹⁶ Increasingly, developers or affiliated management companies are also responsible for maintaining the social infrastructure constructed as part of redevelopments as cash-strapped local

95. LGIM, 'The Dolphin: Community & Shopping Destination, Poole', July 2023; Eshe Nelson, 'How to Revive a Dying Main Street? One U.K. Landlord Offered Free Rent', 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/business/england-high-street-retail-recovery.html>.

96. Matthew Carmona, '41: Neo-liberal public space, in London (and beyond)', 2014. <https://matthew-carmona.com/2014/01/12/neo-liberal-public-space-in-london-and-beyond/>.



authorities are less able to take on the revenue costs associated with new spaces.⁹⁷

In contrast to the owners of existing buildings, developers are subject to a range of statutory requirements that may necessitate the construction of social infrastructure. Alongside the national planning policy framework, Local Plans, and, where they have been created, Neighbourhood Plans, the approval of a planning application is also dependent on planning obligations, such as Section 106 (S106) agreements between the local authorities and developers. These legally obligate developers to either contribute financially towards or construct affordable housing and other infrastructure, such as parks or schools, to mitigate the impact of the development. Since its implementation in 2010, many local authorities have also adopted the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), a cash contribution from developers to the 'collecting authority' to pay for local infrastructure. A 'Neighbourhood Portion' of CIL is allocated to the parish or town councils to spend on infrastructure or other projects that address the demands that the development places on an area. In areas without a parish or town council, which constitute 64 per cent of the English population, the Neighbourhood Portion is spent in consultation with the local community.⁹⁸

Section S106 agreements and CIL do sometimes facilitate the construction and preservation of public and community spaces. In Southwark, for example, a S106 agreement between the council and the property developer, Alumno, resulted in a new community theatre for the charity, Theatre Peckham, whose old site was redeveloped for student accommodation. The developer paid for the construction and fit out costs of the new building, which, with its large auditorium, studios, office

space, and a public foyer, allows Theatre Peckham to run its existing programme of workshops for children and young people alongside new classes, performances, and events.⁹⁹

S106 agreements can also be used to maintain and safeguard social infrastructure in the long-term, as occurred in Wandsworth. Here, the council developed a charter regarding the management of a new public park in the Nine Elms development with the five private owners; the charter is legally enforceable through its inclusion in a S106 agreement.¹⁰⁰ Such an approach may become more widespread in London following the publication of the Mayor's Public London Charter in 2021. This guidance encourages local authorities to agree legally enforceable management plans with the owners of new public spaces to ensure they are open and community-focused as well as to establish suitable arrangements for their maintenance irrespective of changes in ownership.¹⁰¹ But the efficacy of the guidance will depend on the extent to which it is incorporated into the local plans and planning decisions of London boroughs, and, of course, only applies to newly created privately-owned public spaces.

All too often, however, planning obligations are ineffective at securing the physical and social infrastructure that communities need. S106 avoidance is a significant problem, with developers able to replace their obligations with a (far lower) financial contribution if they declare the agreement unviable.¹⁰² S106 agreements and CIL are slow to deliver infrastructure, in part because local authorities require a long period over which to aggregate sufficient funding for infrastructure projects.¹⁰³ Moreover, communities are rarely involved in what planning obligations are used for, despite the government stating, "local communities

97. Roundtable 1; Competition & Markets Authority, 'Housebuilding market study: Final report', 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65d-8baed6efa83001ddcc5cd/Housebuilding_market_study_final_report.pdf.
98. Locality, 'Community Infrastructure Levy', 2021. <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/Understanding-Community-Infrastructure-Levy-2021.10.08.pdf>.
99. Theatres Trust, 'Using obligations to protect and improve theatres', 2023. https://www.theatrestrust.org.uk/assets/000/002/966/Using_obligations_to_protect_theatres_Updated_Apr23_original.pdf?1683105586; Matt Clayton, 'Theatre Peckham's pearlescent new home by Jestico + Whites', 2017. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/theatre-peckhams-pearlescent-new-home-by-jestico-whites>.
100. Matthew Carmona, 'The "public-isation" of private space – towards a charter of public space rights and responsibilities', *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* (2022), Vol. 15, No. 2, 133-164.
101. Mayor of London, 'London Plan Guidance: Public London Charter', 2021. [london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/public_london_charter_lpg.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/public_london_charter_lpg.pdf).
102. Steve Taylor, 'The price of everything and the social value of nothing', 2021. <https://thedeveloper.live/opinion/opinion/the-price-of-everything-and-the-social-value-of-nothing>.
103. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'The Incidence, Value and Delivery of Planning Obligations and Community Infrastructure Levy in England in 2018-2019', 2020. assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907203/The_Value_and_Incidence_of_Developer_Contributions_in_England_201819.pdf; Graham Lanktree, 'The great Section 106 and CIL scandal', 2019. <https://www.propertyweek.com/insight/the-great-section-106-and-cil-scandal/5104449.article>.



should be involved in the setting of policies for contributions expected from development.”¹⁰⁴ The size of the neighbourhood portion of CIL is also dependent on the existence of a neighbourhood plan; areas with such a plan receive 25 per cent of CIL collected from the development within a neighbourhood area compared with 15 per cent elsewhere. But neighbourhood plans tend to be created in more affluent, rural, and southern areas of England.¹⁰⁵

Aside from their legal obligations, some of the developers to whom we have spoken as part of our research include social infrastructure voluntarily within their developments because they recognise it to be a value-adding asset that helps to activate the development once completed. For example, the King’s Cross Central Limited Partnership (made up of pension fund AustralianSuper and clients of the international business of Federated Hermes) and Related Argent (the developer and asset manager of the King’s Cross estate) incorporated a range of different social assets into the final development at King’s Cross. This included ten new (well-used) parks and squares, cultural and educational amenities, a community centre, leisure and sports facilities, such as a multi-use games area, which is free to use for the local community, and space for the local youth entrepreneurship social enterprise, FishTank, which has been given a 15-year lease on peppercorn rent. Similarly, in their Devonshire Gardens development in Cambridge, Railpen and Socius plan to include a Library of Things, creative workspace and studios, a communal kitchen, and a large public park covering almost half of the site.

However, while our research has shown that some developers are starting to understand the importance of the early incorporation of social infrastructure into their developments, there is limited research on how these developments and new spaces are experienced by those people living in and around these places, both in the short-term as a way to attract footfall and create communities

as well as in the longer-term as a way to promote resilience and sustainability. Our previous report identified peer research as a method through which the ways people use these spaces can be identified and perhaps this is something that could be incorporated into the ongoing monitoring of new urban developments.

Alternatively, social infrastructure may be created temporarily through meanwhile use. Developments awaiting planning or under construction can be activated by meanwhile spaces in the same way as the vacant spaces discussed above. This approach is often used by developers to activate and energise an area in advance of the development.¹⁰⁶ But difficulties plague meanwhile use in spaces either awaiting redevelopment or alternative commercial activity. Not only can it contribute to gentrification, driving up land values and rents with few long-term benefits for the local area, but the short-term and insecure nature of leases give occupiers little time to recoup the investment spent on fitting out the spaces and leaves occupiers dependent on the goodwill of the property owner. Meanwhile use can also be extractive in the context of development projects: community businesses and organisations often feel they are brought in during the planning stage to demonstrate social value but once construction starts, commitments to the community seem to disappear.¹⁰⁷ A loophole within the Community Infrastructure Levy also means that developers can, in some circumstances, utilise meanwhile use, either by offering temporary space to community organisations or otherwise, to avoid paying developer contributions on a redevelopment.¹⁰⁸

But meanwhile use does not have to be extractive and short-lived. It can be done well for the benefit of both the local community and the developer, as occurred with Skip Garden in Kings Cross. In 2009, the King’s Cross Central Limited Partnership agreed to install a temporary movable garden run by the educational charity, Global Generation, within the

104. Town and Country Planning Association and Trust for London, ‘London – Planning for a Just City? Exploring how local planning authorities are embedding equality and inclusion in planning policy’, 2019. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/london-planning-for-a-just-city-exploring-how-local-planning-authorities-are-embedding-equality-and-inclusion-in-planning-policy/>; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, ‘Guidance: Planning obligations’, 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/planning-obligations>.

105. James Derounian, ‘The good, the bad and the ugly of neighbourhood plans’, 2016. <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2016/04/20/good-bad-and-ugly-neighbourhood-plans>; Locality, ‘Community Infrastructure Levy’.

106. Carmona, ‘41: Neo-liberal public space, in London (and beyond)’.

107. Roundtable 1.

108. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, ‘Guidance: Community Infrastructure Levy’, 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/community-infrastructure-levy>.



proposed development site, which aimed to work with local children, businesses, and residents to grow food and create environmentally responsible communities. For ten years, Skip Garden (now known as Story Garden) thrived in the middle of the King's Cross development site and now has a permanent place in the local area due to its social impact and popularity. By using meanwhile use to test what community space was needed and desired by the local community, the developers supported the growth of community capacity and created a sustainable space that could be installed into the final development.

Engaging communities

Whether repurposing empty space or creating new social infrastructure, the private sector does not work in isolation. In all of the aforementioned examples, engagement with local communities and the public sector has been crucial. While engagement is crucial for unplanned social infrastructure – especially if private owners aim to enhance the space's social function – it is even more essential for planned social infrastructure, as it is specifically designed to serve that purpose. A greater understanding of the diverse forms of engagement, from consultation to more balanced partnerships, offers insights into their unique benefits and challenges and lays the groundwork for more meaningful private sector-community collaboration that results in social infrastructure that is desired, well-used, sustainable, and when required, commercially beneficial. A table laying out the range of relationships between the private sector and local communities can be found on pg.33.

One of the most basic and widespread ways in which the private sector engages with local communities is through community consultation. This is a statutory requirement as part of the planning process and involves informing and gathering feedback from communities on their plans. As part of the redevelopment of King's Cross, for example, the development team consulted over

4,000 people during the planning process through public exhibitions, pop-up events, interviews, and workshops in local schools and other activities; the feedback from which fed into the masterplan of the development.¹⁰⁹ Community consultation may also be supported by community organisations, such as in Milton Keynes, where the community business, Future Wolverton, has been supporting conversations between the community and the developer TOWN to influence the £25 million redevelopment project, Love Wolverton.¹¹⁰

However, though consultation can be undertaken well with effective outcomes, the process is beset with problems. These include a lack of transparency, inaccessible language in planning documents, the underrepresentation of marginalised communities, and a short time period in which to participate, resulting in an almost complete absence of trust in local planning authorities and private developers.¹¹¹ Yet there are important incentives for developers and local planning authorities to make community consultation meaningful, positive, and ongoing. It can improve the quality of the development, it increases the likelihood of acquiring planning permission, it may enable the development to progress faster, and it can lead to greater community support for the development, providing the developer with greater license to undertake their plans and improving the sustainability of the spaces constructed.¹¹²

Some private property owners and developers do go further than just consultation by deepening their engagement with the local community and involving them in decision-making processes. This may include working directly with the local community from an early stage with the aim to address their concerns and aspirations in the ultimate decisions made. This form of community engagement enables large asset owners and developers to better understand what spaces and services local people need and how they can be maintained for both social and commercial value. In Belfast, the London-based developer, Bywater

109. Urban Land Institute, 'ULI Case Studies: King's Cross', 2014. https://database.dpa-etsam.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/kingscross_16pgs_v11.pdf; Stuart Bridgett et al., 'Making places: The role of regeneration in levelling up', 2022. <https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/making-places/learning-from-kings-cross-regeneration/>.

110. Conversation with Marie, Future Wolverton; Future Wolverton, 'Agora Redevelopment History'. <https://futurewolverton.org/agoradevelopment/>.

111. Town and Country Planning Association and Trust for London, 'London – Planning for a Just City?'. Grosvenor found that just 2 per cent of people trust developers to act honestly in planning for development and 7% trust local gov to make decisions in best interests of area. See Commonplace, 'Engaging for the Future', 2021. <https://www.commonplace.is/ebook-engaging-for-the-future>.

112. Claire Harding, 'Involving people in planning will help us build a better city', 2021. <https://centreforlondon.org/blog/community-involvement-planning/>; Quality of Life Foundation, 'A Quality of Life: Code of Practice', 2023. <https://www.qolf.org/code-of-practice/>.



Properties, established a 'Placemaking Group' consisting of local community leaders to advise the project over the long-term and help the developer decide who should occupy their vacant retail units and under what terms. The incentives for Bywater Properties were financial. Given the extensive local knowledge of the Placemaking Group, it was able to recommend appropriate local businesses to occupy the shops at below-market rent, which would bring vibrancy and footfall to the area, thereby increasing the value of the residential units upstairs.¹¹³ (See Case Study 3 for more information on Legal and General Investment Management's (LGIM) Community Partnership.)

But more meaningful partnerships between local communities and the private sector are possible. In contrast to community consultation, which generally stops once planning permission is

acquired and leaves sole control over decisions to the developer, projects undertaken through partnerships provide communities with a larger decision-making role and longer-term influence. However, partnerships such as these are rare, given they must be designed with a thorough understanding of the inherent power dynamics between partners and often require a long period of time to develop because they can only move at "the pace of the community and capacity that exists".¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the private sector can benefit from investing in these meaningful partnerships with local communities. Community organisations can often access land or buildings that private developers cannot, for example, and are eligible for different sources of funding. This is exemplified in Plymouth, where Nudge Community Builders partnered with the private investor, Eat Work Art, to buy the iconic Millennium

Case Study 4 – Platform Places



Wandsworth Town Property Partnership Dinner, June 2023.

Platform Places is a social enterprise pioneering a partnership approach to the transformation of high streets and city centres.

As a national, cross-sector movement of councils, community leaders, and asset owners, it seeks to encourage local stakeholders to work together to bring more town centre property into community use and, where appropriate, community ownership, while creating development and investment opportunities. It was set up in response to two interconnected issues: high vacancy rates that have resulted from the collapse of physical retail and the struggle of

socially-trading and community organisations to access affordable, secure, long-term space on the high street (almost 80 per cent of community businesses have experienced this problem).

One of their first projects is taking place in Wandsworth Town Centre, where high vacancy rates are accompanied by enthusiasm for change among community leaders and local politicians as well as interest from private asset owners and developers. The Wandsworth Town Property Partnership has been set up and is made up of the council, local community organisations and leaders, socially trading organisations, Wandsworth Town Business Improvement District, major asset owners such as LGIM, and Platform Places. The Partnership's vision is to co-design an impact framework, build local community capacity, and make their innovative ideas come to life in selected buildings through an ownership model that will offer long-term security of tenure. The next step in the project will be to identify, raise funds for, and activate these buildings for community use for the benefit of local people and asset owners alike.¹¹⁵

113. Bex Trevalyan et al., 'A Platform for Places', 2022. https://radixuk.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Platform-for-Places-Report-May-22_V2_WEB.pdf.

114. Roundtable 2.

115. Trevalyan et al., 'A Platform for Places'; New Local, 'How We Did It: Starting a Local Property Partnership', 2023. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/how-we-did-it-unlocking-community-assets-through-local-partnerships/>; Platform Places, 'Wandsworth Town Property Partnership'. <https://www.platformplaces.com/wandsworth-town>.





The Millennium Building, a collaboration between Nudge Community Builders and Eat Work Art in Plymouth.

Building. While the former attracted pots of funding inaccessible to the private sector, such as grants and community shares, the latter was able to access cheaper loans. Now the Millennium Building is in an asset lock, meaning the building is safeguarded in perpetuity for community benefit rather than private profit.¹¹⁷

Aside from co-ownership, meaningful partnerships may take the form of a collaborative design process, as TOWN has adopted in its co-housing developments Marmalade Lane in Cambridge and Angel Yard in Norwich. It may also take the form of community ownership. In Sussex, for example, the private developer, Thakeham, and Plunkett UK have partnered to create an approach to development that puts community businesses at its heart, which resulted in the establishment of a community shop at the centre of Thakeham's new Woodgate development.¹¹⁸ Partnerships between community land trusts (CLTs) and developers can go a step further, involving both co-design and community ownership. When a CLT works with a developer to build housing and other infrastructure, the developer

provides technical expertise, access to development finance, and is largely responsible for funding and often the construction of the development.¹¹⁹ The CLT on the other hand, provides local knowledge, builds support among the local community, and often becomes the management company for all or part of the development upon completion, stewarding homes and amenities for community benefit, as occurred in Sherford (see Case Study 5).

This approach also takes into account the long-term maintenance and sustainability of social infrastructure by transferring the management of newly constructed spaces to those with a stake in the area. On a 500-home development in East Cambridgeshire, Kennett CLT is due to take over place-management responsibilities from the large private developer, Bellway Homes, who are not interested in maintaining responsibility for management. With a modest fee levied on all residents and a commuted sum acquired through planning obligations, the CLT will manage public open spaces, the allotments, work and community space, and a health centre, among other assets.

116. Interview with Real Ideas.

117. Nudge Community Builders, 'Story so far'. <https://www.nudge.community/millenniumstory>.

118. Plunkett UK, 'Creating Community Businesses Alongside Thakeham Homes'. <https://plunkett.co.uk/creating-community-businesses-alongside-thakeham-homes/>.

119. Community Land Trust Network, 'State of the Community Land Trust Sector 2023', 2023. <https://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/State-of-the-Sector-2023-FINAL.pdf>.



The council played a key role here, too, through its support for the CLT and community ownership as well as through its facilitation of engagement between Bellway Homes and Kennett CLT, which would have been challenging given the significant disparity between their ways of working.¹²⁰

Of course, the ability for local communities to meaningfully collaborate with the private and public sectors and shape the future of their area depends on their capacity. In the case of Kennett CLT, for example, the highly experienced working backgrounds of its members and their capacity to spend hours volunteering for the organisation significantly contributed to the ability of the CLT to take a key role in the development process and subsequently adopt place-management responsibilities.¹²¹ Unfortunately, many communities lack the same resources, skills, and experience. As Jane Wills' research into neighbourhood planning has found, communities with existing organisations, civic leaders, and local institutions have a much greater ability to engage with the public and private sectors and take action around planning than those with weak civic capacity.¹²² Supporting communities to grow their capacity, whether that involves strengthening skills or building confidence within local communities, is therefore crucial to enable them to access and manage space and participate in shaping their area's future in the long-term.

Some responsibility for this lies with private developers and asset owners who shape how a place looks and feels, especially those with a stake in the long-term sustainability and maintenance of a building or wider development. This could be done by funding local organisations to build capacity within the community, such as in the case of Sherford (see Case Study 5) or using meanwhile space as an opportunity for incubation, allowing community businesses to test ideas and grow their business before being allocated a permanent location in the final development. This would also bring vibrancy and footfall to the area and provide the developer with a viable occupier upon completion.

Local authorities more commonly support community capacity to enable communities to take a leading role in shaping their places. In Calderdale, the council has used its allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to create a hyperlocal community leadership scheme run by two community anchor organisations in some of the authority's most deprived areas to ensure place-making is community-driven. However, the capacity of local authorities themselves has declined significantly over the last 15 years, making it much more difficult for them to support the community development many areas need.

Case Study 5 – Sherford

In the new town of Sherford on the outskirts of Plymouth, the local authorities involved in this large new residential development utilised the policy levers available to them to prioritise community participation and community ownership.

Through a Section 106 agreement with the private developers, the councils ensured the establishment of Sherford Community Land Trust with an endowment of £1m, which will enable the local community to take on public assets, such as the local medical centre, town hall, and potentially some commercial units, too, once they have been constructed.

The S106 agreement also earmarked funding to build community capacity. As part of this, the local authorities contracted the local community business, Real Ideas, to help residents build soft skills and develop technical insights, such as how to work with customers and suppliers, undertake financial responsibilities, and understand regulatory frameworks. The activities and initiatives organised by Real Ideas will equip residents with the skills necessary to own and maintain many of Sherford's assets in the future.¹¹⁶


120. Community Land Trust Network, 'Kennett Garden Village' (unpublished).

121. Community Land Trust Network, 'Kennett Garden Village'.

122. Jane Wills, 'Emerging geographies of English localism: The case of neighbourhood planning', *Political Geography* (July 2016), Vol. 53, 43-53.



Table 1: Relationships between the private sector and communities in the context of creating social infrastructure

Type of Relationship	Description	Example	Benefits	Challenges	
Inform/ Consult	The developer/property owner informs the public and obtains feedback on plans and decisions. This is a statutory requirement in order to acquire planning permission.	The development team at King's Cross consulted over 4,000 people through a range of activities, such as interviews and workshops during the planning process of the redevelopment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It improves the quality of the development and/or spaces created. - It may enable the development to progress faster. - It cultivates community support for the project. 	Consultation is too often poorly undertaken and is short-lived. Communities have very limited influence over decision-making and are rarely given any control of the spaces created.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Towards mutually beneficial meaningful partnerships</p>
Involve	The developer/property owner works directly with the community over the long-term to ensure public interests are understood and incorporated into planning and decision-making.	Bywater Properties established a 'Placemaking Group' in Belfast to advise them over the long-term and help them decide who should occupy their vacant units.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The community provides a greater understanding of the area and what social infrastructure is required, making it more likely that spaces constructed will be well-used and result in long-term commercial value. This is particularly useful for those private organisations based elsewhere. - The community can, to an extent, shape what social infrastructure is created in their area. 	The extent to which community voices are meaningfully considered is dependent on the developer/property owner, who still retains sole control over decision-making.	
Collaborate	The local community and developer/property owner partner to co-develop projects and spaces. Decisions are made together as much as possible.	Nudge Community Builders partnered with Eat Work Art to buy the Millennium Building in Plymouth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The community and private sector benefit from each other's access to different resources and expertise. - It results in developments and spaces tailored to local community needs and is also likely to result in long-term commercial value. 	It is difficult to develop the kind of partnerships required to meaningfully collaborate, particularly given the length of time needed to build up such relationships.	
Empower	Decision-making power is in community hands while the developer/property owner plays a supportive role. Often this involves community ownership to ensure the public have meaningful and long-term control over the project.	Kennett Garden Village is a residential development led by Kennett CLT (who will adopt management responsibilities of some community facilities once constructed) in partnership with Bellway Homes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A CLT or other community organisation provide local knowledge, build community support, and may have access to land that developers do not. - The development and spaces directly reflect what the community want and need. - It ensures the long-term maintenance of social infrastructure by transferring its management to the community, who can safeguard spaces for long-term community benefit. 	Many communities require greater capacity to shape a vision for their area or take on ownership and management responsibilities.	



Guiding principles and policy recommendations

In his 2024 Chief Executive's lecture to the Royal Society of Arts, Andy Haldane, spoke of social connectedness as a key determinant of opportunity and an underutilised policy tool for addressing inequality:

“The recognition that growing social capital and nurturing social connectivity could play a crucial role in rebuilding the ladder of opportunity for disadvantaged people opens up vast new policy opportunities, in what has been a neglected and under-explored contour of public policy to date.”¹²³

However, Haldane argues that social infrastructure is the ‘poor relation of the infrastructure world’ with spending and policymaking on social infrastructure dwarfed by the attention paid to physical and digital infrastructure. This, he suggests, represents a failure to recognise the high returns, for individuals and society, of investing in the spaces that connect us.

But Haldane also recognises that nurturing these spaces is not a challenge for government alone, suggesting there is a clear role for private and social investment in social infrastructure. Like Haldane, we propose that the task of shaping and stewarding assets to provide much needed social infrastructure for communities is multi-sectoral. Drawing on our research on the role that privately owned spaces play as social infrastructure, in both planned and unplanned ways, this chapter provides a contribution to correcting the policy gap on social infrastructure.

We provide recommendations to asset owners and developers on how to work alongside communities to tap into the benefits of using their assets as social infrastructure. It also sets out how government – at the local, regional and national level – can take a more strategic and more coherent approach to creating and maintaining social infrastructure and situate communities at the heart of this policy issue. The section also lays out a series of principles for best practice for all partners to consider in their approach to developing and maintaining social infrastructure in place.

Principles for developing and managing social infrastructure

Through our research, we have identified a number of principles that have shaped good practice approaches to developing and maintaining social infrastructure in privately owned spaces. They signal the importance of a coordinated approach across sectors and while designed to shape the use of privately owned spaces as social infrastructure, they could also be applied to the stewardship of assets in public or community ownership. These principles are intended to support all stakeholders to take a more coordinated approach to social infrastructure provision.

1. Establish meaningful partnerships to develop and maintain social infrastructure

At the heart of the successful provision of social infrastructure by the private sector is the importance of developing meaningful partnerships involving other key stakeholders in place, particularly the public sector and local communities.

Meaningful, long-term partnerships between the private and public sectors and local communities are possible and often produce the most desired and sustainable social infrastructure because they enable a greater understanding of what spaces are needed and account for their long-term maintenance and management. For partnerships to be meaningful, they must address the balance of power between stakeholders and ensure communities in particular are supported to engage in shaping and delivering social infrastructure alongside the private and public sectors.

2. Adopt a placemaking approach

Spaces in local areas serve distinct purposes for different parts of the community. Social infrastructure should therefore be understood as part of an ecosystem as well as individual spaces. A holistic, place-making approach that involves the adoption of a broad definition of social infrastructure is therefore necessary in order to

123. Andy Haldane, 'From the era of anxiety to an age of aspiration', 2024. <https://www.thersa.org/blog/2024/05/andy-haldane-rsa-ceo-lecture-anxiety-aspiration>.



provide and maintain the social infrastructure that communities need. This enables a greater understanding of the full range of spaces that communities use and value, including those that are privately owned and whose primary purpose is not to foster social connection but nevertheless do, which may include supermarkets, convenience stores, shopping centres, and other spaces.

Policymakers and the private sector should listen to and work with local communities to find out which spaces they use and how, rather than just focusing on those spaces that have the specific purpose to function as social infrastructure. Without the active involvement of communities, both the private and public sectors may fail to understand the diverse ways in which people use spaces for social connection.

3. Develop social infrastructure with sustainability in mind

Long-term sustainability needs to be at the forefront of conversations around social infrastructure. Care is needed to ensure that spaces which provide social infrastructure can remain in use by their communities over the long term, particularly where they are in private ownership.

In part due to the financial and resourcing constraints of local authorities, there is a growing trend towards the private management of public amenities, resulting in inadequately maintained public spaces, poor customer service, and considerable, unregulated charges for residents.¹²⁴ Greater attention must be paid to the long-term maintenance of these spaces from the outset if local authorities are unable to take them on, including by exploring alternative options to private management, such as the community management of local spaces. When the long-term management of these spaces does change hands after building, there should be early consideration of how their maintenance is to be funded and how their function as social infrastructure can be safeguarded.

4. Deliver economic and social value through social infrastructure

Those managing and developing assets in the private sector should recognise the value of social infrastructure provision to generating greater and more sustainable financial returns. Therefore, creating social infrastructure in privately owned spaces should be seen as not just of social value, but of significant potential economic value, including to the private sector.

As our research shows, for the private owners of supermarkets, shopping centres, or other commercial spaces, the secondary, often incidental, social purpose of these spaces enhances commercial value by increasing footfall, customer dwell time and customer loyalty over time. Meanwhile, community-run spaces (including in privately owned assets) enhance the vibrancy of places and can increase footfall to surrounding local businesses. Therefore, by creating places that are more attractive to visit, live and work in, providing social infrastructure can ensure that private investment in a place sees sustained returns over time.

Policy recommendations

Recommendations for asset owners and developers

Private owners and developers of assets should work with community organisations to both facilitate the use of existing private assets as social infrastructure and in the design and delivery of new social infrastructure. By working with communities, asset owners and managers can ensure their spaces deliver what local people want and need, helping to increase and sustain the use of these spaces over time. This will help to deliver return on their investment, both through the benefits for the longevity of the spaces and places they invest in, but also as a knock-on impact on other local businesses, through increased footfall and dwell time.

124. Competition & Markets Authority, 'Housebuilding market study'.



To enable communities to play a role in shaping privately owned spaces to provide social infrastructure, asset owners and developers should:

1. Work with community organisations to shape and create spaces as social infrastructure

Community businesses and community anchor organisations can be key conduits to build trust and buy-in between the private sector and local communities, ensuring new developments and regeneration schemes align with what local people want and need. Creating social infrastructure in a locally informed way ensures that these spaces are popular and that local people will be invested in their survival and use them over the long term.

At the earliest possible stage in a development or regeneration project, private asset owners and developers should identify these trusted community organisations and work with them consistently and equitably to develop and deliver social infrastructure as part of their development and regeneration schemes.

This could be done by commissioning community organisations to run resident engagement sessions with local people to understand their aspirations for social infrastructure spaces to be created through a scheme. Providing meanwhile use of spaces while development is ongoing can help to develop a better understanding of what social infrastructure is needed and is likely to be supported by the community and to attract people to these spaces. This also provides a testing ground for new community business ideas that could then be supported more permanently. Such opportunities should be offered on terms that reflect the social and economic value they generate, such as on a no or low rent lease, to support them to build financial sustainability.

2. Consider community stewardship and ownership of social infrastructure to embed long-term sustainability

The long-term care and management of spaces that provide social infrastructure is a key concern for private asset owners and developers, particularly where traditional routes of public sector ‘adoption’

of social infrastructure are no longer viable. Given community use, stewardship, or ownership of privately owned social infrastructure can be mutually beneficial for both the private sector and local communities, community organisations should be seen as a natural partner in managing and preserving social infrastructure.

Many private developers, for example, do not want responsibility for the complex and costly task of managing the social infrastructure assets that they construct. Transferring assets into long-term community stewardship or ownership can therefore ensure a smooth exit from developments for those developers for whom this is appropriate. Community organisations are well placed to take on and run these assets sustainably, with buy-in from the local community to support their longevity. These models also provide a welcome alternative to private management companies that some developers use, which too often offer a poor quality of service at too high a price for the communities who live in these places.¹²⁵

For asset owners and managers who wish to remain rooted in a place, providing space for the community to use as social infrastructure can enhance the vitality of the asset and the surrounding area with a knock-on effect on nearby businesses. Co-ownership of assets with community businesses can also be an effective way to ensure that these spaces serve local needs, while providing opportunities for commercial return, as in the partnership between Nudge Community Builders and Eat Work Art to redevelop the Millennium Building in Plymouth (see pg. 30). These models can draw on the different sources of legitimacy, skills and finance of the private and community sectors.

Recommendations for local authorities

The capacity of local authorities to create and maintain social infrastructure in the long term has been significantly diminished by the impact of austerity. However, as examples in this report reveal, local authorities still have ample opportunity to harness their convening powers and resources to work with developers and others to provide social infrastructure. They are also well placed to advocate for and support community

125. Competition & Markets Authority, ‘Housebuilding market study.’



stewardship of social infrastructure through assets in both public and private ownership.

To support communities to engage in shaping both private and publicly owned assets to deliver social infrastructure, local authorities should:

1. Take a convening role to shape a ‘whole place’ approach

While local authorities are not the only place leaders, they do have the convening power to bring together the private and public sectors with communities to build a collective vision for place development and ensure alignment across stakeholders’ approach to and investment in assets – including their own.

Where local authorities enter development partnerships with the private sector, they should seek to bring in community partners alongside to engage the public and to shape and manage social infrastructure. Where they have access to their own investment for place development and regeneration, local and combined authorities should ensure that communities can shape and share this investment. For example, community leaders should be recruited to join the investment boards of the 75 Long-Term Plan for Towns areas, and local authorities should consider how place-based funds (like the levelling up funds or their successors) could be invested in the provision of social infrastructure through community spaces, rather than ‘shovel ready’ physical infrastructure projects that may lack popular support.

Elsewhere, local authorities should consider how approaches like Community Improvement Districts, which can provide a mechanism for community leadership and governance of high streets and town centres, could help facilitate a more sustainable community-led approach to the maintenance of assets as social infrastructure.

2. Adopt a comprehensive community asset strategy and make communities the ‘first resort’ for asset stewardship

All local authorities should adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer strategy with a clear

approach to the management of publicly owned assets. This should position communities as a first, not last, resort for the disposal of public assets – particularly those designated as Assets of Community Value – to safeguard their function as social infrastructure against privatisation or disuse.¹²⁶

Local authorities should also account for the importance of privately owned spaces as social infrastructure. As recommended in our previous research with the British Academy, local authorities should work with their communities to understand the range of spaces that communities value, and make provisions to protect their role as social infrastructure. This could include proactively supporting communities to register Assets of Community Value in preparation to support the implementation of a Community Right to Buy (as proposed by the Labour Government) and by protecting the function of these spaces in facilitating social connection through their Local Plans.

3. Use existing financial and policy levers to build community capacity to steward social infrastructure

As examples in this report demonstrate, existing levers in the planning system such as Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 agreements can be used to commission community organisations to engage local people and manage assets as social infrastructure for the long term, such as through the development of a Community Land Trust to hold and manage these assets.

Local authorities should also support communities to adopt neighbourhood plans. These can help to secure a greater role for communities in shaping development and regeneration projects and ensure space for communities forms part of any planning proposals. It also provides communities with access to a neighbourhood share of Community Infrastructure Levy.

This must be backed up with support for communities to build the expertise necessary for asset stewardship. Other sources of public investment, such as UK Shared Prosperity Funding

126. This is a proposal that community organisations across England have been calling for, as articulated by a network of community businesses that own and manage assets. See <https://www.platformplaces.com/news/hawkwood-a-gathering-of-community-asset-leaders-and-the-birth-of-a-new-peer-network>.



(UKSPF) and any successor programmes, and the devolution of business support should also be used to enhance the capacity and capability of community organisations to engage in the development and management of assets as social infrastructure.

Recommendations for central government

Social infrastructure is vital to strengthening our communities and their local economies but has often lacked appropriate policy backing and state investment relative to other types of infrastructure. After the lost promise of the previous government's Community Spaces and Relationships Strategy, the new government should make the provision and preservation of social infrastructure a policy priority, working alongside communities and the private sector to ensure it is provided and protected in the places that need it most.

To address the public policy neglect of social infrastructure, the new government should:

1. Adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure

Central government should adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure to shape the approach to policymaking, funding and support for spaces which provide social infrastructure, similar to Labour's planned National Cultural Infrastructure Plan.¹²⁷ This strategy should shape action across government departments and between different levels of government in place as well as take account of the role of the private sector in providing social infrastructure.

The government should ensure all local authorities have a Community Asset Transfer strategy in place, which prioritises the preservation of assets of importance to local communities when making decisions on asset disposal. This would ensure

coherence between government's approach to both safeguarding important local assets (such as through the Community Ownership Fund and through Labour's plans for a Community Right to Buy) and its advice to local authorities on asset disposal.

It should also consider how government's own surplus assets could be transferred into community ownership for use in delivering local social and economic value and to support their long-term sustainability.

2. Align funding to facilitate community asset ownership and long-term management

A strategy should also guide Government's approach to investing in community assets, ensuring funds like the Community Ownership Fund and dormant assets scheme are used to support communities to acquire assets from the public and private sectors and to equip them with the capabilities to manage these assets long-term.

As part of this, the new government should commit to extend and expand the Community Ownership Fund to provide funding and support for more communities to take on the assets that matter to local people. This could be extended to publicly owned assets to help communities become the first resort to take on struggling public assets. Government should also consider how co-investing alongside social impact funders and investors as well as the private sector could amplify the impact of its financial commitments to community asset ownership.

127. Labour, 'Creating Growth: Labour's Plan for the Arts, Culture and Creative Industries', 2023. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Labour-Arts-Culture-Creative-Industries-Sector-Plan.pdf>.



Conclusion

In too many places, social infrastructure is deteriorating or disappearing entirely, with the impact being felt by local communities across the country. Yet, as this report shows, new approaches to the creation of social infrastructure are being pioneered in many places. Often, these approaches involve a wider range of stakeholders, including the private sector, than may usually be expected in the creation and provision of social infrastructure. By drawing on these examples, we advocate for an approach to the delivery of social infrastructure that involves and benefits all partners with a stake in a place.

This report follows on from our previous research report, “Space for community” (2023), which found that the private sector plays a key role in the provision of social infrastructure, whether through anchor institutions like supermarkets or through the development and regeneration of places. But the involvement of the private sector here goes beyond a purely altruistic motivation. In fact, a growing number of private companies are recognising the dual financial and social benefits of delivering social infrastructure both for local communities and themselves. Many private sector organisations therefore strengthen their social role not merely for charitable reasons, but because they understand the commercial value of doing so. However, more needs to be done to raise awareness around the business case for delivering social infrastructure.

Policymakers need to recognise the importance of privately owned social infrastructure and the willingness of many in the private sector to deliver community space. This offers a significant yet underappreciated opportunity at a time when the public sector has scarce financial and human resources. Without needing large injections of public investment, policymakers could work with local communities and the private sector to deliver social infrastructure tailored to local needs.

For this to work, however, an approach that meaningfully involves local communities is crucial. The private and public sectors cannot understand how communities use and value existing spaces, nor what spaces need constructing, without the collaboration and cooperation of local communities. Therefore, it is no surprise that delivering social infrastructure through meaningful partnerships with local communities produces much needed and sustainable social infrastructure that is maintained and safeguarded for communities in the long-term.



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