Scoping review of additional measures of Community Connectedness

November 2025

Contents

Introduction

This report considers and explores the wider measures of community connectedness that already exist across the UK. Current data infrastructure on community connectedness includes a range of different datasets:

1. Universal survey measures e.g. Community Life Survey, Understanding Society;

2. Surveys developed for understanding the impact of specific interventions including the Pride in Place and Life Chances survey developed for the evaluation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund;

3. Administrative data e.g. organisational registers, voting records, grant data;

4. Indices such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Civic Strength Index, Co-op Community Wellbeing Index;

Making sense of these resources, their strengths, weaknesses and gaps, is a major challenge for policy makers, community practitioners and citizens.

In the sections below, we will review these resources and consider their potential and limitations as measures of social connectedness.

Context: history of the Community Needs Index

In 2019, Local Trust commissioned Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) to develop a Community Needs Index (CNI) for England. The CNI is a quantitative measure of social infrastructure, social capital, community participation and social connectedness produced at a neighbourhood spatial scale and derived from open data. The CNI brings together more than 50 indicators under three domains – Civic Assets, Connectivity and Active and Engaged community.

The CNI was designed to combine with other frameworks to identify needs at a hyper local level. In 2019, OCSI combined the Community Needs Index with the Indices of Deprivation to capture areas experiencing the dual disadvantage of high levels of deprivation and poor social infrastructure. Areas ranking in the top 10% on both measures were identified as 'left-behind neighbourhoods', the findings of this research were published in the paper Left behind? Understanding Communities on the edge[1]. This research was subsequently used as the basis for developing an evidence base for the All Party Parliamentary Group (or APPG) for 'left behind' neighbourhoods[2]. The MPs and Peers formed the APPG to explore the needs of these areas and the aspirations of residents to consider what could be done to meet these aspirations.

The Community Needs Index itself is also gaining wide usage. For example, it was cited as a measure of Social Capital in the Levelling Up White Paper[3] and has been used as a

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[1] Local Trust (2019) Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge
https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/left-behind-understanding-communities-on-the-edge/
[2] The APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods
https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/the-appg-for-left-behind-neighbourhoods/
[3] Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Levelling Up the United Kingdom
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom

component in supporting the distribution of a range of levelling up programmes, including the [DCMS Know Your Neighbourhoods Fund](#)[4], while Sport England are using the CNI as part of their targeting formula for their [new £250m Local Development Partnership](#)[5]. This research also helped Local Trust to make the case for the [Community Wealth Fund](#)[6] and to garner support for it – this is a fund aimed at providing sustainable long-term funding for deprived areas, with the communities themselves determining the priorities for the spend, which government has agreed to support using funds from dormant unclaimed assets. The new Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) uses the CNI alongside the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to identify "doubly disadvantaged" neighbourhoods needing long-term regeneration[7]. Phase 1 allocated £1.5 billion to 75 places, while Phase 2 expanded to cover 169 neighbourhoods across England, Scotland and Wales; overall the programme commits up to £5 billion over 10 years[8].

[An updated version of the CNI was developed in 2023](#)[9]. The overarching aim of the update was to create a refined model, making use of the most up to date data, reflecting the profound social changes experienced in the context of the global pandemic and cost of living crisis. The update also incorporated feedback from expert stakeholders, through the establishment of an Advisory Group of academics, researchers and policy makers who had a key interest in expanding the evidence base for measuring social infrastructure and subsequently, with the wider user community through a [formal consultation process](#)[10]. For the next phase of the work OCSI have been exploring the feasibility of developing an enhanced UK wide Community Needs Index in the [C4 Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness](#)[11]. The aim is to develop a revised version of the CNI within the Centre, making use of the best available administrative and survey data to capture community connectedness and social infrastructure challenges at small area level. Ongoing limitations in coverage, methodology and level of detail holdback our understanding of community connectedness. The aim here, as part of this programme of work, is to engage extensively with partners to co-produce recommendations for change and co-develop a new, more cohesive and systematic measurement framework for community connection.

The update will be in two stages.

1) An interim UK Community Needs Index (UKCNI), which will be built from open data sources;
2) An enhanced UKCNI which draws upon a wider range of sources including safeguarded data, which has been supported and reviewed by collaborative partners in the centre. As part of the enhanced revision, the intention is to widen the scope of the research to explore overall measures of community connectedness.

This output forms part of the scoping stage to inform both the interim and enhanced UKCNI, through a review of current sources of data not included in previous iterations of

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[4] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023) About the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/about-the-know-your-neighbourhood-fund
[5] Sport England (2023) Place Partnerships expanded to help those in greatest need
https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-inspiration/place-partnerships-expanded-help-those-greatest-need
[6] https://communitywealthfund.org.uk/
[7] MHCLG Pride in Place Programme phase 2: methodology note
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-programme-place-selection-methodology-note/pride-in-place-programme-phase-2-methodology-note?
[8] Gov.uk What is Pride in Place https://www.gov.uk/government/news/what-is-pride-in-place?
[9] https://ocsi.uk/2023/05/24/community-needs-index-2023/
[10] https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/LBN_Consultation
[11] https://c4.ac.uk/

the CNI, to understand the suitability, limitations and steps required to bring them into the indices.

Defining Community Connectedness

What is Community Connectedness?

Community connectedness is a multifaceted concept central to the social fabric of any well-functioning society. It can be seen as encompassing a range of interconnected dimensions, including:

- **Social Networks:** The connections between individuals, including strong ties (family, close friends) and weak ties (acquaintances, neighbours), as well as participation in formal groups and informal social activities.

- **Social Trust:** Confidence in the reliability and goodwill of others, including neighbours, people in the local area generally and trust in local institutions.

- **Participation:** Engagement in community life, ranging from formal civic actions like voting or volunteering for registered organisations, to informal activities like helping neighbours or participating in local events.

- **Sense of Belonging and Identity:** An individual's feeling of attachment, acceptance and identification with their local area or community.

- **Social Cohesion:** The extent to which people from different backgrounds get along well together, share values and feel part of a common enterprise within the community.

- **Local Pride:** Positive feelings about the local area as a place to live, potentially linked to its appearance, amenities, or community spirit.

Community connectedness is recognised as vital for both individual wellbeing (e.g., reducing loneliness, improving mental health)[12] and collective community outcomes, such as resilience to shocks, economic prosperity and effective local governance[13]. It is increasingly relevant to policy agendas focused on 'levelling up' geographic inequalities and fostering community wellbeing, which is understood as more than the sum of individual wellbeing, emphasising the crucial interplay between people and their local environment[14].

Given the complexity of measuring community connectedness and the evolving data landscape, a systematic review of existing methodologies is necessary. This review will assess the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches used in prominent UK data resources. The ultimate goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations that can

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[12] See for example Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al., "Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications." https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/wps.21224, World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection — "From loneliness to social connection: charting a path to healthier societies" (2025) https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/978240112360

[13] See for example Local Trust / Andy Haldane & David Halpern, "Social Capital 2025: Building connection, improving outcomes." https://localtrust.org.uk/policy/social-capital-2025-building-connection-improving-outcomes, Daniel P. Aldrich, "The Importance of Social Capital in Building Community Resilience" (in *Rethinking Resilience, Adaptation and Transformation in a Time of Change*, 2017). https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-50171-0_23

[14] See for example the Pride in Place Programme Gov.uk What is Pride in Place https://www.gov.uk/government/news/what-is-pride-in-place?

inform the revision of the CNI, ensuring it remains a relevant, accurate and powerful tool for understanding and addressing community needs related to social infrastructure and connectedness across the UK.

Potential sources for measuring Community Connectedness

A diverse range of UK data sources offer potential insights into measuring community connectedness, each with specific strengths and limitations. This section examines survey and administrative data, composite indicators and newer sources of emerging data.

National Surveys and Frameworks

These provide foundational data on social attitudes, behaviours and experiences.

Community Life Survey (CLS)[15]

- **Overview:** The Community Life Survey (CLS) is an annual household survey of adults aged 16 and over living in England. It was specifically designed to measure different dimensions of community engagement and social relationships, including volunteering, civic participation, social action, neighbourhood belonging, trust, well-being and loneliness. Since its redesign in 2016/17, the survey has been run by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), with full datasets made available through the UK Data Service.

- **Methodology:** The CLS uses a mixed-mode 'push-to-web' methodology, formally known as Address Based Online Surveying (ABOS), with paper questionnaires provided as an alternative for those without digital access. The sampling frame is drawn from the Postcode Address File (PAF), and results are weighted to ensure representativeness of the adult population in England. Because the methodology shifted from face-to-face interviewing to ABOS in 2016/17, there is a recognised break in the trend series which affects comparisons with earlier years.

- **Strengths:** Its primary strength lies in the directness and breadth of its questions covering multiple facets of connectedness, including belonging, neighbourhood relations, trust, various forms of participation (civic, volunteering, social action) and loneliness. These questions are often validated and specifically designed to measure these social concepts. The annual updates provide relatively current data for England, and the robust weighting procedure aims to ensure national representativeness. The survey's explicit focus on community-level interactions and engagement aligns well with the CNI's objectives.

- **Limitations:** The most significant limitation is its England-only coverage, making it insufficient as a sole source for a UK-wide index without supplementary data for other nations. The shift to the ABOS ("push-to-web") methodology in 2016/17, while cost-effective, introduces potential biases. Although a paper option exists, the reliance on online completion may underrepresent digitally excluded or less socially engaged populations, potentially skewing connectedness measures downwards in areas with higher concentrations of these groups – precisely the areas the CNI often

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[15] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). *Community Life Survey.*
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey

seeks to identify. This mode change also creates a break in the time series, complicating the analysis of long-term trends in connectedness. Furthermore, while nationally representative, the standard CLS dataset does not provide reliable estimates at the LSOA level required for the CNI without special license access or aggregation, limiting its direct applicability for granular index scores.

- **CNI Implications:** The CLS is an excellent source for England, but is unusable alone for a UK-wide CNI. The detailed measurement of different forms of volunteering and participation offers a valuable template for ensuring the CNI captures a nuanced picture of community engagement - distinguishing between civic engagement (e.g., contacting officials, petitions), formal volunteering (through organisations), informal volunteering (helping individuals) and social action (improving the local area) - underscoring the multi-dimensional nature of community involvement.

Understanding Society (UKHLS)[16]

- **Overview:** Understanding Society (UKHLS) is the UK's largest and most comprehensive longitudinal household panel study, following around 40,000 households each year. It began in 2009 and incorporates the earlier British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) dating back to 1991. The study is managed by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex and funded primarily by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

- **Methodology:** The survey collects detailed information about individuals, their families and their neighbourhoods using a mixed-mode approach combining online, telephone and face-to-face interviewing. It includes boost samples for ethnic minority groups and new migrant communities, enhancing its representativeness. As a longitudinal study, UKHLS allows researchers to track changes in people's social relationships, civic behaviours, well-being, political attitudes and local experiences over time. It is also a major data source for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Social Capital Framework[17].

- **Relevant Metrics:** Relevant metrics include frequency of contact with family and friends, perceived social support, civic and political participation, neighbourhood safety, life satisfaction and other measures of subjective well-being.

- **Strengths:** The main strengths of UKHLS lie in its UK-wide coverage, longitudinal nature and multi-dimensional scope. It provides insight into the dynamics of connectedness - how relationships evolve, how community involvement changes over time, and how social support interacts with health, employment and household changes.

- **Limitations:** Its limitations stem from its breadth: unlike the Community Life Survey, it does not focus specifically on neighbourhood perceptions or community connectedness and some relevant variables appear only in particular survey waves. The survey's complexity also requires specialist analytical skills and the most detailed geographic data (below Local Authority level) require secure access or statistical modelling.

- **CNI Implications:** The UKHLS has the potential to be a foundational resource for a UK-wide CNI due to the UK coverage, sample and longitudinal design. The project

[16] Understanding Society – UK Longitudinal Household Panel Study.
https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk
[17] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-capital-in-the-uk

team intend to run a multi-level regression model to produce small area outputs from the UKHLS at a sub-Local Authority level as part of the enhanced UKCNI.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) Measures of National Well-being[18]

- **Overview:** The ONS Measures of National Well-being framework monitors the UK's broader societal progress across 10 domains, including Personal Well-being, Relationships, What We Do, Where We Live and Governance. It draws on multiple ONS and government surveys, most notably the Annual Population Survey (APS) [19]and the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN). These surveys provide established indicators including the four standard ONS personal well-being measures (life satisfaction, sense of worthwhile, happiness and anxiety), measures of loneliness, satisfaction with local area, access to green space, volunteering and trust in government.

- **Relevant Metrics:** Personal well-being (ONS4: life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness, anxiety - from APS); Relationships (satisfaction, reliance on others, loneliness - from APS); What we do (volunteering); Where we live (satisfaction with area, access to green space, safety); Governance (trust, civic participation).

- **Strengths:** This framework offers a holistic view of social and community conditions across the UK and its indicators are regularly updated. The conceptual distinction between subjective personal well-being, social relationships and environmental conditions provides a useful blueprint for the CNI, which similarly aims to avoid conflating individual psychological states with community resources and structures.

- **Limitations:** However, the framework is constrained by the granularity of its source surveys. The APS currently faces acknowledged data quality issues following changes introduced in 2020–23, and reliable estimates below Local Authority level are generally not available. Furthermore, although the well-being framework includes community-relevant indicators, it is not specifically designed to measure community connectedness in the way that CLS or UKHLS does.

- **CNI Implications:** It is a valuable source for specific, validated UK-wide indicators (especially. ONS4, relationships, trust), but it is limited by source survey granularity. Despite this, the structure of the ONS National Wellbeing framework itself provides a useful conceptual blueprint. By separating 'Personal Well-being' (how individuals feel subjectively) from 'Our Relationships' (the nature of social connections) and 'Where We Live' (aspects of the local community environment), the framework avoids conflating individual happiness with the presence or absence of community assets and social ties. This distinction is pertinent to the CNI, which aims specifically to measure community needs related to social infrastructure.

ONS Social Capital Framework[20]

- **Overview:** The ONS Social Capital Framework is not a survey or an index itself, but rather a conceptual structure and curated set of indicators used by the Office for National Statistics to measure social capital in the UK. The framework defines social

[18] Office for National Statistics. *Measures of National Well-being Dashboard.*
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing
[19] Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/methodologies/annualpopulationsurveyapsqmi
[20] ONS. *Social Capital in the UK: 2017.*
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/socialcapitalintheuk/2017

capital broadly as the connections between people and the collective attitudes and behaviours that underpin a well-functioning, close-knit society. Its development was guided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) work on measuring social capital. It acknowledges the theoretical distinctions between different forms of social capital: bonding (ties within similar groups, e.g. family, close friends), bridging (ties across different groups, e.g. neighbours, colleagues) and linking (ties to individuals or institutions with greater power or resources). Understanding Society is noted as the single largest source of indicators for the framework.

- **Relevant Metrics:** The framework utilises a set of 25 headline indicators, last revised in 2017, to measure these domains. These indicators are not collected through a dedicated ONS Social Capital survey but are drawn from a variety of existing, high-quality national surveys such as: the Understanding Society (UKHLS), the Community Life Survey (CLS), the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), the ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) and international surveys like the European Social Survey (ESS) where UK data is available. Examples of relevant metrics include frequency of contact with family and friends, having someone to rely on, formal and informal volunteering rates, membership in organisations, trust in neighbours, trust in national government, sense of belonging to neighbourhood and feeling safe walking alone after dark.

- **CNI implications**: Its key strength lies in providing a theoretically robust and internationally recognised (OECD-aligned) structure for conceptualising the multifaceted nature of social capital and community connectedness. The division into four domains (Relationships, Support, Engagement, Trust and Norms) offers a clear and comprehensive way to think about the different elements the CNI might aim to measure within its connectedness-related domains.

Active Lives Survey (Sport England)[21]

- **Overview:** The Active Lives Survey, conducted by Sport England, is a large-scale survey designed to measure participation in sport and physical activity among adults (aged 16+) and children (aged 5-16) in England. It includes volunteering and social development metrics.

- **Methodology:** The adult survey uses a push-to-web design with postal alternatives, while the children's survey is completed through schools. The very large sample sizes allow reasonably robust estimates at Local Authority (LA) level.

- **Relevant Metrics:** Although the survey's main focus is physical activity, it contains several measures relevant to community connectedness. These include volunteering in sport or physical activity, trust in people in the local area, whether people feel others "get along," and membership of sports clubs or cultural groups. Participation in sports and arts often correlates with forms of social capital (e.g. group belonging, collective identity), making these indicators valuable for understanding one dimension of connectedness.

- **Strengths:** The very large sample size enables the production of relatively robust LA-level estimates within England, a granularity often lacking in other national surveys. It provides a detailed measure of volunteering specifically within the sport and physical activity sector, which constitutes a significant portion of overall volunteering. The inclusion of direct questions on local social trust and cohesion

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[21] Sport England. *Active Lives Adult Survey*.
https://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives

(e.g. trust in neighbours, people getting along) is highly relevant to connectedness. Data on sports club membership and potentially arts or cultural group participation offer proxies for engagement in community groups.

- **Limitations:** The survey is limited to England, restricting its direct use for a UK-wide CNI. Its primary focus remains sport and physical activity, meaning connectedness measures are secondary and may not be as comprehensive as those in dedicated social surveys like the CLS.

- **CNI Implications:** The indicator is a useful source for specific indicators (sport volunteering, trust, group memberships) but due to the England only geographic scope it is unsuitable for the UKCNI.

Community Research Index (The National Lottery Community Fund - TNLCF)[22]

- **Overview:** Community Research Index (CRI) is an annual survey commissioned by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) to capture public perceptions and priorities regarding their local communities across the UK. Its findings are used to inform TNLCF's funding strategies and provide insights for policymakers. TNLCF is the largest community funder in the UK, distributing funds raised by National Lottery players as well as other sources like dormant assets.

- **Methodology:** The CRI employs a large sample of UK adults (definitions vary slightly by year, e.g. 16+ or 18+). Recent surveys have included nearly 9,000 respondents (8,968 in 2022/23, 8,976 in 2023/24). The sample includes deliberate boosts for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to enable robust country-level analysis. Quotas are set during sampling to ensure representation across key demographics, including region (within the UK), age, gender and ethnicity. Boosts are sometimes used for specific ethnic groups (e.g. Black, Asian, Mixed respondents) and quotas may also be set based on area deprivation levels (using IMD deciles). The collected data is weighted to ensure the final sample is demographically representative of the UK adult population based on gender, age, region, Socio-economic Group (SEG) and ethnicity.

- **Relevant Metrics:** The CRI focuses on gauging community sentiment and priorities through questions covering: How strongly people feel part of their local community and their perception of the strength of community spirit in their area; Likelihood of volunteering (formally or informally) in the coming year and willingness to work with others to improve the local area; What people identify as most important for community wellbeing (e.g. support with cost of living, looking out for one another, reducing loneliness, youth violence prevention); Perceptions of how well the community fares regarding facilities like community spaces, education, green space and overall quality of life; Views on how events like the COVID-19 pandemic or the rising cost of living have affected community spirit and individual circumstances; Motivation and optimism regarding climate change mitigation.

- **Strengths:** UK-wide; Timely and relevant topics; Direct attitudinal questions; Demographic breakdowns.

- **Limitations:** Its limitations stem from its design as a strategic perception survey: questions focus on attitudes and intentions rather than actual behaviour, and the

[22] National Lottery Community Fund. *Community Research Index*.
https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/community-research-index

dataset is not released at granular geographical scales. Microdata is often not publicly available.

- **CNI Implications:** It is valuable for understanding UK-wide sentiment and priorities but lacks geographical granularity and behavioural data for direct CNI indicators. It could be potentially useful for context and benchmarking.

Administrative Data

Data collected routinely for operational purposes, often used as *proxies* for connectedness.

Organisational Registers and Volunteering Data (NCVO Analysis)[23]

- **Data**: NCVO regularly compiles data from the Charity Commission register[24] to analyse the size, type and distribution of voluntary organisations across Local Authorities in England. These analyses often integrate charity register data with survey-based estimates of volunteering, typically from the Community Life Survey (CLS) or, less frequently, Understanding Society. The combined datasets provide insights into the structure and activity of the formal voluntary sector, including charity density, income patterns, and broad volunteering trends.

- **Strengths**: The key strength of this administrative dataset lies in the comprehensiveness of the charity register for England and Wales, which includes every registered charity and provides standardised information on organisational purpose, size and geography. NCVO's analysis is widely regarded as authoritative, offering high-quality synthesis of multiple public datasets.

- **Limitations**: However, charity registers predominantly capture formal, regulated voluntary activity. They exclude informal groups, faith-based mutual aid networks, ad hoc neighbourhood initiatives and other grassroots forms of connectedness which often play a central role in community life. Moreover, the volunteering metrics used by NCVO rely largely on survey sources and are typically only reported at regional or Local Authority level, limiting their value for neighbourhood-level measurement. Differences in charity regulation across the UK nations also reduce the comparability of register data. Finally, the absence of a coherent national volunteering strategy in England has resulted in inconsistent data flows.

- **CNI Implications:** Given these limitations, this dataset does not meet the requirements for direct inclusion in the CNI. Alternative sources of charity asset data already exist within the Active and Engaged Community domain and provide better national coverage.

Public Library Data (CIPFA[25]/DCMS)

- **Data:** Public library data has historically been collected annually by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), covering Great Britain. The dataset includes information on library service points, staffing, expenditure, book stock, issues and visits. DCMS and the Libraries Taskforce often use these statistics to analyse long-term trends in library provision.

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[23] National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), *UK Civil Society Almanac*. https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/research/almanac/
[24] Charity Commission for England and Wales, *Charity Register*. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission
[25] CIPFA, *Public Library Statistics*. https://www.cipfa.org/services/statistics

- **Relevant metrics:** Access to community resources; Engagement with cultural and educational services; Physical visits.

- **Strengths:** Libraries represent important civic assets that facilitate access to information, learning, digital support, social activities and local community networks. As such, library usage and provision act as meaningful indicators of community engagement and connectedness.

- **Limitations:** Despite their potential value, the usability of CIPFA's library statistics has declined in recent years. Data quality concerns include inconsistent responses from Local Authorities, difficulties in standardising categorisations across different service models and declining completeness as fewer authorities contribute to the voluntary return. CIPFA data is also subscription-based, limiting accessibility. Importantly, no small-area library usage data is available, restricting its usefulness for a neighbourhood-level index.

- **CNI Implications:** Although public libraries are symbolically and practically important within civic life, the current limitations in data availability and quality mean that CIPFA/DCMS statistics cannot be directly incorporated into the CNI without further processing or supplementation.

Digital Connectivity/Exclusion Data (Ofcom[26]/Good Things Foundation[27])

- **Overview:** Digital connectivity and exclusion are increasingly recognised as determinants of social and economic participation. Ofcom publishes the UK-wide Connected Nations reports, which provide detailed data on broadband availability, mobile coverage, network speeds and geographic gaps, often at Local Authority or more granular levels. Ofcom also conducts research into digital adoption and digital disadvantage, exploring how demographic, economic and attitudinal factors affect digital participation. The Good Things Foundation synthesises these datasets into accessible summaries, such as the Digital Nation infographic series. Separately, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has developed a Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI)[28], which estimates the likelihood of exclusion using demographic, economic and connectivity variables.

- **Relevant Metrics:** Broadband speed and access; risk of digital exclusion.

- **Strengths:** Digital exclusion is closely linked to broader social exclusion, especially among older people, disabled residents and low-income households. Connectivity data therefore has potential relevance to community connectedness, as digitally excluded residents may struggle to access services, maintain social contact, or participate in online civic life.

- **Limitations:** However, availability of broadband infrastructure does not always translate into digital usage. Digital exclusion is strongly shaped by skills, motivation, confidence and affordability - none of which administrative data captures fully.

- **CNI Implications:** Digital connectivity indicators should be interpreted as one component of broader access.

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[26] Ofcom, *Connected Nations Reports*. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/connected-nations
[27] Good Things Foundation, *Digital Nation 2023*. https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-nation-2023/
[28] GMCA, *Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI)*. https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/digital-inclusion/

Points of Interest data (OS/CDRC[29])

- **Overview:** The Points of Interest (POI) dataset, curated by the Consumer Data Research Centre (CDRC) using sources such as Overture Maps Foundation and Ordnance Survey, provides a detailed national catalogue of geocoded facilities and venues. These include retail, leisure, cultural, educational, environmental and community-oriented locations. Because POIs are spatially referenced and linkable to census geographies, they can be used to calculate density or proximity measures for civic and community assets.

- **Relevant Metrics:** The POI dataset includes a broad variety of geocoded facilities, not only retail/business, but also leisure, environmental, social, cultural and community-oriented facilities. Because each POI is geocoded and the data are joined to census geographies, it is possible to compute for any area (e.g. a neighbourhood, MSOA, or a buffer around a boundary) the number or density of relevant POIs per capita. In line with previous measures of civic assets, we would propose a buffer-based approach: e.g. count all relevant POIs within 1 km of a neighbourhood boundary, which helps account for "amenities just outside but within walking distance", giving a more realistic sense of accessible local infrastructure.

- **Strengths:** A POI-density measure is about the *existence/presence* of assets i.e. the structural supply of social infrastructure (places to meet, recreate, access services, participate). For a neighbourhood-level study, that's valuable: it reveals where there is (or is not) a foundation for community activity. Because of the dataset's breadth and geocoding, you can disaggregate by type (e.g. cultural, leisure, health, education, retail, community) - which enables you to build sub-indices (e.g. "education assets per 1,000 residents", "leisure & cultural assets per km^2", etc.). This granularity supports nuanced assessments of different dimensions of social infrastructure. The POI data product has been peer-reviewed and its quality assessed: the authors compared its locational and thematic accuracy (positional accuracy, completeness, attribute correctness) against a trusted reference dataset (for example, a supermarket retail dataset), finding that the dataset performs well in those respects[30]. Researchers and urban scientists now frequently use POI data to model "urban functional areas," land use, amenity access, spatial patterns of services - indicating that POI-based metrics are broadly accepted as legitimate proxies for evaluating built/social infrastructure[31].

- **Limitations:** Coverage is uneven: the dataset's completeness depends on the data sources (Overture Maps, Meta, Microsoft, etc.). The maintainers themselves note that POIs sourced entirely from one provider (e.g. Microsoft) may exhibit "high levels of attribute incompleteness."[32] Even though supermarkets (for instance) showed good alignment with a ground-truth retail dataset, this does *not* guarantee equally good coverage for more informal or non-commercial community assets (small community halls, voluntary social clubs, grassroots organisations, informal meeting places). Some of these may be missing or mis-classified. Indeed, the literature on POI data warns that missing or mis-classified features - especially in categories like social, cultural, or community amenities - remain a major concern[33]. A POI is just a

[29] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), *Libraries Statistics* (various releases). https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/libraries
[30] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23998083241263124
[31] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363102013_Integrating_Point-of-Interest_Density_and_Spatial_Heterogeneity_to_Identify_Urban_Functional_Areas
[32] https://data.geods.ac.uk/dataset/point-of-interest-data-for-the-united-kingdom?
[33] Psyllidis, A., Gao, S., Hu, Y. *et al.* Points of Interest (POI): a commentary on the state of the art, challenges, and prospects for the future. *Comput.Urban Sci.* **2**, 20 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s43762-022-00047-w

"point." The dataset identifies the existence and location, but not how good or how accessible the asset is. For community connectedness / social infrastructure, aspects like opening hours, condition of buildings, capacity (size of hall, seating, equipment), cost to use, inclusivity, staffing, accessibility for disabled people, all matter. POI data will not capture those.

- **CNI Implications:** The POI density measure will be incorporated into the Civic Asset domain. Relevant POI category types will be disaggregated into broad asset categories e.g. community; leisure, cultural; education; and green space. A buffer-based metric (e.g., within 1 km of MSOA area boundary) will be used rather than only counting within formal administrative boundaries - to reflect real-life catchments and accessibility.

Access to Green Space Data

- **Overview:** Access to green space is a widely recognised component of neighbourhood quality, supporting recreation, social interaction and mental well-being.

- **Relevant Metrics:** Several administrative datasets provide coverage of green spaces across Great Britain. OS Open Greenspace maps public parks, playing fields and recreation grounds[34], while the OS MasterMap Greenspace Layer provides more detailed information, particularly in urban areas. Natural England's Green Infrastructure (GI) Framework assesses access against the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGSt) [35]. Fields in Trust (FiT) also produce annual analyses of green space provision with their Green Space Index[36].

- **Strengths:** These datasets offer comprehensive national mapping of green spaces and can be used to assess the availability of natural and recreational environments that contribute to connectedness and community activity. Their strengths include consistency, granularity, national scope, suitability for spatial analysis assessment against access standards (ANGSt).

- **Limitations:** The presence of a green space does not reveal whether it is safe, well-maintained, accessible, or regularly used - all of which influence its role as a community asset. Access modelling methodologies also introduce uncertainties and depend heavily on assumptions around routes and barriers.

- **CNI Implications:** Green space data should be considered as a key component within the Civic Asset domain.

Local Resilience Forums and Emergency Preparedness Data

- **Overview:** Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) are multi-agency partnerships established under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004[37] to coordinate emergency preparedness and community resilience planning. Each LRF operates across a police area and includes Local Authorities, emergency services, NHS bodies, and voluntary sector representatives. Local Authorities within LRFs are Category 1 responders, required to maintain local risk registers, emergency plans and mutual aid arrangements.

[34] Ordnance Survey, *OS Open Greenspace*. https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/products/os-open-greenspace
[35] Ordnance Survey, *OS Open Greenspace*. https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/products/os-open-greenspace
[36] Fields in Trust, *Green Space Index*. https://www.fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index
[37] UK Government, *Civil Contingencies Act 2004*. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/36/contents

- **Relevant data:** The ONS publishes a LAD-to-LRF lookup (2023)[38] that maps each Local Authority to its corresponding LRF area, providing a geographical proxy for the presence of local resilience structures. Some LRFs publish Local Risk Registers or community resilience frameworks, which can be used to assess strategic preparedness and voluntary sector integration.

- **CNI Implications:** The presence of an active LRF may act as a proxy for institutional resilience coordination at a sub-regional level. Although LRFs operate at a broader scale than neighbourhoods, their work in preparedness, volunteering networks and local communications could influence connectedness and perceived community capacity in times of crisis. Further work would be needed to assess the visibility and accessibility of these networks at a neighbourhood level.

Closure or Decline of Communal Venues (e.g. pubs, clubs, community centres)

- **Overview:** Communal venues such as pubs, social clubs and community centres often act as informal hubs of connection, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas where formal civic infrastructure may be limited. Decline in these spaces is widely seen as indicative of weakening social infrastructure, but systematic data on closures remains limited and uneven across the UK.

- **Relevant metrics:** National trend data from the Night Time Industries Association[39] indicates thousands of closures in recent years and the Greater London Authority has published detailed historical data on pub closures within London[40]. Local Authorities may hold relevant data (e.g. change-of-use planning applications, licensing or business rates records), but this is not standardised or routinely published.

- **Strengths:** Highlights physical loss of social infrastructure linked to reduced opportunities for connection and participation.

- **Limitations:** Despite these insights, no comprehensive UK-wide administrative dataset exists to track closures at the Local Authority or neighbourhood level. Local Authorities may hold relevant information via planning or licensing records, but these are inconsistent and not routinely published. Commercial datasets exist but require costly licensing.

- **CNI Implications:** Decline in communal venues is a meaningful indicator of local connectedness risk, particularly within the Civic Assets domain. While current data gaps limit direct integration, targeted Freedom of Information (FOI) collection or strategic licensing could support future inclusion.

Census data

People Providing Unpaid Care[41]

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[38] ONS, *Local Authority District to Local Resilience Forum Lookup (2023)*. https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/
[39] Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) Publications. https://www.ntia.co.uk/
[40] Greater London Authority (GLA), *Pubs in London: A Contextual Overview* (2000–2018). https://www.london.gov.uk
[41] Census 2021 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/unpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021

- **Census variable:** Provides unpaid care to family members, friends, neighbours or others due to long-term physical or mental health or disability, or problems related to old age.

- **Relevance:** Unpaid care is one of the clearest measurable forms of informal support, reflecting family caregiving, neighbourly assistance, sustained social obligation and prevalence of local support networks

- **Strengths:** Areas with high levels of unpaid care often exhibit dense familial or community ties, especially where adult children support elderly parents or where communities rely more on informal care due to low service coverage. Informal caregiving is strongly associated in literature with local embeddedness, strong bonding social capital, durable relationships, informal networks and mutual support structures[42]. It therefore aligns well with the "social support" dimension of community connectedness. It can also highlight where there is a lack of statutory provision.

- **Limitations:** Unpaid care has a strong association with age, and while age standardised versions of this data are available for England and Wales these are not available at below Local Authority level. There is also a strong association between high care needs and poorer health outcomes. Moreover, census phrasing emphasises *regular* and *substantive* care. Everyday acts of neighbourliness or low-intensity support are not counted[43].

- **CNI Implications:** Due to the limitations, there is value in exploring whether it is possible to produce an age standardised informal care measure on a consistent basis across the constituent UK geographies. This will be explored for the enhanced measure rather than the interim measure.

Multi-Generational Households[44]

- **Census variable:** Households with 3+ generations living together: e.g. children and parents and grandparents.

- **Relevance:** Aims to capture intergenerational connectedness and support encompassing built-in support networks, high interdependence, bonding social capital, inter-generational continuity and structural support patterns.

- **Limitations:** In high-housing-cost areas (e.g. parts of London), multi-generational households may form due to economic constraints rather than strong social ties. Intergenerational support outside the home (e.g. grandparents living nearby, neighbourly child support) is not captured.

- **CNI Implications:** More strong empirical evidence is required of the association of intergenerational living with strong social connectedness before this would be

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[42] See for example Barrett, A., Hale, B., & Butler, M. (2013). *Family Care and Social Capital: Transitions in Informal Care*. Springer, Dahlberg, L., Demack, S., & Bambra, C. (2007). "Age and social isolation in later life: The role of informal caregiving." *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 15(2), 123–132. Hlebec, V., Srakar, A., & Majcen, B. (2018). "Social capital and informal long-term care: Empirical evidence from SHARE." *Social Science & Medicine*, 200, 55–63.

[43] See Census https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/unpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021 for details

[44] Census https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/census2021dictionary/variablesbytopic/demographyvariablescensus2021/multiplegenerationsinhousehold

considered as a measure of inclusion. This is something to explore in the next phase of the work.

Composite Indices

Composite indices combine multiple indicators into a single summary score, providing an interpretable overview of complex social, economic or environmental conditions. For the Community Needs Index (CNI), composite indicators offer useful points of comparison, established frameworks and insight into methodological choices such as weighting, indicator selection and aggregation. However, these indices vary in purpose, conceptual focus and geospatial resolution, meaning that not all are suitable for direct integration into the CNI. The following section reviews relevant composite measures across the UK and highlights their implications for a national measure of community connectedness.

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)[45]

- **Overview:** The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and its devolved nation equivalents (SIMD, WIMD, NIMDM) constitute the UK Government's primary tools for assessing relative deprivation at small-area level (typically LSOA/Data Zone). These indices integrate multiple weighted domains including income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services and the living environment. The IMD is widely used across public policy, including local funding formulas, service planning, research and statutory equality assessments. It provides a robust, consistent and nationally recognised picture of socio-economic disadvantage.

- **CNI Implications:** The IMD is not designed to measure community connectedness, social capital or civic engagement. Its focus is on deficits such as material deprivation and structural disadvantage rather than relational or community-level strengths. The "Barriers to Housing and Services" domain includes access indicators, but these relate primarily to physical access (e.g. proximity to GP surgeries or schools) rather than social infrastructure or connectedness. Despite these limitations, deprivation is strongly related to many drivers of low community connectedness, making the IMD an essential contextual benchmark for the CNI. However, on its own it is insufficient for measuring social connection or the quality of community life.

London Civic Strength Index[46]

- **Overview:** The London Civic Strength Index, developed by the Greater London Authority (GLA) in partnership with The Young Foundation, provides a borough-level assessment of London's civic life. Unlike deprivation indices, it aims to highlight positive civic assets and strengths, including,

  o Relationships and Trust,

[45] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG). *English Indices of Deprivation 2025.* https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025, Scottish Government. *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).* https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-simd/, Welsh Government. *Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD).* https://gov.wales/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation, NISRA. *Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM).* https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/deprivation
[46] GLA & The Young Foundation. *Civic Strength Index.* https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/civic-strength-index

- o Participation and Volunteering,

- o Diversity and Inclusion,

- o Institutions and Space,

- o Voice, Influence and Collective Action.

The index draws on a mixture of survey data (e.g. Talk London, Festival of Ideas engagement exercises) and administrative sources including charity registers, 360Giving grant data, electoral information (voter turnout and councillor demographics) and Local Authority records on civic assets such as community centres, libraries and sports clubs. A key innovation is the Civic Data Innovation Challenge, undertaken to improve the underlying administrative data (e.g. cleaning charity records, mapping community facilities), reflecting the GLA's investment in enhancing civic infrastructure data quality across London.

- **CNI Implications:** The index provides a rich conceptual model that explicitly foregrounds civic infrastructure, social relations and community power - all highly relevant to the CNI's aims. However, its London-only scope, bespoke data collection processes, and non-standardised datasets limit its direct transferability to a UK-wide measure. Nonetheless, the methodological approach - especially the integration of administrative data on civic assets, offers a replicable model for improving civic data coverage nationally. This will be explored as part of the next phase of the work.

Co-op Community Wellbeing Index (CWI)[47]

- **Overview:** The Co-op Community Wellbeing Index (CWI) is a UK-wide index measuring community wellbeing across approximately 28,000 "Seamless Locales," a customised sub-neighbourhood geography created by Geolytix[48]. The framework is structured around three pillars - People, Place and Relationships - and nine domains, one of which focuses specifically on Relationships and Trust. The CWI was developed through co-production, including workshops and expert consultation. To achieve nationwide coverage at small-area resolution, the index relies heavily on proxies derived from available administrative and open data, including Straight-line (Euclidean) distance to social spaces (pubs, cafés, playgrounds, community centres), derived from OpenStreetMap. Demographic indicators from the 2011 Census (e.g. % children under 14, % older single-person households, % with long-term illness). Household churn from Land Registry data. Crime rates from Police UK (2016). Scores are percentile-ranked, scaled 0-1 and aggregated to produce domain and overall scores from 0-100.

- **CNI Implications:** The CWI is notable for attempting to measure "relationships" and "trust" - intangible dimensions that few composite indices incorporate. It provides a valuable UK-wide benchmark and demonstrates the importance of balancing granularity with data availability. However, the index has recognised limitations. Many indicators rely on older data (e.g. 2011 Census), and some proxies - such as Euclidean distance to a pub - are weak approximations for community connectedness. Methodological transparency around indicator weighting and updates is limited and despite an intention for annual refreshes, indicator changes remain unclear. For the CNI, the CWI highlights the practical challenge of measuring relational aspects of community life with available data. Some of its

[47] Co-op & The Young Foundation. *Community Wellbeing Index.* https://communitywellbeing.coop.co.uk
[48] Geolytix. https://geolytix.com/

asset-based approaches are informative, but the methodology cannot be adopted wholesale.

Thriving Places Index (TPI)[49]

- **Overview**: The Thriving Places Index (TPI) assesses whether Local Authorities in England and Wales have the conditions for people to thrive equitably and sustainably. The framework comprises three main pillars:

1. Local Conditions - including People and Community, Mental and Physical Health, Work and Local Economy

2. Equality - examining inequalities in outcomes

3. Sustainability - covering environmental impact and climate resilience

- **CNI Implications**: The People and Community domain is particularly relevant for the CNI, as it incorporates measures of social capital, social cohesion and civic engagement. Indicators include: Percentage of people who feel they belong to their neighbourhood (CLS), Proportion who regularly talk to neighbours, Trust in local people, Volunteer participation, Voter turnout. These measures provide insight into trust, belonging and local participation - core components of community connectedness. The TPI's strengths lie in its clear conceptual structure, transparent methodology (standardised z-scores aggregated consistently), and focus on local conditions that enable flourishing. Its reliance on publicly available datasets adds credibility. However, the index is limited to Local Authority level, making it too coarse for neighbourhood-level analysis required by the CNI. Many indicators also draw from surveys with known limitations in small-area granularity. Many of the relevant indicators (such as voter turnout) are already incorporated in the CNI.

Manchester Community Resilience Index (CRI)[50]

- **Overview:** The Manchester Community Resilience Index (CRI), developed by the University of Manchester, assesses the resilience of Local Authorities in England - specifically, their capacity to withstand and recover from shocks. The framework comprises 44 indicators distributed across five domains, one of which is explicitly focused on social capital and connectivity. Indicators span a mix of socio-economic, environmental and civic dimensions and are drawn from national datasets. The tool is presented as an interactive resource allowing exploration of resilience profiles across Local Authorities.

- **CNI Implications:** While resilience and connectedness are related concepts, the CRI's primary focus is response capacity under crisis rather than everyday social infrastructure or community connectedness. Its top-down design also reflects institutional rather than community-led perspectives.

Other Emerging Data Sources

While traditional surveys and administrative data provide the backbone for current measures of community connectedness, a number of emerging data sources offer new, albeit complex, opportunities. These sources which are often digital, participatory, or geospatial can address gaps in timeliness, granularity and behavioural insight. However, their use raises important questions about coverage, validity, standardisation and ethics.

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[49] Centre for Thriving Places. *Thriving Places Index*. https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org
[50] University of Manchester. *Community Resilience Index*. https://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/

Below we explore three key areas with growing relevance: geospatial analysis, digital data streams and participatory data generation.

Geospatial Data Analysis

Geospatial analysis involves linking survey, administrative, or behavioural data to geographic characteristics to infer aspects of community infrastructure, mobility and social life. Increasingly, researchers and policymakers are combining geospatial data on physical environments (such as the presence of green space, community buildings, or third places like cafes or pubs) with socioeconomic and demographic indicators to model how supportive or isolating an area may be.

The Department for Transport Connectivity metric[51]

- **Overview:** The Connectivity metric is intended to measure "an individual's ability to reach employment, services and social engagements" via different modes of transport in England and Wales. It evaluates the "opportunity to travel" to designated destinations which include key services and amenities, as well as social purposes such as visits to friends and families and civic and community assets.

- **CNI Implications:** The inclusion of destinations spanning employment, education, shopping, healthcare, leisure and "community/leisure & community" means that the metric touches on many aspects of what might be called social infrastructure - e.g. libraries, social clubs, places of worship, green space. Because the metric measures *potential to access* destinations rather than actual usage, it can help reveal structural constraints (e.g. poor transport network or low density of services) rather than just what people currently do. For assessing neighbourhood infrastructure, this is particularly useful, and the indicator has potential for enhancing and replacing the existing set of indicators in the physical connectedness subdomain – particularly as it is available at a neighbourhood level. However, the data is only currently available for journeys across England and Wales – a key constraint for usage in wider UK measures. For the National Transport Strategy (NTS2) monitoring framework, Transport Scotland commissioned modelling of journey times from every data zone to a set of services and employment hubs using walking and public transport[52]. As with the DfT Connectivity measure, the Transport Scotland Journey Times to Basic Services uses network-based modelling of generalised journey times by public transport and walking, from small-area origins to key services. However, the data is increasingly out of date and it focuses on journey time to the *nearest* service, rather than a full "opportunity set" of multiple destinations with diminishing returns. The most recent timepoints for this data are pre-Covid. Northern Ireland has an official programme of transport accessibility statistics led by DfI/NISRA, but there is not yet an openly documented, DfT-style connectivity model of access to key services by public transport or walking at fine spatial scales[53].

[51] Department for Transport (DfT) Transport connectivity metric
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-connectivity-metric/transport-connectivity-metric
[52] https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/monitoring-and-evaluation-2019-baseline-report-may-2022-national-transport-strategy-nts2/helps-deliver-inclusive-economic-growth/
[53] See https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/transport-accessibility-statistics-northern-ireland for details

Digital Data Streams

Social media platforms, mobile phone records and other passively generated digital data offer a new lens on community life. These sources can capture behavioural patterns, network structures and information flows that go beyond what is available in traditional surveys. However, while digital data streams offer speed and scale, they potentially come with significant ethical and technical challenges. Access is often commercial or restricted and datasets may exclude key groups (e.g. older adults, low-income populations). Privacy concerns are also central, particularly in the context of community-level monitoring. The most notable example of a digital dataset relevant to capturing social infrastructure is the UK Social Capital Index (explored below).

UK Social Capital Atlas[54]

- **Overview:** The UK Social Capital Atlas - produced from anonymised data from Facebook (meta/Facebook friends networks) and described in the research report Social capital in the United Kingdom: Evidence from Six Billion Friendships[55] is a large-scale, data-driven measure of social networks, community connectedness and social infrastructure. The Atlas is based on friendships of approximately 20 million UK users aged 25–64, which represents roughly 58% of that age group in the UK. Because it is derived from real friendship ties (on Facebook), it reflects actual social networks and interpersonal connections rather than potential infrastructure. That gives insight into social structure, not merely infrastructure. The research doesn't just count friendships - it derives a variety of metrics that are relevant to social cohesion, bridging, civic potential and more. Key metrics include: "Economic connectedness" i.e. the extent to which people from lower- socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are friends with those from higher-SES backgrounds (bridging capital). Network clustering / cohesion i.e. how tightly knit are local networks (bonding capital). The Atlas also reports (at MSOA or similar geography) measures of volunteering and "activism" (or at least presence/participation of "activist groups / friends in activist roles") which could potentially be used as proxies for Civic engagement

- **CNI Implications:** The Atas can express multiple facets of "social infrastructure": bridging across income groups, local cohesion, civic participation and potential for social mobility. The data are provided down to relatively fine geographies: MSOA (Middle-layer Super Output Area). The underlying research finds that areas with higher "economic connectedness" tend to have better outcomes: for example, higher rates of upward social mobility (for low-SES children in those areas), greater self-reported well-being, trust, feelings of support and belonging. This strengthens the face validity of the Atlas: it isn't just mapping "who is Facebook friends," but these friendship-derived metrics can be used to infer social mobility and well-being - outcomes of clear relevance to social infrastructure and community connectedness. The dataset is published and accessible (e.g. via the Humanitarian Data Exchange), which supports transparency and reproducibility[56]. It gives a strong empirical base for comparative analysis across areas, something that conventional survey-based measures often struggle with due to sample size. Despite its strengths, there are a number of limitations; some inherent in the data source

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[54] Meta UK Social Capital Atlas
 https://dataforgood.facebook.com/dfg/tools/uk-social-capital-atlas#methodology
[55] BIT Social capital in the United Kingdom: Evidence from Six Billion Friendships
https://www.bi.team/publications/social-capital-in-the-united-kingdom/
[56] https://data.humdata.org/es/dataset/uk-social-capital-atlas

(Facebook), others methodological, which affect how far the Atlas alone can serve as a neighbourhood-level measure of social infrastructure / connectedness. Therefore the Atlas may systematically under-represent certain demographic groups (e.g. elderly, digitally excluded, people with few social media contacts), which means its picture of "social capital" may be skewed toward more digitally active and socially outgoing populations. The Atlas covers only Facebook users aged 25–64 with at least a threshold number of friends (to allow meaningful network metrics), excludes children, many older people and those not using Facebook or less socially active on the platform. Areas with lower Facebook uptake may appear artificially in the " low social capital" group even if offline networks are dense. Facebook friendship does not always reflect meaningful social ties; some "friends" may be weak ties, latent connections, or acquaintances, not necessarily community-level relationships involving support, trust, local engagement, or participation in community institutions. The data may under-count those whose social lives are offline or centred on institutions that don't have strong Facebook presence. Nevertheless, given the strong overall coverage across the UK, we recommend the inclusion of key indicators from the Social Capital Index in the UK wide Community Needs Index. The following indicators will be brought into the Interim Community Needs Index:

- Friendship support ratio[57]
- Participate in volunteering group on Facebook
- Participate in activism group on Facebook
- Number of volunteering groups per 1,000 people on Facebook
- Number of activism groups per 1,000 people on Facebook

Other examples of emerging digital data include:

- **Social media**: Public platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, or Reddit allow researchers to track how people discuss local issues, celebrate community identity, or coordinate collective action. More locally-focused networks like [Nextdoor](#) offer insight into neighbour-to-neighbour interaction, though access is restricted and data biases (age, digital literacy) remain.
- **Mobile phone and location data**: Aggregated mobility data, often derived from telecommunications providers or apps, can help visualise physical co-presence, regular footfall in public spaces and the use of community assets. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this data was key to understanding how different communities experienced lockdown and recovery.
- **Platform usage data**: Digital platforms like Eventbrite, Meetup, or Do-It.org (volunteering) can be analysed for patterns of civic engagement and group participation. Public library usage systems or bookings for community facilities (e.g. sports centres) may also serve as indicators of local engagement.
- **UK petitions data[58]:** The UK petitions site is an official online channel through which UK residents (or at least signatories meeting eligibility) can support petitions addressed to the UK Government and Parliament. For each petition, the site publishes the number of signatures, and crucially the geographic breakdown, with the postcodes of respondents collected to allow mapping by parliamentary constituency. This could potentially be used in the social participation subdomain, as signature counts are concrete actions, not just self-reported measures of civic participation and engagement. However, there are some caveats - signing an

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[57] This indicator takes each person in the area, looks at all of their Facebook friends (even if those friends live elsewhere) and for each friend, checks whether that friend shares at least one other friend in common with the original person.
[58] UK petitions https://petition.parliament.uk/

online petition is a particular mode of civic participation which may favour certain demographics (younger, digitally literate, motivated by issue, with time/resources). Moreover, the volume of sign-ups in an area may reflect how a given petition topic resonates locally, rather than general civic connectedness. For example, a national-level petition might attract signatures from some regions more than others depending on issue relevance, media coverage, social networks, not necessarily because those areas are generally more "connected". Also, there may be duplicates, or variation in how accurately people enter their postcode, while high signature rate may reflect a small active subgroup rather than broad civic connectedness across the whole area. Nevertheless, this indicator does have potential for capturing active civic participation at a granular level and provided we can get data over a wide range of timepoints we believe this could add value to a measure which is currently reliant on self reported census data.

Participatory Data Generation

Participatory approaches involve communities directly in generating, interpreting, or owning data about their local areas. These methods include citizen science projects, community-led surveys, local asset mapping and place-based ethnographic work. Examples include:

- **Community Insights Surveys (Local Trust / New Economics Foundation)[59]**, Residents in Big Local areas co-design and conduct surveys to capture neighbourhood perceptions, safety, wellbeing, and community strengths.
- **Neighbourhood Audit Toolkits (e.g. Community Organisers UK[60]) Co-designed wellbeing frameworks**, Communities systematically gather data about local places, assets and issues through structured conversations and street-level mapping.
- **Community Asset Mapping Toolkit (Scottish Community Development Centre)[61]** Supports communities to gather data on local services, spaces, skills and networks.
- **FixMyStreet (mySociety)[62]** Residents report local problems (e.g. fly-tipping, potholes) and create open, geo-tagged data used by Local Authorities.
- **OpenStreetMap Community Mapping[63]** Volunteers map paths, buildings and local features; used for health, accessibility and transport planning.
- **Neighbourhood Research (Young Foundation)[64]** Ethnographers work with residents to co-create place-based insights into belonging, trust, cohesion and local identity.

Participatory methods can surface data that is rich, grounded and locally trusted - particularly valuable for capturing intangible aspects of connectedness, such as mutual aid or informal caregiving and surface hidden assets (e.g. informal venues, unregistered groups). However, they are typically resource-intensive, difficult to standardise and may not scale to national index-level use without substantial coordination.

CNI Implications

Emerging data sources offer clear opportunities to strengthen the CNI's measurement of community connectedness - especially in capturing aspects that are under-represented in

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[59] https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/community-insights/
[60] https://www.corganisers.org.uk/resources/
[61] https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/asset-based-approaches
[62] https://www.fixmystreet.com/
[63] https://www.openstreetmap.org/
[64] https://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/our-approach/community-researcher-networks/

traditional data, such as informal relationships, mobility patterns and real-time changes in engagement. Geospatial data can enhance the environmental context of connectedness; digital behavioural data (like the UK Social Capital Atlas) offers relational and network-based insights; and participatory approaches provide local legitimacy and nuance. However, these sources should currently be seen as supplementary rather than foundational for the CNI. Each brings trade-offs between granularity, standardisation, representativeness and data quality. Future development of the CNI could explore piloting or integrating such data sources where feasible, particularly through partnerships with academic, civic tech, or platform providers - while maintaining a cautious, transparent and ethically grounded approach.

Conclusion and Recommendations for CNI Revision

This review has examined existing UK data resources and frameworks, giving an overview of various approaches to measuring community connectedness, whilst assessing their potential to inform a revision of the Community Needs Index (CNI). The CNI, with its focus on the social infrastructure and participation, provides a valuable lens on community connectedness needs, complementing traditional deprivation measures like the IMD. Enhancing its measurement of community connectedness - encompassing social relationships, trust, participation, belonging and access to social infrastructure - will further increase its relevance and utility. A number of high level themes have emerged from the review of sources.

- **Direct Measurement vs. Proxies:** Surveys like the Community Life Survey (CLS) and Understanding Society (UKHLS) offer direct questions on core connectedness concepts (belonging, trust, loneliness, participation). However, they face limitations in geographic granularity (CLS often England-only LA level, UKHLS requires special license for sub-regional) and methodology (CLS mode change/bias, UKHLS complexity/timeliness). Administrative and geospatial data (e.g. library data, green space access, digital connectivity) provide objective measures of infrastructure but act only as proxies for social connection itself, often with their own quality or definition issues. Composite indices like the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) cleverly combine infrastructure data with demographic proxies to infer risk at the LSOA level.

- **UK-wide Consistency:** Measuring connectedness consistently across all four UK nations is challenging. Resources like CLS are England-only, while others like UKHLS or TNLCF/CRI offer UK coverage but may lack LSOA granularity or use different methodologies. Achieving a UK-wide CNI requires careful data integration or potentially nation-specific adjustments. However, we have identified a number of open data UK wide indicators that are suitable for an interim measure and will be exploring ways in which this gap can be bridged in further iterations with non-open and modelled data sources.

The Community Needs Index will be refined in two stages. An interim Community Needs Index will first be produced. This will be based on open data which is available on a consistent or comparable basis across the UK constituent nations. We acknowledge that there will be some thematic gaps in this iteration; however, the emergence of new sources of data (as explored here) will provide a sufficient breadth of evidence to provide a proof of

concept measure of community needs at a UK wide level. Based on this review, the following indicators (explored in this report) will be brought into the interim Indices:

- Points of Interest data (OS/CDRC)
- UK Broadband provision data (OfCom)
- Access to Green Space Data (OS/Natural England/FiT/DEFRA)
- UK Social Capital Atlas (Meta)

Looking further ahead to an enhanced CNI, the following recommendations are proposed to produce a UK wide measure of community connectedness:

1. **Refine Conceptual Domains:** Maintain the CNI's core focus on social infrastructure needs. Review the existing domains (Civic Assets, Connectedness, Active and Engaged Community) against the structures offered by the ONS Social Capital Framework (Relationships, Support, Engagement, Trust) and potentially the CWI (explicit Equality/Voice domains). Ensure a clear conceptual distinction between objective infrastructure/access measures and subjective/relational aspects of connectedness, potentially creating a dedicated 'Social Relations and Trust' domain or sub-domain. Explore lessons learned from the Civic Data Innovation Challenge developed as part of the London Civic Strength Index to enhance the quality of Admin data in the indices.

2. **Strengthen Core Connectedness Indicators (drawing on Surveys):**

   o **Trust and Belonging:** Explore incorporating LSOA-level estimates (potentially modelled from UKHLS if direct data is unavailable) for key indicators like 'Trust in neighbours' and 'Sense of belonging to local area'. Prioritise questions validated in UK surveys. Alternatively, liaise with key government and third sector organisations to explore the potential of administrative data to fill these gaps.

   o **Social Support and Loneliness:** Consider adding indicators related to perceived social support ('having someone to rely on' - from UKHLS) and loneliness (using standard ONS questions). Address data availability/quality issues (especially regarding APS). In addition, liaise with key government and third sector organisations to explore the potential of administrative data to fill these gaps.

   o **Participation:** Diversify measurement beyond formal volunteering and voting. Explore the potential of the petitions site to gather participation data. Explore proxies or modelled estimates for informal volunteering and social action, drawing on UKHLS definitions.

3. **Optimise Infrastructure and Access Indicators (drawing on Geo/Admin Data):**

   o Digital Connectivity: Retain or refine the use of the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI)

   o Explore with DfT and agencies in Scotland and Northern Ireland regarding the potential to expand the physical connectivity measures beyond England and Wales as this remains the most significant gap in terms of the availability of UK wide measures of connectivity. Alternatively, the research team will explore the feasibility of creating a UK wide consistent measure of connectivity using GIS tools and service node data from Address Base or Points of Interest.

4. Liaise with government agencies and other data suppliers to understand and capitalise on enhancements in administrative data.

   o Strengthening the administrative foundations of the CNI will require closer collaboration with the public bodies that generate or steward key datasets. Many of the limitations identified in this review stem not from an absence of relevant administrative data, but from challenges in coverage, consistency, granularity or accessibility. Over the coming years, several government agencies, including the ONS, Ofcom, DCMS, DfT, MHCLG, devolved administrations and regulators such as the Charity Commission, are investing in improved digital infrastructure, more integrated data systems, and new forms of administrative statistics. Establishing regular dialogue with these organisations will position the Centre to anticipate forthcoming methodological changes, influence the development of new indicators and ensure that the CNI is aligned with the most robust and up-to-date evidence.

   o This may include:

     1. **Engaging with data owners to improve granularity and interoperability**, for example by encouraging the publication of small-area breakdowns, clearer metadata, or harmonised variable definitions across the UK nations.

     2. **Supporting cross-government data quality initiatives**, such as efforts to modernise charity registers, improve administrative data on civic assets, or expand digital inclusion metrics beyond infrastructure to usage and skills.

     3. **Exploring access pathways to safeguarded or secure datasets** where these offer substantial value for relational or behavioural measures (e.g. microdata on transport connectivity, library usage, or civic participation).

     4. **Encouraging open-data standards** for emerging geospatial, cultural and community asset datasets, building on the model of the Civic Data Innovation Challenge in London.

   o By taking an active role in these conversations, the Centre can help shape and accelerate the development of a more complete and coherent administrative evidence base for community connectedness, ultimately enabling future iterations of the CNI to rely on richer, more direct and more regularly updated indicators.

5. Review the feasibility of producing enhanced census derived measures of informal care and multi-generational households.

   o The Census remains one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources of small-area data and its measures of *unpaid care* and *household structure* offer important proxies for community connectedness that are not captured elsewhere. However, to fully realise their potential within the CNI, significant technical and conceptual work is required. As the earlier Census section highlighted, unpaid care is a strong indicator of informal support networks, bonding social capital and mutual aid. However, current Census outputs are limited by strong associations with age structure. A feasibility review should explore producing age-standardised informal care rates consistently across

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, ideally at MSOA/Data Zone/SOA level.

o   Multi-generational living may reflect embedded intergenerational support, strong kinship networks or cultural norms conducive to connectedness. However, it can also stem from housing pressure, economic constraints or lack of suitable accommodation. Further work might examine disaggregating multi-generational households into more meaningful subtypes where possible (e.g. older adults living with adult children vs. young families living with older relatives), exploring contextual variables, such as housing affordability, overcrowding and tenure to understand when multi-generational living is likely to signal strong intergenerational ties rather than housing stress. Together, these enhancements would allow the CNI to incorporate more robust, interpretable and UK-consistent indicators of informal support structures which represent key components of community connectedness that are difficult to measure through other data sources.