



Extending Social Infrastructure for Connected Communities: Next Steps For Research

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Abstract

This paper discusses the growing literature and evidence base on social infrastructure and identifies a set of key themes and questions for further research.

Social infrastructure does not have a clearly agreed definition but tends to refer to community spaces which support social connection, and includes facilities like community buildings, libraries, parks and play areas and faith spaces.

The evidence base on social infrastructure is developing rapidly, and coalesces around five themes: defining, mapping, accessing, valuing and sustaining social infrastructure.

Research priorities include addressing questions on the presence, distribution, maintenance and condition of social infrastructure; ownership and control of social infrastructure; understanding the importance and local embeddedness of social infrastructure for communities of place and identity; and what 'good social infrastructure' could look like, is needed and should be expected.

Introduction

"Social infrastructure refers to the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community. These are the places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate..."

This is not what happens – it's the stuff that supports stuff to happen"

(Gregory, 2018: 11).

Social infrastructure is a relatively new concept, but the idea describes something familiar and enduring. In general terms it encompasses 'the public and quasi-public spaces and places that support social connection' (Latham and Layton, 2022: 661). In practice it includes things like community buildings and meeting spaces, libraries, youth centres, parks, play areas, faith spaces, sports facilities and social clubs. However, it is important to emphasise that social infrastructure is not simply a passive 'thing' – a building, space or platform - doing its work behind the scenes to facilitate connection, but an active, affective presence in community life, laden with meaning, emotion and significance (Amin, 2014).

Often taken for granted, social infrastructure has found new appreciation in recent years as part of the basic fabric of everyday life. It was popularised by US sociologist Eric Klinenberg in his book 'Palaces for the People' (2018), drawing from earlier research on how different neighbourhoods fared during the 1995 heat wave in Chicago. From around 2018 the concept began to be used in UK policy-making circles, following the publication of reports commissioned by Local Trust on the quality of community institutions and facilities in deprived neighbourhoods (Gregory, 2018), and the Early Action Task Force on the protective role of social institutions in the 'upstream' prevention of social problems (Sloccock, 2018). Subsequently Local Trust (2020), Power to Change (Bell and Plumb, 2021) and the British Academy (2023, with Power to Change), among others, have sustained the interest in the concept, and it has gained traction amongst policymakers, practitioners, researchers - and even financial institutions as an investment opportunity (Newcore Capital, 2024).

Social infrastructure offers something of a promise, to policymakers, practitioners and

communities. Attending to social infrastructure may address concerns around quality of life, social isolation, well-being, community spirit and community cohesion, and it has been invoked in debates on all these issues. The idea has tended to escape party political divides. Social infrastructure featured as part of the 2019-2024 Conservative government's 'Levelling Up' agenda (Kruger, 2020; DLUHC, 2022). Subsequently, it became a core concept in the 2024 Labour government's initiatives on Pride in Place (MHCLG, 2025) and the Community Wealth Fund (DCMS/MHCLG, 2025), with resources targeted towards 'doubly disadvantaged' areas, i.e. those with high socio-economic deprivation and lacking in social infrastructure (see also, Turner et al, 2024).

It is also reflected in a variety of work through the devolved administrations. For example, in Northern Ireland, a pilot Community Infrastructure Fund aims to support voluntary and community organisations to enhance the physical condition and accessibility of community buildings, to 'support the halls, centres and hubs that quietly hold our communities together' (Department for Communities, 2025, 2). Scotland has the most advanced legislative framework supporting social infrastructure in the UK, in terms of land reform and the community ownership of assets, particularly the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (Nason, 2022; Hutcheon et al, 2024). In Wales a Community Asset Commission (2024-26) is examining the statutory and policy framework on community assets in Wales following recommendations from a Welsh Parliament Inquiry (Welsh Parliament Local Government and Housing Committee, 2022; Plunkett Foundation, 2024).

What do we know so far?

Research on social infrastructure has gathered pace in recent years, but the evidence base in the UK and internationally is still developing. Research and commentary have centred on five inter-related themes: definition, mapping, access, value and sustainability.

Defining social infrastructure

While there is yet no commonly accepted definition of social infrastructure, the literature tends to coalesce around the idea of places and spaces for meeting up and connection. The idea of infrastructure itself typically calls to mind essential but often taken for granted structures and features like roads, railways, pylons, pipelines and cabling. These so-called 'hard' civil engineering facilities enable social and economic life to happen but are often regarded as operating in the background and acting invisibly (Star, 1999).

Social infrastructure extends the metaphor, with one definition referring to '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' (Kelsey and Kenny, 2021: 11). The definition combines a setting (physical spaces), a set of social relationships (regular interactions) with expected outcomes (trust and reciprocity). The authors of a recent review drew on sources dating back to the 1960s to chart the changing meanings of social infrastructure. They proposed a general definition of the concept as 'the virtual and real-world spaces that involve high stewardship and coproduction, cultivating trust, enhancing cooperation, and deepening social cohesion and social capital' (Joshi and Aldrich, 2025: 289). This reinforces the idea that social infrastructure is far from inert; rather it plays an active and entangled role in forging social identities, relationships and practices. Likewise, a learning exchange project drawing insight from Belfast, Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo distinguished between havens ('spaces for people to gather around shared identity'), hubs ('spaces to connect across different backgrounds') and hangouts

(‘spaces for people of all backgrounds just to be’), defining social infrastructure as ‘the network of physical and social structures that build relationships and foster thriving communities’ (Gehl, 2024: 31).

As such, these definitions tend to link social infrastructure closely to another important concept, ‘social capital’, usually regarded as social relationships, networks and norms of reciprocity which lead to greater trustworthiness in communities (Putnam, 2000). For Klinenberg (2018: 5) social infrastructure comprises ‘the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops. When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves’.

Definitions are often followed by familiar concrete examples of types of social infrastructure, usually including community centres, libraries, parks and open spaces, play areas, youth centres and social clubs, sometimes with an extension towards digital spaces. Slocock (2018: 5) expands the notion of social infrastructure to include ‘buildings, facilities and the built environment; services and organisations (public, private and voluntary); and strong and healthy communities (social capital; social norms; influence and control; partnership working)’. Klinenberg (2018: 16) also offers a ‘capacious’ understanding of social infrastructure, but confines it to spaces where people can assemble, including ‘sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other spaces that invite people into the public realm’, as well as regular markets and commercial venues. This overlaps closely with the associated concept of ‘third places’ (Oldenburg, 1989; Yarker, 2019), physical settings beyond the home (first place) or workplace (second place) that host informal interaction and foster sociality and good company, including cafes, bars and hair salons.

The concept of social infrastructure has become a very popular term-in-use amongst policymakers and commentators (e.g., Kruger, 2020, DLUHC, 2022, MHCLG, 2025). Its promotion appears intended to put it on a par with traditional ideas of infrastructure, underpinning an argument that we should care about the state of social infrastructure and that it requires both policy attention and investment. This context, and the fact that social infrastructure as a concept is both elusive and elastic, means that emerging literature and commentary sometimes links an existing feature of community life with the concept – for instance, sports cages, urban cultural festivals and parades and arcades ‘as social infrastructure’ (Billingham et al, 2024; Quinn, 2025; Farrar et al, 2026; Greg

The extension of the concept of social infrastructure beyond traditional venues like community centres and libraries raises questions about the outer limits of social infrastructure, about what kinds of spaces would not qualify. For example, the British Academy and Power to Change (2023: 10) refer to ‘accidental’ social infrastructure, settings which come to function in part as social infrastructure but are intended to serve a different purpose. Should the idea of social infrastructure include some notion of depth and intensity of social interaction, with possibility for greater community connection, or would any informal space offering chance and fleeting encounters between different people be included?

Mapping social infrastructure

A second theme in the literature charts the (uneven) provision of social infrastructure and attempts to track trends in availability. Work so far has tended to map more visible ‘traditional’ social infrastructure (e.g. libraries, community buildings), for which better data is available, compared with less familiar informal and emerging forms, such as board game cafes.

OCSI/Local Trust (2019) developed a ‘Community Needs Index’, where ‘lack of connectivity’ in an area is defined as a lack of places to meet, low levels of civil society, as well as poor physical

and digital connectivity. The report (and subsequent iterations, including allied research in Wales (Building Communities Trust, 2023)) has had considerable influence (e.g. MHCLG, 2025). Like many studies, it uses a specific lens to identify ‘doubly disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods, those that are both materially deprived and lacking in social infrastructure. Other types of areas – inner-city neighbourhoods, for example – face different infrastructural challenges, such as lack of access to healthy and safe green spaces (Harris et al, 2025). Further, the Community Needs Index is dependent on the data that is available (the limitations of which the report authors summarise in useful detail). For example, some measures of civic participation are reliant on data from 2008 and 2009.

An updated mapping exercise considered neighbourhoods in England that featured in the lowest deciles of both the Index of Multiple Deprivation and latest data from the Community Needs Index (Turner et al, 2024). The research identified 1,315 such ‘doubly disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods (measured as ‘Lower Super Output Areas’ in the indices), representing some 2.3m people in England. These neighbourhoods are found in every region but are more concentrated in post-industrial towns and cities and in some coastal areas (Turner et al, 2024: 14). They include housing estates on the edges of large towns and cities, characterised by low incomes, high economic inactivity, poor health, and are lacking in social infrastructure.

Accessing social infrastructure

A third question addressed in the literature asks who has access to social infrastructure, who gets to use it, and crucially, who doesn’t. Social infrastructure is often regarded in policymaking circles as politically neutral, as a site and driver of consensus, cohesion and conviviality. Yet research highlights how it is thoroughly enmeshed in contested power relationships between different interests and groups, in terms of access, use and control (Layton and Latham, 2022; Middleton and Samanani, 2022; Horton and Penny, 2023).

Research has latterly begun to explore how the provision of social infrastructure maps onto existing economic, social and power inequalities, asking to what extent social infrastructure is open, affordable, welcoming and inclusive, and what can make it more so. Participants in research on community meanings of social infrastructure stressed the importance placed on spaces that promote inclusivity and diversity, but which can also bring different groups together without friction, such as people of different ages (Zia et al, 2023). Social infrastructure needed to be accessible and clearly welcoming. This could be achieved in sometimes quite mundane ways; for example: ‘Being able to use spaces socially was also linked to seating and benches. A lack of seating meant respondents did not feel they had permission to stay, and physically couldn’t stay’ (Zia et al, 2023: 16).

Hollis et al (2023: 59) observe that social infrastructure can ‘bring together different kinds of people, from different groups and backgrounds, who might otherwise never meet and engage with one another. However, in every case where social infrastructure can accomplish this for some people, we find the crucial caveat that it cannot encompass everyone.’ They observe that inclusivity in social infrastructure is partly a result of openness and flexibility in use, based on trust, and not over-specifying its purpose or rules of use. Inclusivity can be ‘designed in’ to increase the diversity of social infrastructure’s uses and affordances for different people’ (Hollis et al, 2023: 8). For example, it can often reduce stigma through ‘camouflage’, providing activities such as crafts and photography, but which are primarily intended to reduce isolation and loneliness. The distinction here between surface and submerged purposes is described evocatively in one resource on community hubs: ‘that moment when the ribbon is cut and a community hub is declared open is rich in possibilities. Beyond a vision of dance practice, digital skills, crafts, parenting or cooking classes there’s a real and meaningful opportunity to bring neighbours together, revive community spirit and improve lives’ (Locality, 2020: 4).

If one strand of thinking about social infrastructure focuses on bringing people from all walks of life together, an alternative perspective can be seen in efforts to think about social infrastructure developed by and for specific, often marginalised groups. One of the key roles of social and cultural infrastructure is 'identity exploration.... to help individuals situate themselves within or feel part of their wider community' (Panayotopoulos-Tsiros et al, 2025: 15). Music venues, pubs, sports arenas, arts spaces, cafés and bookshops all potentially play a role in supporting the development of communities of identity. This may be particularly relevant for the belonging and safety of LGBT communities - especially where their original community of place is repressive or harmful. Matthews and Ryan (2026) note the drivers on LGBT populations to move in order to connect with peers, access relevant services, and find community – these often being found within cities and large towns.

A related consideration is around understanding the potential for community connection found via and within digital platforms and online communities, including the creation of safer spaces for marginalised groups. An international comparative review of social infrastructure summarises relevant research, for example highlighting the pioneering everyday use of technology in South Korea to enrich a sense of belonging (Hollis et al, 2023). Marginalised and very small populations may rely on digital platforms for a form of 'safer' social connection; while equally, these platforms are sometimes less accessible for those without a reliable internet connection and/or computing devices.

The role of virtual networks and spaces in underpinning communities of place also needs to be considered as a manifestation of the complex hybridity of different forms of social infrastructure. Many place-based communities are also reliant on social media platforms, apps, video-calling software, and websites to stay in touch with neighbours, coordinate community action, recruit volunteers and helpers, and stay abreast of local developments (see Hollis et al, 2023; McCabe et al, 2021). Moreover, many virtual networks and online communities stretch the geographies of connection far beyond the apparent boundaries of places. However, Facebook and WhatsApp, the home of many neighbourhood-based groups, are both owned by Meta. While such technologies may facilitate engagement and connection, they cannot be divorced from the question of ownership and control (see Lockley, 2026).

Valuing social infrastructure

A fourth theme asks how we value social infrastructure, in terms either of what it means to residents and other users, or in terms of what difference it can make to communities and people's lives.

Qualitative research confirms the importance of social infrastructure to places which have faced generations of under-investment. The affective dimension of a place's social infrastructure is examined in Tomaney et al (2024: 1238), who highlight the importance of social infrastructure in providing opportunities for 'the formation of attachments, creating spaces for differences to be aired civilly, disputes resolved and collective action agreed upon'. And, consequently, its loss leads to disrupted place attachments – resulting in grief, trauma and a lack of trust. Its loss is also associated with working class-political disenchantment – and yet, attempts to re-form it can bring about 'radical hope'. This meaning and impact of social infrastructure is not easily quantified nor measured at scale.

Zia et al (2023) note that residents value the continuity social infrastructure can provide - especially in times of crisis. This peer-led research also emphasised the value of a space where the user feels comfortable to be themselves. This is also highlighted in Hollis et al's international review (2023), which highlights the tension between this potential freedom and the rules, regulations and programming of those who own the space.

Social infrastructure's value can also be assessed in economic terms. OCSI/Local Trust (2019) report that a lack of connectivity and social infrastructure is correlated significantly with poor socio-economic outcomes in deprived areas, compared with other disadvantaged places. There was also a strong correlation between a lack of connectivity and voting to leave the EU in 2016 (note that this report is limited to England). The findings have been used to make the case that these areas have been 'left behind', and that for the residents of these areas the absence of spaces that bring people together contribute to them feeling neglected.

Investment in social infrastructure may lead to stronger local economic performance and reduced use of public services. One way this is theorised to come about is through social infrastructure facilitating the development of social capital, leading to positive social outcomes in terms of health, wellbeing, and crime. In addition, it can facilitate skills development, and so employability (Snelson and Collis, 2021). As well as this, Kelsey and Kenny (2021) note the particular importance of cafes, bars, pubs and arts institutions in attracting footfall and creating jobs.

One analysis suggests that scaling up social infrastructure in key neighbourhoods could yield much as £3.50 for every £1 spent (Frontier Economics, 2025). Undoubtedly the nature of the causal relationship is complex (Kelsey and Kenny, 2021), and dependent on a range of influences – for example, level of use, quality of provision, global economic trends and regional industry presence.

Sustaining social infrastructure

Finally, debate on social infrastructure also covers resourcing, support and its future prospects. It asks how secure or fragile social infrastructure is, and what financial and other resources are needed to support it, maintain it and enable it to flourish. Much of the discussion here centres on the challenges for groups of residents in communities of taking responsibility for keeping forms of social infrastructure up and running (Aiken et al, 2011; Archer et al, 2019; Trup et al, 2019), coupled with guidance on how best to do so (Locality, 2020).

The literature raises concerns about the task of asset transfer of community buildings from public authorities (Archer et al, 2019), alongside maintaining and expanding good quality facilities in the face of constrained public finances, highly competitive charitable funding, and limited scope for significant revenue generation in low-income communities (Trup et al, 2019).

Research on community hubs in England - that is, multi-purpose, open and accessible, community-led buildings providing services - revealed ongoing struggles with financial security, including a need to control costs very closely, operate on extremely tight margins with low profitability and with very low reserves (Trup et al, 2019). Although financially they may be more 'liability' than 'asset', groups running them remain optimistic about current and future viability (see also Aiken et al, 2016).

Participants in the research identified a range of factors for ongoing success:

'those running community hubs believe they are most likely to do well and be around for the long term if they can do all, or at least most of the following:

- Involve large numbers of people from across their community
- Build up a pool of reliable volunteers
- Provide things which people value and will pay for

- Ensure that their community hub is attractive, welcoming and well-used
- Run a tight-ship with excellent financial data and an eagle eye
- Build positive relationships with others
- Build a positive team and embrace change' (Trup et al, 2019: 8).

None of these are straightforward to develop or easily sustained, particularly in more deprived areas. More recently, Ross and Pollard (2026) identified the importance of a robust ownership model, access to specialist expertise such as on planning permission and legal obligations, budgeting for energy efficiency upgrades and for ongoing maintenance – as well as echoing most of the above factors. Without these, hubs may disappear out of a community's control.

What would we like to know?

Considering the rapidly growing literature and debates on social infrastructure, there seem to be five main priority knowledge gaps, which can provide a focus for future research. Together they speak to a broader research agenda on social infrastructure (Latham and Layton, 2026) and variously connect with other interdisciplinary research themes in C4.

Mapping

Data limitations mean that we have only a very broad-brush picture of the scale, extent, depth and types of social infrastructure across the country, changes over time, and variations and inequalities in provision (such as between more and less affluent areas, or between urban and rural areas). Some work developed so far has been England-specific only. A starting point would be a commonly accepted or 'good enough' definition for mapping purposes, combined with an updateable data infrastructure to enable the confident exploration of patterns and trends UK wide. Panayotopoulos-Tsiros et al (2025: 13-17) propose a helpful framework as a starting point for identifying and measuring social and cultural infrastructure, addressing three sequential questions: is it an asset? (long-lived and holding accumulated value); does it function as infrastructure? (enabling 'downstream' activities, open and non-rivalrous); is it social and cultural? (playing a role in relationship and identity building, meaning-making or creative expression). However, the 'helicopter view' offered by mapping is more helpful for some stakeholders and purposes than others. It is invariably expensive, incomplete and dates quickly. As such, to be a priority it requires a clear sense of rationale, purpose and expected outcome.

Ownership and control

The question of who is or should be responsible for social infrastructure, and whether and how ownership and control might matter is beginning to surface (Ross and Pollard, 2026). Further research could examine different models of provision in more depth. This issue remains salient in a policy and practice context which heavily promotes resident participation, community power and how communities can be enabled to take action to address disadvantage and improve outcomes. It also raises questions about how social infrastructure relates to tensions and divisions within and beyond communities – the extent to which it is seen as 'open to all' or 'only for some' (Hollis et al, 2023).

The local embeddedness of social infrastructure

There is considerable scope for research to enhance understanding of the wider symbolic meaning, social connections and economic implications of social infrastructure (Tomaney et al, 2024). This could address whether and how social infrastructure may be embedded in making places, upholding pride in place and providing a cohesive and welcoming sense of community. It could also draw links to allied and overlapping agendas around community health, creative communities and community wealth building to support flourishing neighbourhoods.

Communities of identity and virtual social infrastructure

The overwhelming emphasis in the literature and commentary assumes a physical and place-based sense of social infrastructure, through which connections are made, often at a neighbourhood or town-based level (e.g. OCSI/Local Trust, 2019, Snelson and Collis, 2021, Panayotopoulos-Tsiros et al, 2025). This tends to privilege communities of place to the neglect of those of identity. A significant knowledge gap exists, then, on the role of social infrastructure for communities of identity. This extends to a gap around the sociality and community connection engendered through digital platforms and online communities, and the extent to which they work through open or relatively enclosed rules of access and operation, including the creation of safer spaces for marginalised groups.

Good social infrastructure in place

For understandable reasons, research and commentary has studied existing social infrastructure in a constrained context of threat and decline. An alternative starting point for research involves asking what good social infrastructure for communities could look like, is needed and should be expected, in terms of scale, scope, access, diverse forms and quality (Zia et al, 2023). This would need to embrace the needs of different kinds of communities of place and identity (for example, urban and rural).

At heart this is a fundamentally political question, in suggesting possibilities for how we ought to live together in communities (Gregory et al, 2026). As such it also extends to who has policy ownership and responsibility for the state and role of social infrastructure, and a closer comparative examination of the legislative, policy and funding contexts for social infrastructure across the four UK nations.

These questions might address how social infrastructure could legitimately be placed within a broader field of comprehensive and effective social provision which promotes economic security, human flourishing and reduces multiple inequalities, as part of a deeper discussion of the UK's political future. Research here could contribute to recent debates on reimagining social provision and the welfare state. For example, social infrastructure can be seen in different ways as a central component in new thinking on universal basic services (Coote and Percy, 2020), a politics of respect, 'ordinary hope' and of communities 'taking back control' (Stears and Tryl, 2023: 54-60), a concern with the social drivers and dynamics of economic security (Cooke, 2023; Ibison and Hunter, 2026) and the idea of foundational liveability (Calafra et al, 2023). The latter posits social infrastructure as the subtlest of three 'pillars of liveability' (alongside more familiar ideas of residual income and essential services). In this account, social infrastructure is seen as 'a key support of individuals' health and fulfilment, creating the necessary conditions for positive contribution in the household and, more broadly, in social and political life' (Calafra et al, 2023: 209).

Conclusion

Debate on social infrastructure has intensified in recent years, in that it seems to have become a central reference point and watchword in policy in relation to communities, neighbourhoods, cohesion and regeneration. It speaks to many fields, including public health, local economic development and quality of life. As such it can sometimes have an ‘all things to everyone’ quality, which offers both opportunities for advancing policy development, and a risk of vagueness and confusion. Overall, the gathering discussion on social infrastructure has combined several arguments in a relatively clear sequence: the concept is named and elaborated; its significance is highlighted but it is argued to be under-appreciated (i.e., it is said to be essential but hidden in plain sight); it is claimed to be patchy, in decline or under threat; and finally efforts are made to define, measure, map and evaluate its contribution, value and outcomes. The research priorities indicated in this paper aim to use the opportunity of the C4 research investment to take the investigation of social infrastructure several steps further. Arguably, the ongoing challenges of the economic, political and social context means that the concept is likely to remain highly salient for some time to come.

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