Kickstarting Social Infrastructure

A Report by Neighbourly Lab

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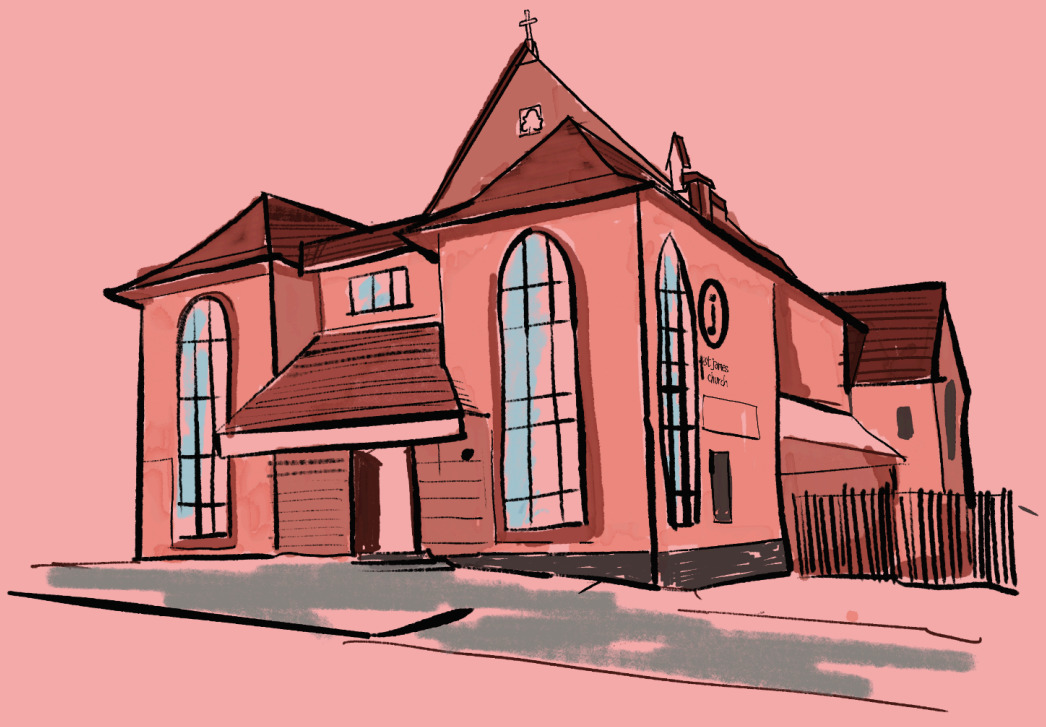

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Executive Summary

Over the last six months, Neighbourly Lab has been exploring ‘social infrastructure’ as part of a research Development Grant from the National Lottery Community Fund. The purpose of this project has been to lay down the conceptual framework for social infrastructure, determine what ‘good’ looks like for social infrastructure, and begin to establish partnerships across the country to support a larger project, in which we will run experiments to try and build good, impactful social infrastructure.

The following report is a summary of our findings to date, including a conceptual analysis of what social infrastructure is and how to bring it about in the best possible way. We combine our in-depth interviews and workshops with stakeholders across the country with our observations of being in the field and experiencing different kinds of social infrastructure.

The inspiration for this work came from our experiences in the field and seeing first-hand the impact of having the right spaces for creating meaningful social connections. For example, our research into the impact of the Cost of Living crisis revealed how those communities where there was a central hub providing wrap-around support fared much better than those that did not. Furthermore, our work exploring the role of online community groups showed how residents who get access to these networks are much more able to create lasting connections with their neighbours and are more informed about what support is available to them. At Neighbourly Lab our mission as an organisation is to massively increase social connection in the UK for everyone. Helping to build the right social infrastructure to facilitate those connections, and plugging gaps in this infrastructure is central to our work and our central ambitions.

Neighbourly Lab Team

Our Approach

We set out to collect learnings on social infrastructure across the country to understand how social infrastructure is understood and valued by stakeholders. We specifically wanted to look at social infrastructure through the lens of partnerships as we know that collaboration can be a key facet to developing social infrastructure, so our insights were garnered from groups across Local Authorities, local charities and local businesses, as well as by national stakeholders interested in the subject. This was all made possible via our Development Grant funding from the National Lottery Community Fund.

Social infrastructure is a broad topic, so for us to explore it properly we narrowed down our focus to two domain areas, to understand what enables good social infrastructure for a specific cohort and their needs.

1. **Social infrastructure that supports people who are new in a place**

   Why: We believe this is an important domain area and target cohort. Our research from the GLA, looking at loneliness in London, shows that in your first year living in a place people are more likely to experience severe loneliness. This means they are more likely to want to access and inevitably benefit from Social Infrastructure within a local area to encourage social connection and the building of social capital.

   Example: Developing neighbourhood WhatsApp groups that new arrivals can access that plug them into digital forms of communication and build their awareness of physical social infrastructure opportunities in their area.

2. **Social infrastructure to build capacity and opportunities for young people**

   Why: Stakeholders we had spoken to acknowledge a lack of good quality social infrastructure and provision for children and young people to meaningfully build social connection and social capital.

   Example: A shopping centre, Local Authority team and youth club joining together to deliver an after-school and holiday club for children and young people hosted in a spare space in the shopping centre.

Throughout our research, we sought to answer four key questions:

1. How is social infrastructure understood and valued across locations in England?
2. What are the key qualities that make for good social infrastructure?
3. What are the necessary enablers that support the development of social infrastructure?
4. What does it take to unblock the development of social infrastructure?

To address these questions we developed a methodology that used both ethnographic and qualitative research methods. To listen deeply and to understand the existing strengths, capacity and successes in the place, we spent time in local communities and places, as well as speaking with national stakeholders and prominent thinkers on social infrastructure. This methodology enabled us to test our emerging hypotheses about how to build good social infrastructure that has a high and long-lasting impact on individuals' social connection and social capital.

Below we summarise what we have done as part of our methodology:

In our initial phase we wanted to explore the first two of our key questions, **how is social infrastructure understood and valued across locations in England?** So we spoke to 13 local and Combined Authorities including:

- Calderdale Council
- Derby Council
- Greater London Authority
- Greater Manchester Authority
- Birmingham City Council
- London Borough of Ealing
- Central Bedfordshire Council
- Lancashire County Council
- London Borough of Newham
- Somerset County Council
- London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Northumberland County Council
- South Tyneside Council

Our conversations with local and combined authorities explored their understanding of the term 'social infrastructure', what initiatives they currently had in place for young people and newcomers in particular, what their vision for better social infrastructure is and the role they saw partnerships playing in developing that.

We also spoke to national or local organisations that had an interest in or were also working towards a better understanding of social infrastructure, including:

- Impact for Urban Health
- Institute for Public Policy Research
- IVAR
- More Human
- The Santander Foundation
- Power to Change
- The LGA
- Somerset Community Foundation

Our conversations with partnership organisations focused more closely on the dynamics of the partnerships they had with public sector and private sector organisations in the development of social infrastructure. We explored what the key ingredients for a successful partnership were, and what role they saw themselves and the council playing in maintaining those partnerships.

Alongside these conversations, we reviewed the policy literature in the space of social infrastructure, analysing the way social infrastructure is understood, what its intended purpose is, and how it fits in with broader plans for levelling up and local development. Examples of the literature we explored include:

- The London Plan: Social Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Guide
- What Works Centre for Wellbeing's literature review on Places, Spaces and Social Connections
- The Levelling Up Whitepaper
- British Academy & Power to Change: Space for community: strengthening our social infrastructure
- Locality: Spaces to Thrive Report
- Social Life: Social Infrastructure in times of crisis

For us to delve deeper and begin to ask and answer our remaining two questions; What are the necessary enablers that support the development of social infrastructure, What does it take to unblock the development of social infrastructure?

We held explorative and collaborative design workshops across 5 locations in England. The locations were chosen so we could have a mixture of: current activity/inactivity surrounding social infrastructure, a mixture of SES areas and a mixture of rural and urban locations. These locations included:

- Birmingham
- Northumberland
- Newham
- Calderdale
- Somerset

With invitees from across the local authorities, third sector and local businesses, all with a mixture of expertise in the concept of social infrastructure specifically for children and young people or for newcomers. These workshops enabled us to test our initial insights, explore examples of good social infrastructure; as well as to explore barriers and gaps in social infrastructure within these locations. So that we could be in a position to surface opportunity areas to develop social infrastructure that is needed in these communities.

Overview of Social Infrastructure

The first of our key questions for this research focused on understanding **how social infrastructure is defined and valued across England.**

Throughout our research stakeholders noted the need across the UK for more social infrastructure, in order to strengthen their place's resilience and capacity to flourish. To care for one another, contribute to the shaping of their place, and build new and innovative collaborative ways of working.

Social infrastructure was commonly referred to as the "tapestry" or "network" which connects us all to our community and wider support. However, it was often described as a nebulous concept that can become tangled up with other concepts or services available in communities. This was a challenge for us, we needed to untangle what social infrastructure is to take some of the mystery out of it and to enable people to better focus on it.

So through our research, we developed a clear definition of social infrastructure:

> ***Social Infrastructure is the places and spaces that enable people to form social connections and build social capital.***

We see it as essential for healthy, thriving, and well-connected communities. It is necessary for fighting loneliness and isolation, for tackling the social determinants of disease and making people feel like they belong in their local areas.

Within this definition, what can social infrastructure be? (with examples from our fieldwork)

Although we have developed a clear definition of how we see social infrastructure throughout our research we understood that social infrastructure cannot be seen in a one-size-fits-all manner. It can manifest and show up in a variety of different ways including being:

Publicly-owned	Or	Privately owned
Birmingham Warm Spaces network, warm hubs hosted across libraries, churches and community centres for residents to keep warm, connect into support and form connections. Delivered by the Birmingham City Council warm spaces team.		**Roadwater Community Shop** in Exmoor which is a place for residents to get their everyday community essentials, but it has also become a place for people to connect with one another, and also be referred into and access support services.
Enduring for a long time	**Or**	**Short-lasting**
The Piece Hall in Halifax, is a historical exhibition and event space in the heart of the city.		**The Healthy Holidays programme** in Calderdale offers support for children and families during the school holidays. Support is offered over a restricted time period but it offers support to a larger number of families across the town.
Stable	**Or**	**Shape-shifting**
Orange Box Young People's Centre in Calderdale is a multipurpose space for children to access a variety of activities and meet one another.		**A Covid Neighbourhood Whatsapp Group** that lay dormant and reemerged in the community as the **Cost of Living Crisis** began.
Big	**Or**	**Small**
Northumberland's Markets are a cluster of historic market villages. They have a weekly Farmers Market and Craft activities. They are a central part of the area's cultural identity.		**A Mobile Library** in Northumberland that delivers books as well as tea and coffee to communities across the local areas. Enabling neighbours to connect in a safe and neutral environment.
Physical	**Or**	**Digital**
Wooler Family Hub in Northumberland children and family support offered out of the old fire station.		**A Neighbourhood Facebook Group** based on a street in Calderdale where people post about local things going on.

From our understanding and throughout this research what struck us was how integral social infrastructure is to everything that we do, as it acts as a key facilitator for social connection and building social capital. So it is important to focus on where it is, where it exists and how it positively serves the community.

What does this definition mean?:

This definition means that these places and spaces must enable us to connect and build social capital, but that they do not necessarily exist solely for these specific reasons. So almost always the places that act as social infrastructure also do another job for people.

That is to say, the primary job of a place or space can be to dispense information for a service or to meet other forms of needs, but (a Library with space for Mum groups) is always a conduit for social connection. At the heart of what makes a place, social infrastructure is its ability to facilitate social connection, thereby creating social capital.

The GLA's Regeneration and Culture team directed us to how often social infrastructure can spring up and shape to the needs of the community, seemingly adapting itself. They shared two key London-based examples of this:

***1. Noor Cash and Carry in Brixton**, which functions as a key community pillar. It is a place where people go to buy food or essentials and yet locals also go there to connect with one another and their local community. The site was threatened with eviction but because it was a key asset as a form of social infrastructure and because the community rallied behind it it now still exists.*

***2. Shepherd's Bush Market** is again primarily a place where people go to buy food, but is also a shared physical space in which people connect with one another, so it serves as a form of social infrastructure. It is also a place that has strong cultural significance to the area and acts as a central point.*

Another common property that we saw of places that act as social infrastructure is that they serve some other need as well as connecting people. We heard this across the research when people spoke of digital social infrastructure such as:

A neighbourhood WhatsApp group *focused on support for Cost of Living social infrastructure, is a platform for people to connect, but it also enables people to meet a need which is accessing support based around the Cost of Living.*

We also heard of brilliant examples of this type of social infrastructure when it came to multipurpose spaces like this example from Newham:

The Welcome Newham team that runs One Stop Shops every week to help refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants with no recourse to public funds. The service offers practical support around Benefits Advice & Support, school support, and employability pathways amongst others. But it also acts as a place for people to connect and build a sense of belonging to the community by providing space for people to chat, do family activities and direct people to further social activities that they can easily access in the area.

The two ways of seeing social infrastructure we have seen:

Within our definition, we observed that social infrastructure can form into two distinct categories. In conversations with stakeholders how they found it useful to distinguish between purpose built and adapted spaces.

Purpose Built

These are spaces and places that are built with social connection and social capital in mind. Where it is being built with this as an overt goal.

A good example of purpose built social infrastructure is a local park in Newham that has facilities to bring the community together including, a cafe, kids play area and a football pitch.

Adapted

These are spaces and places that exist for another purpose (e.g. to shop or access healthcare). But, it can be tilted towards serving more as a form of social infrastructure.

A good example of adapted social infrastructure is a market in Manchester that has created a space for people to sit and chat by adding tables and chairs to its empty space.

We were especially interested in the idea of adapted spaces as they provide opportunity for the repurposing of spaces that already exist within a community to foster social connections and build social capital.

Qualities and Enablers of good social infrastructure

The definition of social infrastructure we established above is an important starting point for our work, but on its own, it fails to distinguish between good and bad instances. The central goal of our work is to establish the enablers of and bring about *good* social infrastructure – so what else does social infrastructure need to be considered good?

Good social infrastructure is well used, allows many residents to gain social connections and increase their social capital, and is generally well-used, liked and trusted by the community. Through comparing and contrasting social infrastructure that had these qualities with those that didn't, we concluded that good social infrastructure must at least have these three qualities:

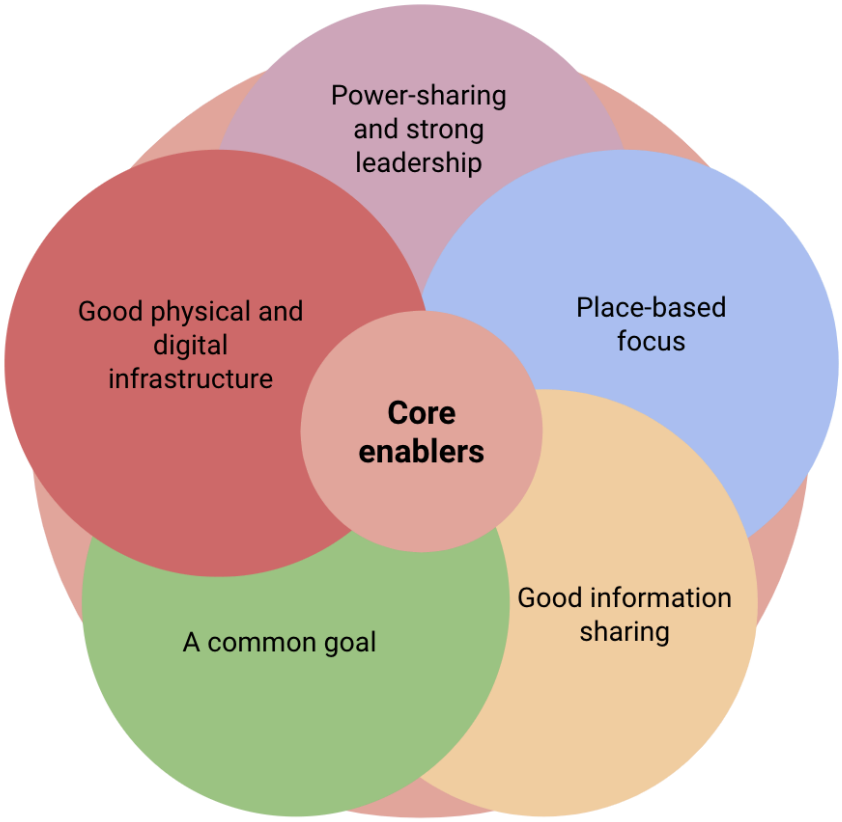
Quality	Dimensions of the quality	Example from our fieldwork
Inclusive, in aggregate locally	The requirements of the people with the greatest needs are met overall in the local area. At the unit level, social infrastructure can be non-inclusive, as long as that's required for, or benefits its users.	Birmingham City Council Warm Spaces provides a network of spaces within 15 minutes of all neighbourhoods to suit all needs. **However,** They offer warm spaces exclusively for specific communities including Refugees, Asylum Seekers and vulnerable women.
Truly accessible for the people who need it most	• **Cost** - cost should not act as an exclusionary factor to people participating. We are not necessarily saying it has to be free of charge.	West Norwood Health and Leisure Centre provides a variety of services including healthcare, dental care and a gym and pool. All for free or at a limited cost. The centre is also easily accessible being close to transport links and having lots of parking spaces.

	• **Physical accessibility -** it should have access to good transportation options and be open at various times during the day. • **Welcome -** people who can benefit from the SI should feel welcome to access it. • **Safety -** all should feel safe within the space and not at risk.	
The environment encourages contact and social-mixing **This is measured in aggregate locally**	The environment is conducive to more social contact, especially contact across lines of difference. In aggregate, it enables more contact and more mixing amongst the different people who share the place to foster bridging social capital.	Moseley Hive is a repurposed old shop on the high street that has been transformed into a thriving community space. With a timetable full of welcome for all activities like dance classes and ESOL sessions

The enablers to the development of good social infrastructure

Now that we have established what constitutes good social infrastructure, the task at hand becomes much clearer – how can these three attributes of good social infrastructure be brought about, and how can we support the development of these enablers?

While our list of these enablers continues to grow as we explore social infrastructure in all its forms across the country, we found throughout our research that a core set of features was consistently associated with good social infrastructure. These were:



Below, we explore each of these in detail, explaining how they bring about the core features of good social infrastructure. It is important to note that our research is ongoing, and therefore so is our understanding of these core enablers. The following section should thus be read as a work-in-progress set of hypotheses based on our current research.

Power-sharing and strong leadership

Good partnerships between the community, the local authority, and sometimes the private sector as well were often essential to the success of many of the examples of good social infrastructure we came across. There were two core aspects of these partnerships that underwrote their success:

- Effective power-sharing between all partners
- A strong leadership that held space for this power-sharing

While at first glance these two may seem like they are in conflict with one another, we argue that effective power-sharing is the hallmark of a strong leader. For example, in our workshop in Calderdale, we discussed The Orange Box in Halifax, a multi-purpose space built by and for the local youth. The site is a fantastic blend of different organisations under one roof, a shared community cafeteria, a skatepark and a climbing wall. When we asked participants to reflect on why they felt this place had such good social infrastructure, many referenced that the organisations worked so strongly together, and yet the youth's voice was certainly heard in the development of the site:

> *"All the different organisations who are based there are really good at working together. When there is a problem, such as a young person who needs additional support, they can easily refer that individual to another organisation and ensure they get the support they need. Because they all share the space, they all take their role as managing the space seriously, and ensuring it works for all. However, the young people themselves have been involved with the project from the start. That's how the skatepark on the roof came about!"*

Power-sharing and strong leadership becomes even more important and challenging when the local authority, the third sector, and the private sector all have seemingly competing visions and interests. However, when the local authority takes charge and works to hold space for different parties to get their voice heard, good social infrastructure is often the result. We came across a great example of this in Derby, where a community asset fell into disarray and

needed rebuilding and rethinking the role it ought to play in the community. The council convened a partnership between a local church which wanted to run the space as a multi-purpose community hub, and a private contractor who wanted to help develop the site as part of their social value initiative. The council mediated this partnership and successfully brought about a collaboration where the developers were able to support the development of the community site and align it with the community's and church's vision and needs.

Place-based focus

To be inclusive and accessible, social infrastructure needs to be responsive to local needs. It is also crucial to recognise that scalability is not always the goal for social infrastructure; having a place-based focus is often much more important than replication. To be responsive to a local area, it is important that the community's voice is championed through the development and implementation of social infrastructure, and that the programme of activities or agenda is adaptable. Below, we give two examples of how being place-based has led to good social infrastructure:

Example	How it is place-based	How this has made it 'good'
St James' Church, East Barnet This church is a local hub of activity, support, and bringing together of residents. It has strong relationships with organisations across the ward and is an important site to many different communities in the area	The support that the church puts on is highly responsive to local needs. For example, when many Iranian refugees moved to the area, one of the rooms became a drop-in information point for newcomers, and a congregant began putting on ESOL classes. When the local CAB offices had to close down, the church offered to relocate	Being adaptable to local needs has meant that many communities view the church as a lifeline – even those that are not religious. This means the space has been made to be inclusive to lots of different communities.

	them to a spare classroom. This ensured that the local community still had access to a vital service.	
Community Champion's Scheme, Newham During the pandemic, Newham council recruited and supported several Community Champions, who were locals who were well-connected with their neighbours through online WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These individuals supported their local groups, sharing information from the council with them, and feeding back to the council any challenges	Since the infrastructure for these groups was already set up over Covid, they have been able to be transformed into Cost of Living champions and help provide tailored support for their neighbourhoods in a new context.	Community Champions have been pivotal in increasing awareness of and accessibility to Cost of Living support and information in Newham. In sustaining these online networks, they also provide a local environment that encourages meeting and mixing. We have come across many examples of these groups leading to in-person social events and long term friendships between neighbours.

Good Information Sharing

Social infrastructure cannot be good if people don't know about it. Therefore, ensuring that the infrastructure is linked to a good information ecosystem is essential. To what extent residents are aware of social infrastructure is often dependent on how well linked in with a local area that social infrastructure is. Therefore, sites that are established with a place-based focus, that champion the community voice and that are committed to partnering with sites across an area are more likely to be good at information sharing as well.

As the example with Community Champions and online neighbourhood networks highlights, digital social infrastructure that is inclusive of all people in a local area and accessible through common platforms like WhatsApp is often enabled by the good information sharing that these platforms afford. Other times, having up to date and accessible databases of what is available

in a local area is what underpins the success of social infrastructure. For example, the platform Manchester Active shares all these sports activities available to locals and provides the required information to access them. This is essential for making local sports spaces accessible and inclusive.

Often, a lack of linking with the local information ecosystem is a barrier to making social infrastructure good. For example, during fieldwork in Barnet, we came across a community centre. Despite putting on regular activities for locals of all age groups and abilities, its catchment was not broader than the streets that surrounded it. Few of the residents we spoke to knew it was there. Getting the word out about the site and what it has to offer is needed to transform this space into *good* social infrastructure.

A Common Goal

We observed that, often, the catalyst for effective partnerships and power-sharing to address a local need was a common goal shared by the local authority, the community and other local stakeholders as well. Establishing that common goal is thus an important enabler of good social infrastructure in many circumstances.

The best example of this we came across was in Derby. The council and local police received several complaints that young people were causing trouble at a local shopping centre. On deeper investigation, the council learned that the young people had nowhere else to go as there was no local youth space or after school activities. The shopping centre, police, council and local youth-focused third sector organisations solved this issue by setting up a youth space inside the community centre, complete with local volunteers to support the young people and make the space their own. In sharing a common goal and using their power to create change, each partner was able to help tackle this issue and bring about good, accessible social infrastructure that addressed a core local need.

Good Physical and Digital Infrastructure

In many of the cases of good social infrastructure we came across, good physical and digital infrastructures were a prerequisite. While this seems obvious, it is important to be clear on what good physical and digital infrastructure means and what impact it will have on what is possible for the social infrastructure in an area.

Good digital infrastructure means reliable internet accessibility, good digital literacy amongst residents, and access to digital tools. It also means that there are well established and updated digital spaces for residents to access, such as notice boards, social media groups, or organisation websites. With this in mind, good digital infrastructure often underwrites good information sharing, which in turn is required for spaces to be accessible and inclusive.

Good physical infrastructure means accessible, well-known and well-built physical spaces that have the right physical and organisational structure to support community activities. Many examples we have seen of great social infrastructure are situated in repurposed empty plots on high streets. For instance, Moseley Hive in Birmingham is a multipurpose community space that is located in an old supermarket plot. These spaces work well as they are often centrally located, are already well-known by the community, and are conveniently situated amongst other local amenities.

The main mechanism for transforming these spaces into social infrastructure is community asset transfers. Publicly owned land and buildings are given over to the community for ownership and management. This, coupled with local authorities' new powers to rent out empty high street plots, helps to secure good social infrastructure for communities. However, it is important to note that community asset transfers are not magic bullets – often, plots that have been designated for community use will lie empty for months or years if the community is able to raise the required funds to buy the plot, or not provided with enough support to determine a site management plan. We have seen this a lot in our exploration of social infrastructure across the country. The enabler of good social infrastructure thus encompasses community asset transfers, as well as support structures for the community to take advantage of those sites.

While we have explored five core enablers in depth, there are many more enablers that are emerging as we continue our research. These include well suited funding, alignment of the right values, and passionate and motivated individuals to name a few.

One of the main goals of the next phases of our work is to explore these enablers in more depth, determine the mechanisms through which these enablers bring about good social infrastructure, and trial different ways of establishing these enablers in practice.

Unblocking the development of good social infrastructure

As we know communities need more good quality social infrastructure to strengthen resilience within communities and the connections within them. However, social infrastructure is not always felt evenly across the country or communities. Some communities benefit from a greater amount of social infrastructure and crucially better experience the qualities of good social infrastructure that we have outlined. We also saw within our research how some communities might have greater access to social infrastructure over others, rather than it being felt in aggregate locally.

As part of our research, we thought it integral to focus on where the barriers and gaps exist when it comes to social infrastructure, both nationally and locally. In order to answer our final question of, **what it takes to unblock the development of good social infrastructure?**

So that we can focus on what must be done and put it in place to catalyse and enable its development, to support the communities and places that would most benefit from social infrastructure can experience its impact.

Barriers to the development of good social infrastructure:

Throughout our research, several key barriers continued to emerge that posed as a blocker in developing good social infrastructure. Though many of these barriers were similar they affected communities differently based on their individual needs.

We were able to uncover these key barriers throughout our research but most predominantly through our workshop series. In which a key area of our focus was the barriers that representatives from across Local Authorities, the third sector and local businesses had collectively or individually experienced and felt got in the way of the development of good social infrastructure within their communities.

The six key barriers included:

Crucially we saw six key barriers that came up most frequently for various stakeholders that operated across England, these included:

1	**Accessibility Constraints**	Barriers including access to public transport, knowledge of language or translation or cultural barriers.
2	**Capacity Constraints**	Demand for services not currently reaching capacity of staff, volunteers or opportunities
3	**Funding System**	Funding often set up to support short term project based opportunities. Further seen a decline in line with austerity
4	**Lack of private sector involvement**	Private sector often has capacity to support the development and investment in social infrastructure but often doesn't play a role.
5	**Not listening to community voices**	In the set up and delivery of services communities are rarely consulted, meaning sometimes services don't match up with the need.
6	**Poor physical or digital infrastructure**	A lack of space or assets to adequately cater for social infrastructure opportunities, or a lack of energy to invest in them.

We acknowledge that across England and particularly in local areas these are not always likely to be experienced and some may be experienced more acutely than others. However, we believe that they are the most important barriers for us to focus on.

Each of the barriers in detail:

These six barriers came up consistently throughout our research as affecting the development of social infrastructure within local communities and the formation of partnerships to enable the development and amplification of good social infrastructure. Below we explore each in detail with examples from our fieldwork.

1 **Accessibility Constraints** Barriers including access to public transport, knowledge of language or translation or cultural barriers.

For social infrastructure to be accessible it has to be easy to access, particularly for those who need it most or would most benefit from it. Accessibility barriers that came up most frequently during our fieldwork were transportation barriers and language or cultural barriers and cost. If any of those barriers are in place the use of local social infrastructure is likely to be impacted and may have a narrow use amongst the local community.

Transportation Barriers

For social infrastructure to support communities widely it has to be easy to get to and linked to public transport if available, to account for those who may not be able to walk, be able to access a car, or pay for public transport if it is available.

Transportation barriers came up, particularly during our conversations in Somerset where the availability of public transport is not felt evenly especially for more rural communities. Therefore, if communities cannot access social infrastructure within walking distance or have use of a car social infrastructure is utilised unequally.

We also spoke to the Eden Project in Cornwall which runs a horticulture therapy programme in their garden space, this is run by an organisation called the Defence Garden Scheme, which provides support for local Veterans. Given that the Eden Project is hosted in a rural and potentially inaccessible area, they provide support for travel either providing lift shares or support to expense back their travel costs, therefore making the service more

accessible.

Language Barriers

If the way in which services are delivered does not account for language or culture differences it is likely to not make participants feel welcome and can provide a sense that the social infrastructure has not been designed to support the specific needs of a community.

We heard in Newham how language and cultural barriers can significantly affect uptake for people who are new to the area and may have come from another country. So when social infrastructure is developed, culture and language is at the forefront of their minds.

For instance, when we spoke to the Welcome Newham Team they emphasised the importance of accessibility and how it was at the forefront of their approach, by ensuring that translation is available and that staff speak multiple languages at their drop in one-stop shops for Asylum Seekers and Refugees who are newly arrived.

Cost

Cost came up frequently, especially in light of the Cost of Living crisis with many services being closed to communities or individuals due to the cost to access. We heard in our workshops how this acts as a key barrier when it comes to support for children and families throughout the school year, especially for families who might be struggling financially and needing more year round support from their community, but are unable to access holiday provision or extra-curricular activities because of the cost. So efforts need to be made to ensure that children or young people from more deprived areas do not miss out on opportunities. Accessibility therefore came up as a key gap.

2	**Capacity Constraints**	Demand for services not currently reaching capacity of staff, volunteers or opportunities

A key barrier for many of the communities that we spoke with was capacity preventing the delivery and development of social infrastructure. We saw this in two key areas:

Demand not aligning with capacity of those providing support:
Many practitioners that we spoke to felt that this was a key problem, especially for practitioners working within the voluntary sector.

For instance, we spoke with practitioners in the children and young people space during our workshops who noted a particularly high demand for their services with many families needing support. However, many practitioners noted that they were at capacity, with need for support not matching with the time they have available, the pay that they receive particularly in the midst of the Cost of Living crisis, and the decline in youth services practitioners. Many also noted a reliance on the voluntary sector to pick up the slack for statutory services when in many cases they have reached full capacity and are at risk of burnout.

3	**Funding System**	Funding often set up to support short term project based opportunities. Further seen a decline in line with austerity

The development of social infrastructure opportunities is often based around short term project based opportunities, this means that stakeholders particularly within the voluntary sector are forced to chase funding or mission creep based on what is available to them. This short termism can mean that social infrastructure opportunities can struggle to be accelerated at scale or achieve their long term goals.

It can also prevent the formation of constructive relationships, between the funder and the developer, we saw this most often between the Local Authority and the organisation that they have funded. This is especially detrimental given how important partnership working is when it comes to social infrastructure.

We heard examples of the detrimental effects of the funding system in Calderdale, where a

thriving Community Centre had shut down because of funding constraints and the lack of support for the day to day running costs of the centre. There were numerous service providers that operated out of this space leading to a huge loss in community support. These services included a South Asian community group and a popular female only youth group that have yet to resurface, so the loss of space was also a huge gap.

4 **Lack of private sector involvement**

Private sector often has capacity to support the development and investment in social infrastructure but often doesn't play a role.

We believe that private sector organisations have a key role to play when it comes to the development of social infrastructure.

By operating for profit they can have the financial ability and power to invest in social infrastructure when it aligns with their commercial goals. They are also receptive to the needs and wants of their consumers which can drive how they behave and operate. They also often own the physical space that social infrastructure could operate out of, for instance large supermarkets like Asda or Tesco often have space within their shops that goes underutilised but that could be used to facilitate the formation of social connections and to build social connections. However, businesses often do not play a role in developing social infrastructure via partnerships so we see them as an underutilised resource.

There are a few key reasons why the private sector does not have much involvement. Firstly, they do not have the reputation or experience for being in the long term development and maintenance of social infrastructure. Secondly, within private sector organisations, there is unlikely to be a designated role for someone to focus on social infrastructure so there can be confusion when it comes to whose responsibility it is. Finally, for the private sector, especially those that are not embedded in the local community, they might not have the relationships to be actively involved in what the social infrastructure needs are within the community and to know how their resources can support social infrastructure.

This is not to say that private sector organisations never play their role as many actively pursue a social purpose model and are embedded in their community, but that is not often the case.

5	**Not listening to community voices**	In the set up and delivery of services communities are rarely consulted, meaning sometimes services don't match up with the need.

A key barrier when it comes to social infrastructure is not consulting the community in which the social infrastructure is seeking to support. If the social infrastructure has not been co-designed or at least involved some form of consultation it runs the risk of feeling top-down, which can affect its use, how welcome people feel and how inclusive the service is to communities.

This came up particularly during our workshop in Northumberland, participants noted that what a small village needs in terms of social infrastructure is often very different from what a city needs. So, local authorities like Northumberland that cover a vast region focus a lot on enabling the community to take charge of designing the social infrastructure that's right for them. As well using language and terminology that is accessible and enables the community to get involved.

6	**Poor physical or digital infrastructure**	A lack of space or assets to adequately cater for social infrastructure opportunities, or a lack of energy to invest in them.

A key barrier to the development of good social infrastructure across communities is the availability of good physical and digital infrastructure.

For instance, community stakeholders noted the loss of social infrastructure through austerity and the selling off of assets across the UK, especially council-owned spaces that were previously used as a form of social infrastructure.

Stakeholders acknowledged that the need for social infrastructure across communities is acute, but often that need does not match with investment in the development of social

infrastructure.

For example, stakeholders in Newham noted how focus on investment can be directed disproportionately to some areas over others. In particular Stratford was highlighted as an area that has experienced considerable investment in infrastructure particularly transport and in social infrastructure spaces public and particularly private. However, other parts of the borough have not received the same investment opportunities and in those locations that have not received as much investment the demand for social infrastructure does not currently match the supply.

We also heard that a lack of digital infrastructure or even a complete gap in digital infrastructure acts as a barrier, especially for more rural communities. For instance, in our workshops in Somerset stakeholders highlights that in some areas there is limited to no digital access meaning some communities are disproportionately and cannot maximise the benefits of digital forms of social infrastructure.

Our Next Steps

Given the key barriers and gaps that we have outlined, we believe it is essential that further attention is paid to understanding social infrastructure and creating the necessary conditions to enable the development of good social infrastructure across England and the UK.

So we would like to briefly share our further plans at Neighbourly Lab to focus on social infrastructure and to make a call to action for others who are interested in social infrastructure to actively focus on it and contribute.

Programme Background and Rationale:

We believe that a programme that focuses on putting attention on local social infrastructure is essential, especially one that focuses on social infrastructure that is built collaboratively and with partners within the community is needed now more than ever.

As we know, communities need more good quality social infrastructure to strengthen resilience in communities and the connections within them. However, social infrastructure is not always present evenly across the country or communities, with some communities benefiting from a greater amount of social infrastructure and crucially better experiencing the qualities of good social infrastructure that we have outlined. We also saw within our Development Grant research how some communities might have greater access to social infrastructure over others, rather than it being available for everyone.

We see a few key barriers that get in the way of social infrastructure being built to support all in a community and that prevent a clear focus on social infrastructure:

1. There is an ambiguity about what social infrastructure is or is not and about what constitutes good social infrastructure. Our engagement with local groups and local government during our Development Grant highlighted that different stakeholders are often talking at cross-purposes and find it very difficult to direct attention at the long-term truly-infrastructural layer. As interest increases (driven by more national-policy prominence and by new funding pots such as the Community Wealth Fund and the Shared Prosperity Fund), local government and VCFOs are struggling to know how to clearly plan and prioritise for investing in Social Infrastructure.

2. It can be difficult to know "how to start" and how to form the right inclusive partnerships. This is because the models are nascent and uncodified, and because the different organisations who need to collaborate for long-term planning are often not in touch or not used to working productively together. Or worse, often there's mutual suspicion between these categories of organisations (e.g. between VCFOs and Council, or local-businesses and VCFOs/Councils) collaboration is also difficult because there are no pre-established templates or measures for how to get going or to know if you're "doing it right" especially when it comes to working with private sector partners.

3. The current funding regime is not well set up to support these partnerships. Funding is often project based and short term which can constrain its impact, or discourage long-term local partnerships. Moreover, most funders prefer to fund only VCOs (eg TNLCF or Community Foundations) limits the partnerships that can be formed within a place.

Our Programme Summary:

In order to achieve our objectives we want to work across England in 6 locations, to develop:

- The know-how and evidence base about how to develop and maintain social infrastructure, covering partnership models, measurement and evaluation tools, and methods for local co-design.
- Models of different types of social infrastructure, organised by type and target cohort, including blueprints and methods for local adaptation.

The outputs will be disseminated through resources and ready-to-use tools for practitioners that we will spread through a network of local and national communities. It will also be diffused and promoted through our steering group and other relevant partners.

Our programme will be based on a two-track approach as can be seen below:

This parallel approach will run over 4 years to allow us to test and build an evidence base for how to build good social infrastructure; and explore how SI can meet the needs of those who are likely to use it and benefit the aggregate good in the society that it inhabits. It will also provide us with time to develop our outputs and develop a clear dissemination strategy for our findings. The timeline will look like this:

Principles guiding our approach:

Throughout our work, we will be guided by a series of principles so that the programme's aims can be achieved and our work is delivered in an equitable and inclusive way. These principles are also aligned with our values as an organisation. These are the core principles of our work:

	Principle	**What it means**
	Partnerships	The programme puts partnerships at its core to be successful, both local and national.
	Community Led	Social infrastructure pilot projects will be designed and delivered through meaningful engagement with our partners and the community.
	Sustainability and Legacy	Projects will seek to invest in the long term needs of a place to build up its capacity and resilience. By doing so the programme will be sustainable beyond the life cycle of the programme.
	Tightened scope on social infrastructure	To keep a laser focus on the programme we will focus on social infrastructure for children/young people and newcomers.

Partnerships:

Our programme is reliant on local partnerships to be successful and to build trust, connections and relationships within the community that we are seeking to work with. Neighbourly Lab's central role is to create incentives and space to establish relationships, bringing together the partnership model and sustaining it throughout the programme lifecycle.

We are proposing a partnership model between the Local Authority, local VCFO partners and local businesses in each of the regions we work in will enable the local pilot projects to be developed and delivered. Being the principal architects of the models, the local partners will have a vested interest in building social infrastructure and all will have a shared common goal aligned with children, young people and/or newcomers to support their community.

Thank You

Beth Worku-Dix: **beth@neighbourlylab.com**

Emma Bowkett: **emma@neighbourlylab.com**

Harry Hobson: **harry@neighbourlylab.com**

To find out more visit:
https://www.neighbourlylab.com/

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