



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

Briefing for central government

This [new joint report](#) by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Power to Change explores the under-examined role of the private sector in providing social infrastructure – the spaces where people mix and meet, which facilitate regular interactions between and within the diverse sections of the community. The report argues for a cohesive, cross-sectoral approach between the private and public sectors and local communities to shape and maintain these spaces in a way that delivers mutual benefit.

Key findings

- The state of community spaces in England has significantly deteriorated in recent years, with hundreds of libraries, community centres, and youth clubs closing due to cuts in public spending. As a result, sustainable solutions for the long-term preservation of social infrastructure must urgently be sought.
- And yet, as our 2023 report with the British Academy and Institute for Community Studies, [Space for Community](#), identified, the private sector plays a key, though underappreciated, role in the provision of social infrastructure. Its ability to do so without large-scale public investment should be of interest to policymakers seeking alternative models for the provision and management of social infrastructure.
- Our new report details a range of ways in which the private sector provides space for community organisations to fulfil local needs and create social connection – from ‘meanwhile use’ of vacant retail space to partnerships and longer-term stewardship or ownership of social infrastructure assets.
- It finds that the private sector makes two significant contributions to the provision of social infrastructure as it:
 - provides ‘**unplanned**’ social infrastructure – spaces whose primary purpose is not to create social connection, but which nevertheless do (such as shops, hairdressers and gyms).
 - contributes to ‘**planned**’ social infrastructure - spaces that are intended to foster social connection, and which have traditionally been stewarded by the public sector. Increasingly, the owners of private assets are introducing this function to diversify their offer and create vibrant spaces, producing economic and social benefits for both the owners of assets and local people.
- The report concludes that an approach based on cross-sectoral partnership is vital to securing and maintaining social spaces for the long term.

The role of central government

- Social infrastructure is vital to strengthening our communities and their local economies but has often lacked appropriate policy backing and state investment relative to other types of infrastructure.
- The fiscal challenges facing local government have made its traditional role as the guardian of social infrastructure less viable, and the approach to asset disposal for capital receipts, as endorsed by the previous government, has been inconsistent with central government’s efforts to support community ownership of local assets which provide space for social connection (such as through the Community Ownership Fund).



- After the lost promise of the previous government's Community Spaces and Relationships Strategy, the new government should make the provision and preservation of social infrastructure a policy priority, working alongside local government, communities and the private sector to ensure it is provided and protected in the places that need it most.

Recommendations to central government

1. Adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure

Government should adopt a comprehensive strategy for social infrastructure to shape a coherent approach to policymaking, funding, and other support for social infrastructure. This should shape action across government and with combined and local authorities, as well as consider the private sector's role in providing social infrastructure.

As part of the strategy, government should mandate all local authorities to implement a Community Asset Transfer policy. This would prioritise preserving or transferring to community ownership assets of significant community value when making decisions about asset disposal. This would help promote coherence between government's investment in community asset ownership (such as through the Community Ownership Fund and Labour's plans to introduce a Community Right to Buy) and its advice to local authorities on asset disposal.

The government's social infrastructure strategy should also consider how their own surplus assets could be used to promote community ownership and provision of social infrastructure.

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

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

As part of this, the government should commit to extending and expanding the Community Ownership Fund, to enable more communities to safeguard and run local assets that function as social infrastructure. Government should use the Community Ownership Fund to attract investment in community asset ownership through social purpose and private capital.

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