



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

Briefing for local 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 diverse sections of the community. The report argues for a cohesive, cross-sectoral approach including 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 interest 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 local government

- The capacity of many local authorities to create and maintain social infrastructure has been diminished by the constrained fiscal environment of the last decade. However, local authorities still have ample opportunity to harness their convening powers and resources to work with the private sector and communities to provide social infrastructure.
- The report details how some councils are using local planning powers to ensure communities have a voice in development and regeneration, ensuring social infrastructure is built into plans in new and existing places.



- Local authorities are also well placed to advocate for and support community ownership as a way to secure the long-term sustainability of social infrastructure, where public sector ‘adoption’ of assets is no longer viable. For example, through transferring surplus assets from public ownership to local communities.

Recommendations for local authorities

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

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

Local authorities partnering with private sector developers should bring community partners alongside to engage the public and to shape and manage social infrastructure. They should also consider how approaches like Community Improvement Districts, which can provide a mechanism for community leadership and governance of high streets and town centres, could help facilitate a more sustainable community-led approach to the maintenance of assets as social infrastructure.

2. Adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer Strategy and make communities the ‘first resort’ for asset stewardship

All local authorities should adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer Strategy with a clear approach to the management and disposal of publicly owned assets. This should position communities as a first, not last, resort for the disposal of public assets – particularly those designated as Assets of Community Value – to safeguard their function as social infrastructure against privatisation or disuse. Local authorities should also account for the importance of privately owned spaces as social infrastructure, and support communities to identify and protect the spaces they value through Asset of Community Value registration and through recognition in Local Plans.

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

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

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

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