

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

Briefing for asset owners and developers

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 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 is providing 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 asset owners and developers

- The report demonstrates that by working in collaboration with community-led organisations, private sector owners can shape their assets to meet local needs and provide space for social connection. The report details some of the models of partnership pursued by the private sector with communities – from ‘meanwhile use’ of vacant retail space to longer-term community stewardship or ownership of social infrastructure assets.
- Delivering social infrastructure in privately owned spaces can create a positive economic, as well as social, impact. Working with communities to shape spaces to meet local needs ensures these spaces are genuinely popular and likely to remain in

use in the long term – helping generate a return on investment over time. They also act as destination spaces and increase footfall and dwell time, including for surrounding businesses, increasing economic vitality.

Recommendations for asset owners and developers

1. Work with community organisations to shape and create spaces for social infrastructure

Community businesses and community anchor organisations can be key conduits to build trust and buy-in between the private sector and local communities, ensuring new developments and regeneration schemes align with what local people want and need.

At the earliest possible stage in a development or regeneration project, private asset owners and developers should identify these trusted community organisations and work with them consistently and equitably to develop and deliver social infrastructure.

This could be done by commissioning community organisations to run resident engagement sessions with local people to understand their aspirations for social infrastructure. Providing ‘meanwhile use’ of spaces while development is ongoing can help to develop a better understanding of what social infrastructure is needed and is likely to be supported by the community and to attract people to these spaces. Such opportunities should be offered on terms that reflect the social and economic value they generate, such as on a no or low rent lease, to support them to build financial sustainability.

2. Consider community stewardship and ownership of social infrastructure to embed long-term sustainability

The long-term care and management of spaces that provide social infrastructure is a key concern for private asset owners and developers, particularly where traditional routes of public sector ‘adoption’ of social infrastructure are no longer viable. Transferring assets into long-term community stewardship or ownership can therefore ensure a smooth exit from developments for asset managers for whom this is desirable and appropriate. This can also offer an alternative to costly private management companies which can be unpopular with residents.

For asset owners and managers who wish to remain rooted in a place, providing space for the community to use as social infrastructure can enhance the vitality of the asset and the surrounding area. Co-ownership of assets with the community can also be an effective way to ensure that these spaces serve local needs while providing opportunities for commercial return. These models can draw on the different sources of legitimacy, skills and routes to finance of the private and community sectors.

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