



Key learning on how shared spaces make communities work

- To help reduce social isolation amongst older people, communities need a range of shared spaces that allow chance social encounters with a diversity of people where social connections can be made.
- The existence of informal shared places are growing in importance as the responsibility for service delivery continues to move from the state to local communities.
- Despite its often informal and unintended nature social infrastructure is not naturally occurring and therefore requires direct investment and support.
- Public libraries, commercial spaces and green spaces are some of the most critical forms of our social infrastructure. These spaces facilitate interactions that can help reduce social isolation and increase feelings of autonomy without the pressure of taking part in a structured activity.

Introduction

The importance of shared spaces is growing as our population gets older and austerity leads to more and more state responsibilities falling to civil society.

Many of the responsibilities being taken on by local communities are crucial to ageing in place.

The relationships developed in spaces such as community centres, libraries, parks, GP surgeries, shops, cafes and post offices help to strengthen the social connections that are so important to keeping older people active in, and connected to, their communities.

If we want to enable older people to play an active role in their neighbourhoods, we need to ensure that a diverse range of social infrastructure is in place.

This briefing summarises the report, **Social Infrastructure: how shared spaces make communities work** produced by MICRA as part of the Ambition for Ageing programme.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age-friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by providing small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester in addition to funding larger scale work across the city-region. As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy. Ambition for Ageing is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK.

What is social infrastructure?

Social infrastructure is a term used to describe places where social relationships are formed, providing opportunity for local face-to-face interactions.

This briefing uses the term shared spaces to define places outside the home or the work place where you might have social interaction.

In other literature, these types of spaces may be known as third spaces.

Social infrastructure can include:

- **community spaces** such as village halls and community hubs,
- **public services** such as libraries and GP surgeries,
- **public spaces** such as parks and squares,
- as well as **commercial spaces** such as shops, shopping centres, cafes, banks and post offices.

Reducing social isolation for older people

Shared spaces facilitate the everyday and often mundane informal encounters we have with others in our local neighbourhoods.

These spaces are important as they can have a valuable impact on the development of social capital - the relationships we have with others.

Building relationships with others locally is an important factor in the wellbeing of older people, providing a source of social support that can reduce social isolation.



Different kinds of shared spaces help support different types and levels of social capital

To reduce social isolation for older people we need a diversity of shared spaces supporting the development and maintenance of different types and levels of social capital.

There are broadly two forms of social capital.

- Bonding capital refers to the relationships and networks between people who share some form of commonality.
- Bridging capital on the other hand refers to connections made between diverse groups of people.

Within both types of relationships there is the possibility for individuals to develop both strong and weak ties of association and both are important for supporting ageing in place.

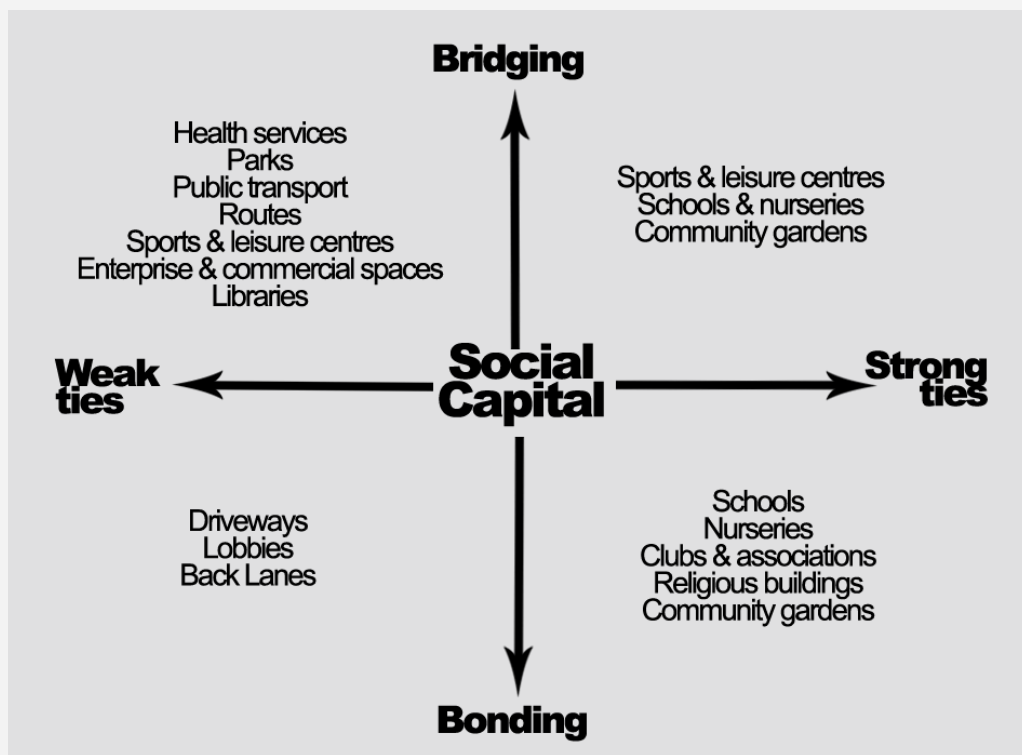


Figure illustrating which kinds of social infrastructure might be best suited to facilitating and supporting the different types and levels of social capital and connection



Both strong and weak social ties are important for reducing social isolation

The ability to build social ties - even weak ones - with a diversity of people helps older people feel more connected to the places in which they live, reduces social isolation, and improves resilience.

Weak ties of association are important for reducing social isolation as they provide bridges to social worlds we are previously unfamiliar with which in turn allows us to disseminate and get access to information that we might not otherwise have.

Social infrastructure that is open to a diversity of people, where the majority of the community would have the opportunity to visit at some point are best placed to facilitate this.

Often, these are places where the space is designed to provide something other than a social space.

“ If somebody is needed, they will help, but you don't live in each other's pockets. ”

What kinds of places?



Public libraries are one of the most critical, yet undervalued forms of our social infrastructure. They offer spaces of culture and companionship to all ages but are particularly important for older people and those with limited financial resources. Their community orientated service also works to remove any stigma some older people may feel towards activities geared specifically towards 'older people'. There is considerable potential for public libraries to support the building of bridging capital by providing an inclusive and neutral environment within communities.



If suitably organised, **commercial spaces** such as cafes, banks, and local shops have the potential to act as places of bridging capital where social connections can be fostered across the neighbourhood. These spaces facilitate talking, allowing people to at least exchange pleasantries, information and to gossip if they wish. The interactions that occur within neighbourhood shops can allow older people to maintain autonomy within their communities. This social capital may operate as weak ties, but none-the-less provide an important sense of connection and familiarity to older people.



The presence, safety and quality of **green spaces** in their living environment has been shown to decrease feelings of loneliness and increase sources of social support for older people through opportunities to develop social ties. Access to public spaces, such as parks, squares and high streets operate as gateways to the outside world for many older people with restricted mobility and they provide opportunities for direct and indirect social contact with other neighbourhood residents of a diversity of ages and cultural backgrounds.



Social infrastructure can help to increase community cohesion and resilience

Although neither a solution nor a quick fix, intergenerational and intercultural encounters can be the starting point to overcoming prejudice, mistrust and apprehension towards those who we see as 'different' from ourselves. Over time this can lead to greater community cohesion.

Shared spaces provide a space to have social encounters with a diverse range of people, providing opportunities for people to spend time with those outside of their usual social circles. Indirect benefits can be gained through the building of mutual empathy between different groups and the challenging of prejudiced attitudes, born from a lack of contact with ages or cultures different from their own.

In addition, intergenerational contact has proven mental and physical wellbeing advantages for older people.

Social infrastructure provides a space for social change and further social participation

The use of shared spaces for political discussion, activism and social change is well documented; shopping centres can provide a space for social organising and cafes and pubs can become spaces for meeting and discussion which can lead to social movements. This type of social interaction helps individuals build confidence and energy leading to more active involvement their local community.

Shared spaces outside of the community and voluntary sector are becoming increasingly important for creating places for further social participation. Good social infrastructure provides the opportunity for social interaction that can build trust and familiarity between neighbours and can often represent the first step for older people to become more socially engaged.

A question then for both the ageing agenda and community development more broadly, is how to create an environment locally that can support and encourage social participation. Recognising the role that social infrastructure has in encouraging further participation in neighbourhoods is vital if we are to 'future proof' the community and voluntary sector and prevent an overreliance on a small 'civic core' of local individuals.

To read the full report and a list of references for this briefing visit www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/socialinfrastructure



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