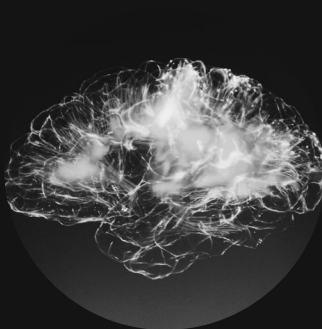


Revealing Social Capital

Friends with Benefits: how diverse social connections drive economic mobility.



The Revealing Social Capital research was carried out by Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in partnership with RSA, Neighbourly Lab, Stripe Partners, Opportunity Insights and Meta.

The work of BIT, the RSA, Stripe Partners, and Neighbourly Lab on this project is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. Contributions from Meta are self-funded.



Contents

Introduction	04
Research & Policy Development Process	05
Policy Principles	05
Summary of Policy Recommendations	06
Research Synthesis	07
Key Insights	09
Policy Recommendations:	10
1. Increase cross-SES exposure at a young age	10
2. Strengthen Community Wealth Funds to improve social infrastructure and connective capacity	12
3. Design spaces and services to support economic connectedness	15
4. Create national accounts for economic connectedness and social capital	17
Conclusion	18

Introduction

Friends with Benefits: how diverse social connections drive economic mobility.

Our lives are shaped by our relationships. So are our opportunities.

The sum-total of our personal connections, (close and distant) and the networks they form, are known as 'social capital'. The 2022 Levelling Up White Paper noted that social capital was one of six 'capitals' (alongside human, physical, intangible, financial, institutional) upon which 'prosperity' and other desirable economic and social outcomes depend. However, financial relationships leave trails that are easy to measure in a way that human relationships do not. Social capital is difficult to measure and, like many things that can't be counted, it often gets discounted in public decision-making.

There is strong evidence to suggest that finding better ways to measure social capital leads to better decisions. For example, humans know instinctively that isolation is bad for us, but in 2010 work by Dr Julianne Holt-Lundstad¹ put a number on this. She showed that loneliness is not just unpleasant, it is a killer; as deadly as a 15-a-day cigarette habit. This insight helped turn loneliness from a charitable concern into a public health priority.

If a lack of human contact can be viewed as an issue of public health, who we connect with should be seen as an issue of public wealth. Professor Raj Chetty's groundbreaking work on Social Capital and Economic Connection used Facebook data to make a powerful economic argument for fostering better integration and connections². It showed that areas with high levels of economic connectedness (the share of high-income friends held by people of low income) strongly correlated with areas showing high levels of upward social mobility.

Revealing Social Capital (RSC) builds on this research for the UK. It is the most detailed study of social connection in UK history, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and delivered by Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), Neighbourly Labs, The RSA, Stripe Partners, Opportunity Insights and Meta.

Put simply, children who live in areas with more diverse friendship groups will grow up to earn more.

Low-income children who grow up in areas with the most cross-class connections earn 28% (£2,924 per year) more at age 28 than those from the least connected areas. Low-income children growing up in deprived areas (where economic mixing is less likely) with a higher ratio of 'long ties' (90th to 10th Percentile) earn 26% (£2,690 per year) more at age 28.

The phrase "it's not what you know, it's who you know" has been in common use since at least 1914.³ This research puts a number on the impact of 'who you know' – and that's nearly £3000 per year.

1) Holt-Lundstad, J., Smith, T. and Layton, J. (2010) Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review. PLoS Medicine, 7, e1000316

2) Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T. et al. Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. Nature 608, 122–134 (2022)

3) First recorded use May 1914 issue of The Electrical Worker

Research & Policy Development Process

Revealing Social Capital used anonymised data from 20 million Facebook users to identify the different kinds of connections users had and mapped this against longitudinal earnings records from the [UK Longitudinal Education Outcomes](#) (LEO) dataset. They inferred economic mobility from free school meals data as a baseline and HMRC income records when the individuals reached age 28.

Alongside the data analysis, the partnership ran ethnographic research carrying out interviews in four areas of the UK speaking to communities that are demographically similar but had different levels of connectedness to provide qualitative insights into how social capital works in the real world.

The findings of the quantitative and ethnographic research were supplemented with a desk-based review of secondary evidence, policy and practice to identify promising areas for policy development.

The following recommendations were informed by this secondary research and developed through a series of events and workshops.

The RSA and Neighbourly Lab ran a series of regional workshops with practitioners and residents to draw on their lived and professional experience and begin to generate ideas. These and other suggestions were subject to a process of exploration and refinement.

This allowed us to generate a shortlist of strawman recommendations that responded to challenges revealed in the quantitative analysis and were informed by promising case-studies and secondary sources of evidence.

We tested these ideas – inviting other suggestions – with the expertise of local and national policy makers, social capital academics and experts, and practitioners from the public and VCSE sectors who work on the frontlines of building social connections. This work yielded a set of policy principles and case studies as well as informing our proposals.

Policy Principles & Framework for Connectedness

The proposed policies aim to improve integration, connection and friendship between people of different socio-economic status by **increasing exposure** to people of different backgrounds, **reducing bias or friction** to connection in places where exposure is high, and diversifying access to 'low bias' activities through improved social infrastructure.

Experts consistently emphasised the importance of:

- 1) Enabling **bottom-up creativity and innovation** to build connections within and between communities, with room to try things out and take risks. Given the complexity of social relations, what works in one area may well not work in another; and interventions will need to be tailored to local circumstances.
- 2) Encouraging **local authorities, business and institutions** to support and design for connection in the delivery of their products and services.
- 3) **National policies** to create the conditions for local connections - devolving powers and providing stability, resources and accountability for change.

Our design principles for recommended policies include:

- Potential for systemic impact at **scale**
- Prioritising connections at **early** age
- Supporting the **conditions** for local adoption and adaptation
- Recognises **constraints** on the public purse

Summary of Policy Recommendations:

Our policy recommendations are summarised below and explored in greater depth throughout our report, along with the relevant guiding principles and supporting evidence.

1) Increase cross-SES exposure at a young age

Ensure young people are exposed to people across the economic spectrum through fair admissions policies for schools and carefully designed civic engagement programmes for young adults. Schools can create some of our most formative and enduring connections, but they are often skewed towards those already like us, limiting exposure to different groups and entrenching bias.

2) Strengthen Community Wealth Funds to improve social infrastructure and connective capacity

Social infrastructure is part of our economic infrastructure. To thrive, communities need welcoming, flexible spaces, responsive funding, and leadership support that enables inclusive, low-barrier activities. The government's *Pride in Place* strategy recognises this, establishing **Community Wealth Funds** where residents help decide what their neighbourhoods need. These funds should have the flexibility to support new ideas and grow local capacity through small, light-touch grants and local backbone support, and also provide access to sustainable revenue for established institutions and VCSE organisations. Long-term mechanisms to grow and stabilise these funds are essential to secure ongoing investment in the social spaces and connections that keep communities strong.

3) Design services and spaces to support economic connectedness

Integrate 'connectedness strategies' in the applications, commissioning and evaluation frameworks for all new localised policy funding including, Plan for Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood Health Services, Best Start Family Hubs, Youth Guarantee, Post-16 skills provision. These settings offer scale and wide reach across lines of difference, but delivery is largely individualised, and their potential to facilitate mixing is under-utilised. Considerations should include how geographical placement of services, co-location and design of waiting or 'bumping spaces' could support connections between service-users.

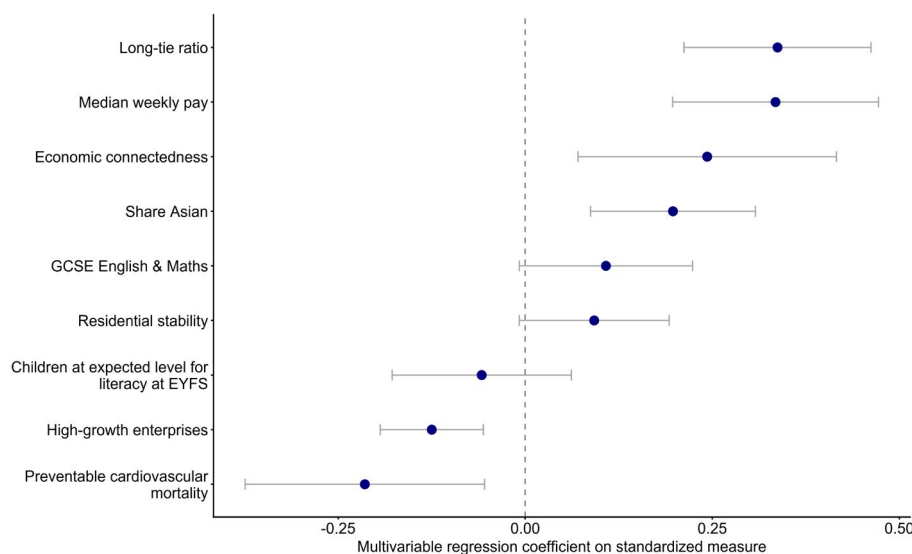
4) Create national accounts for social capital

Develop new measures and institutions to monitor economic connectedness at a local level and national accounts to consider social capital as a form of national wealth. At present, we lack granular data on the extent and nature of connections at the neighbourhood level. We must move beyond the current ONS framework and learn from new technologies and countries that do this well.

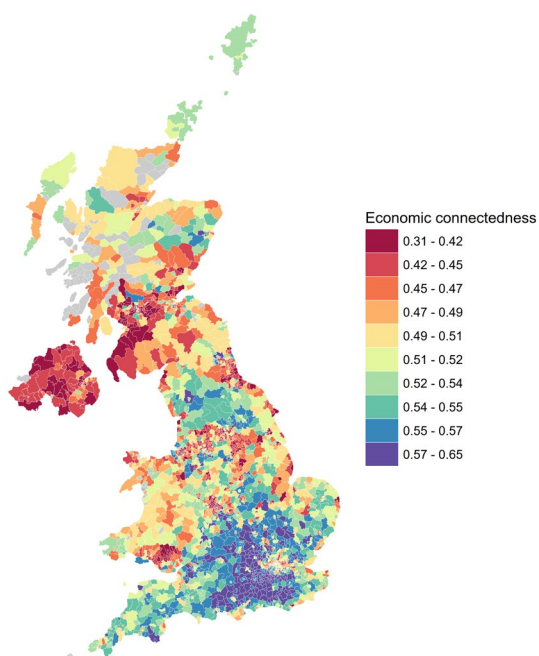
Research Synthesis

Revealing Social Capital's analytical outputs showed the value of economic connectedness, as well as where and how people interact.

RSC's quantitative analysis shows that high levels of connection across socio-economic boundaries are predictors of academic attainment, individual wellbeing and upwards economic mobility. As this chart shows, outside of median weekly pay, long ties and economic connectedness are the strongest predictors of upward economic mobility at an area level, even greater than GCSE achievement.



The strength of economic connectedness varies geographically. The map below shows the high-level distribution of economic connectedness across the UK. However, the research shows that even adjacent neighbourhoods with similar demography can vary in terms of economic connectedness.



There are two factors that effect economic connectedness. The first is the number of people from different socio-economic backgrounds you encounter on a regular basis (exposure). The second is individual willingness to befriend people from different backgrounds (bias).

To create the conditions for better connectedness, we must aim to increase the number of interactions between communities from different economic backgrounds preferably in settings that are designed to reduce the natural bias to befriend people similar to ourselves.

The full Revealing Social Capital Data Analysis report can be found [here](#)

Where do connections form?

The data research showed that people make most of their connections through their school or local community. Hobby groups, faith communities, the workplace and volunteering also play a role in fostering cross-economic connections.

Neighbourly Labs' ethnographic work provides additional insight into how connections are formed within different settings, and what conditions support better integration and connection between socio-economic groups and other communities with differing backgrounds.

Neighbourly Labs' work identifies five key settings for building social connections: (1) Education and training (2) The workplace (3) Sports, leisure and hobby groups (4) Arts, music and culture (5) Faith, interfaith activities and faith spaces.

These conclusions are largely borne out by the quantitative analysis, which also highlights the outsize role that secondary school plays in shaping our connections.

This paper's policy recommendations aim to create the conditions for exposure to people of different socio-economic status in school and to expand access to low-bias settings and activities through community social infrastructure and public service design.

We have not made specific recommendations for the workplace in this report, however Neighbourly Labs' work makes several recommendations for employers who want to create the culture and conditions for cross-economic mixing. These include giving staff opportunities to mix with others across class and authority and creative ideas to reduce hierarchies and economic segregation within the workforce.

The full Revealing Social Capital Ethnographic report can be found [here](#)



Key Insights

This paper draws on findings from both the quantitative and ethnographic research, alongside qualitative contributions from practitioners and experts. These are the guiding insights:

- **Place and scale matter:** Neighbourhoods are where people experience daily routines and chance encounters, the foundation for trust and belonging. Lived neighbourhoods may map poorly onto administrative boundaries and Revealing Social Capital shows that different neighbourhoods within a single Local Authority district can vary significantly in terms of economic connectedness. What works to promote economic connectedness may differ significantly between even adjacent neighbourhoods – particularly where ‘bonding capital’ and friending bias is high.
- **Friendship diversity:** Children who grew up in areas with a higher number of satellite friends - referred to in the research as ‘long ties’ - earn approximately 26% (£2,690) more annually as adults than those from the least connected areas. This suggests opportunities to connect with people outside of close communities can have an economic impact even in low-income areas where economic mixing is less likely.
- **Key settings:** Outside of schools and the workplace, sports/hobby groups, arts/music, and faith spaces foster cross-economic friendships. Schools are shown to be important for parental mixing as well as for pupils. Local social infrastructure, such as community centres, libraries, pubs and other amenities, are often identified as the key places where people mix across line of difference and are most open to create new connections. These settings have, however, suffered from attrition over recent years amid austerity and financial pressures.
- **Role of institutions:** Anchor institutions – such as schools and large workplaces – with inclusive cultures and a sense of local responsibility, plus nearby social spaces, can play a key role in encouraging mixing if they work intentionally and strategically – both within these settings, and into the wider community through outreach and offering up their facilities.
- **Effective design and clear purpose:** Activity settings must be local, accessible, affordable, welcoming, and have a clear purpose to attract participation. This, in turn, requires suitable, trained and trusted staff to broker relationships and facilitate mixing.
- **Collaborative approach:** Boosting social mixing and mobility requires coordinated action across public services, businesses, and community organisations.
- **Barriers:** Small, everyday barriers (such as childcare, relevant kit, and/or the cost of transport) can prevent lower-income families from participating in activities that would expand their networks and diversify their friendships, thereby entrenching existing divides.
- **Measuring change:** The UK currently lacks the ability to measure economic connectedness (and wider social capital) at a neighbourhood level. Existing surveys (e.g. Community Life Survey) don’t have large enough samples to analyse small areas, and lower-SES households are typically under-represented in surveys. Without granular and inclusive data, it’s hard to identify where action is needed, design and target interventions, or understand what works. To prioritise and improve economic connectedness at both local and national levels, we need better measurement and monitoring.

Policy Recommendations:

I. Increase cross-SES exposure at a young age

The government should reform the school admissions system to support economic integration. Measures to achieve this include, “giving priority to FSM-eligible pupils, up to a quota of 15% of places in each school”⁴ (Burgess et al) or ballots where potential students are selected for admission using a lottery (recommended by Sutton Trust⁵).

The Rethinking Social Capital data has shown that many of our connections are formed in schools, but schools are often economically segregated, particularly in urban areas. An ‘outstanding’ rating for a school increases admissions demand, often met by reducing the catchment area. House prices go up accordingly, creating a wealth premium to attend the best schools.

The top performing schools ranked by pupil progress had average Free School Meal (FSM) rates almost 5 percentage points lower than the typical school, and 4.3 percentage points lower than the level in their own catchment.⁶ Fair admissions can already be achieved at a local level - 90% of secondary schools are their own admissions authorities - but require co-ordination between Local Authorities and Academy Trusts.

Brighton & Hove – School Admissions

This year, Brighton & Hove Council has changed how secondary school places are allocated to give more priority to disadvantaged pupils. Up to 30% of Year 7 places in each community secondary school are now set aside for children eligible for Free School Meals. Within this, the priority goes to FSM pupils who live in the school’s catchment area, followed by FSM pupils from outside the catchment, until the 30% cap is reached. An additional 5% of places are reserved for children living in single-school catchment areas, improving fairness and access across the city.

This should be reflected in Ofsted’s revised inclusion framework, that now include socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. Classroom practice and school culture can support better economic connectedness for both pupils and parents. This includes:

The government should expand Ofsted inspection frameworks to include bridging measures and social mixing.

Classroom practice and school culture can support better economic connectedness for both pupils and parents. This includes:

- **Classroom practice:** Mixed-ability teaching, rotating seating plans, and structured group work to foster bridging.
- **Extracurricular inclusion:** Policies to enable pupils with lower economic means to access after-school activities and clubs.
- **Parent engagement:** Ethnographic work shows that school gates, coffee mornings, and extracurricular activities are vital points of parental mixing, and should be designed in a way that facilitates connection.

4) Modifying school choice for more equitable access in England – University of Bristol – Professor Simon Burgess, Professor Estelle Cantillon, Dr Ellen Greaves, 2025

5) <https://www.suttontrust.com/fair-school-admissions> - Fair Admissions Policies

6) Social Selection on the Map – Sutton Trust – Carl Cullinane, 2024

The Government should reimagine national civic service models for school leavers, based on regional needs and linked to the forthcoming National Youth Strategy

National service models, both civic⁷ and military,⁸ have been consistently shown to develop bridging social capital for young participants. Civic service models create the opportunity to bring young people into teams designed for (economic) diversity and promote connection through a shared aim with definable real-world outcomes,⁹ at a key point in their lives.

England's National Citizens Service (NCS) was discontinued after proving dubious value for money, diverting money from local youth services, having limited reach, and focusing too heavily on a short-term summer model. However, it was shown by five high-quality studies to consistently improve social connections, with improvements in social cohesion and social support among participants.¹⁰

We propose reimagining Civic Service as a localised model that responds to community-defined needs and is delivered in partnership with local organisations. Pilots could be developed through the government's National Youth Strategy and co-designed with local youth and VCSE organisations.

Youth Civic Service can look very different by place, depending on what is already on the ground, but principles and features to consider include:

- **Automatic registration** (opt out rather than opt in)
- Designed with small, **cross-class teams**
- Project outcomes tied to **regional / community priorities** - civic service teams are accountable to local stakeholders
- Delivered through **grass-roots partnerships** - programmes can be designed with local providers and VCSE organisations (with structured support, training and mentoring) and existing youth programmes (e.g. Scouts, Guides, DfE)
- Participants receive high-quality **recognition of the skills and abilities** learned using digital credentials or recognised certification
- **Linking events** to local careers services, education institutions and employers

Alongside the economic connectedness benefits, consideration must be given to the recognition of skills and abilities gained through the programme. Programmes should be explicitly tied to local employability schemes and LSIPS.

7) Vogenbeck, D. (2007). National service impacts on nonprofit community networks (CSD Research Report No. 07-11)

8) Patulny R, Siminski P, Mendolia S. The front line of social capital creation--a natural experiment in symbolic interaction. *Soc Sci Med*. 2015 Jan;125:8-18. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.04.026. Epub 2014 Apr 24. PMID: 24836279.

9) Pettigrew TF, Tropp LR. A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2006 May;90(5):751-83. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751. PMID: 16737372.

10) What works social capital evidence review – Centre for Thriving Places, 2022

2. Strengthen Community Wealth Funds to improve social infrastructure and connective capacity

‘Pride in Place’ Neighbourhood boards and Community Wealth Funds should develop micro-grants and ‘backbone support’ to support local capacity for civic and social engagement as well as social infrastructure.

RSC ethnographic work showed that access to social and community infrastructure is key to enabling activities, hobby groups and civic organisations that promote connections across lines of difference. Equally important is the resident's capacity to start and maintain activities that bring that community infrastructure to life.

Time, expertise and capacity were regularly cited as barriers to growing and diversifying connection-building activities. Access to small grants, advice and administrative support for individuals (not just incorporated entities) was identified as key to enabling ideas that have the potential to grow to gaining momentum and impact.

The Government's recent ‘Pride in Place’ strategy emphasises the importance of local decision making to ensure community and social infrastructure meets the needs and priorities of neighbourhood residents. It proposes the creation of new bodies including ‘neighbourhood boards’ and ‘community wealth funds’ to administer local funding.

Even here, capacity-building is important. Local Trust's ‘Big Local’ place-based funding programme showed that equipping residents to take on large financial decision-making control required a lot of time, patience and support to build their capacity to respond to the ever-changing needs of their local community.¹¹

The resource allocated to Neighbourhood Boards and Community Wealth Funds offer a major opportunity to strengthen connective capacity; the everyday ability of residents to initiate and sustain local action. To realise this potential, local funding systems should recognise and support informal, early-stage initiatives as essential to place-based renewal.

- **Establish discretionary micro-grants** (£250–£5,000) within Community Wealth Funds to support individuals and informal groups developing ideas that build social connection, wellbeing, or local pride. Critically, these should be responsive and light-touch.
- **Enable Neighbourhood Boards** to administer these funds directly, with simple applications and light-touch monitoring, ensuring resident-led decision-making and flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities.
- **Allow non-incorporated applicants** to access small grants, using trusted local partners to manage risk and accountability.
- **Ringfence a proportion of Community Wealth Funds** for experimentation, rapid prototyping, and seed funding, creating a clear pathway to scale and embed individual initiatives into sustainable community assets.
- **Resource local ‘backbone support’ organisations** to provide enabling infrastructure for civic participation, including:
 - Practical support with **governance, incorporation, and compliance** when initiatives are ready to formalise.

¹¹) <https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk>

- **Grant management and application support**, helping small groups access larger or longer-term funding.
- **Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL)** advice to evidence outcomes proportionately.
- **Mentoring and peer networking**, connecting new civic actors with experienced community leaders.
- **Shared administrative and communications services** to reduce the burden on small-scale initiatives.
- **Support and advice on accessibility and safeguarding** to encourage the most diverse participation.

Camden Giving – Community-led light-touch funding

Camden Giving is an independent charity and participatory funder; tasked with distributing delegated funding from Camden Council to reach and serve underfunded communities more effectively. It does this in direct collaboration with local residents with lived experience of local inequalities, training and paying 50 new panellists each year.¹²

It operates a number of grant programmes, and recent funded projects have included social clubs for isolated older people and youth activities.¹³ Connections are a key focus, “breaking down divides between people who live and work in Camden to create greater outcomes”.¹⁴

The We Make Camden Kit fund – in partnership with Camden Council and Camden Citizens – gives out grants of up to 2k to residents, small organisations and schools, and is designed to be light-touch and responsive. Interested parties can submit an idea relating to a core Camden mission on a monthly basis. These are reviewed by residents each month, with decisions taken within 5-6 weeks.¹⁵

Local authorities should link planning contributions to Community Wealth Funds

Local and regional governments should augment **Community Wealth Funds** using revenue generated through local planning mechanisms such as **Section 106 agreements** and the **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**. These tools already capture a share of the value created by new development to fund local infrastructure, but often, this investment is confined to works such as roads or drainage, with little dedicated to the social fabric that makes places thrive.

As new Community Wealth Funds are established, local authorities should consider **channelling a portion of Section 106 and CIL receipts directly into these funds** to support social infrastructure, civic capacity, and community connection. This would create a stable, long-term funding streams that link local growth to shared local benefit.

¹²) Camden Giving (n.d.) About us. Available at: <https://www.camdengiving.org.uk/what-we-do>

¹³) Camden Giving (n.d.) About us. Available at: <https://www.camdengiving.org.uk/what-we-do>

¹⁴) Camden Giving (n.d.) About us. Available at: <https://www.camdengiving.org.uk/what-we-do>

¹⁵) Camden Giving (n.d.) We Make Camden Kit. Available at: <https://www.camdengiving.org.uk/we-make-camden-kit>

To ensure impact:

- Embed **Neighbourhood Boards** in decision-making about how these funds are allocated, giving residents a direct voice in shaping community priorities.
- Allow a defined percentage to be used for **revenue funding**, not just capital projects, enabling support for programming, participation, and local networks.
- Encourage councils to co-invest with philanthropic or anchor institutions, creating **blended finance models** that multiply the reach of local planning contributions.

We understand that not all social capital-building initiatives will benefit from bridging capital outcomes. For example, initiatives to support people who have had shared adverse experiences that are linked to their socio-economic status (e.g. women who have suffered domestic violence, or refugees) must not fear that their funding streams will be at risk if they cannot introduce bridging outcomes.



3. Design spaces and services to support economic connectedness

Local and national government should make “connectedness by design” a funding condition for new services.

Local services serve as trusted community touchpoints, drawing in a large number and wide range of local residents. This scale makes them a promising vehicle for connection, but at present this potential is under-realised. Services should take concrete and intentional steps to convert this exposure into meaningful connection, through thoughtful design and delivery.

These new connections may well, in turn, help services to achieve their own goals through positive impacts on service-users' confidence, resilience and health, among others.

Bake explicit *Connectedness Strategies* into applications, commissioning and evaluation for new localised services and policies, including Plan for Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood Health Services, Family Hubs (Best Start/Start for Life), Youth Guarantee, and post-16 skills (LSIPs/Adult Skills Fund).

This can be achieved in practice through:

- **Co-location** with other public/voluntary services within a 10–15-minute walk of target populations.
- **Circulation plans, waiting areas and “bumping spaces”** that prompt cross-group mixing (parents, older people, young adults).
- **Timetabling** that overlaps cohorts (e.g., clinics starting at school drop-off/pick-up) to increase incidental contact.
- **Groups and venues** – such as municipal sports facilities and leisure centres – should design nudges and strategies to promote economic mixing. By way of example, people could be offered lower prices to play in teams that were automatically created to include individuals from different backgrounds, and pay a premium to hire equipment and space for a team of their own composition.
- **Governance** that includes local organisations as delivery partners.
- Updated **national and local guidance** to include “institutional design” prompts in service guidance drawn from co-design processes but might include prompts like these derived from Mario Luis Small's *Unanticipated Gains*.¹⁶

When commissioning public services, Local Authorities should favour investment in smaller local organisations (over larger corporate providers) or providing personalised budgets to residents to tie outcomes to local initiatives and economies, VCSE sectors.

Central government, combined authorities and local universities should collaborate to create an evidence base on social infrastructure design.

To inform longterm investment in the built environment and social infrastructure government should invest in research and work with partners to inform the layout of public spaces, community hubs and shared facilities affects participation, trust and local pride.

¹⁶ Small, M. L. (2009). *Unanticipated gains: Origins of network inequality in everyday life*. Oxford University Press.

Findings should influence future planning frameworks, social impact assessments and social value metrics to ensure that design for connectedness becomes a measurable national priority.

Denmark – Inclusive Urban Design

Denmark's approach to inclusive urban design – exemplified in cities like Copenhagen and Aarhus – aims to nurture diversity and mixing among residents. Principles of “Life, space, buildings – in that order” have taken root in urban architecture, and spurred socially inclusive design.¹⁷ These have been increasingly formalized over recent decades into national policy guidance that promotes social sustainability and prevents ghettoization through a holistic view of quality, aesthetics, sustainability, inclusion, accessibility and flexibility.¹⁸

'Universal design' principles also seek to ensure that the built environment is accessible to everybody, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, or class, among others, underpinned and enforced by building regulations.¹⁹ These ensure mixed tenure and house prices, and inclusionary zoning laws around social housing foster diversity. Social mixing is also incentivised through common spaces that promote interactions, the provision of activities and services to residents, and active inclusion of residents in maintenance.²⁰

Create a cross-programme Connectedness Metric Set and Dashboard

Add a small, common survey module to monitoring, with prompts at onboarding/exit. Link to service-level logs and linked outcome data to create neighbourhood-level dashboards to include:

- **Diversity** of contacts (age/tenure/occupation mix) formed through the service;
- **Frequency** of incidental interactions per visit; participation in at least one joint activity;
- **Bridging outcomes:** referrals across institutions (hub - college; youth offer - local employer); progression to apprenticeships/training/jobs for 18–21s (aligned with Youth Guarantee).



17) European Accessibility Resource Centre. (2023). DK Accessible EU Indicators 2023. European Accessibility Resource Centre.

18) Danish Government (2014). Danish Architectural Policy: Putting people first.

19) European Accessibility Resource Centre. (2023). DK Accessible EU Indicators 2023. European Accessibility Resource Centre.

20) Nordregio (n.d.) Interventions in improving physical and social living environments. Available at: <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2025-7-beyond-segregation-nordic-approaches-to-socially-inclusive-cities/6-interventions-in-improving-physical-and-social-living-environments.html>

4. Create national accounts for economic connectedness and social capital

The Government/Treasury should develop granular national accounts for Social Capital that recognise social and economic connections as a core form of national wealth.

National accounts should combine surveys, administrative data, and granular insights from trusted tech partners. Drawing on international comparators such as **New Zealand's Wellbeing Dashboard** and **Canada's Belonging Index**, the UK should track social capital and economic connectedness as rigorously as GDP. **The ONS should augment its current framework.**

- Increase the **frequency and scale of relevant surveys** to produce more granular small area estimations of social capital, including economic connectedness.
- Task the ONS and the new commission with producing **quarterly social capital bulletins**, drawing on mixed-method data (surveys, admin data, big data, case studies).
- Fund **regional social capital observatories** (universities, VCSE consortia, local authorities) to collect and interpret data locally, ensuring national accounts are sensitive to place-based variation.
- Link the above to **wider datasets** (e.g. school-parent networks, volunteering records, NHS patient participation, housing allocations).

Government and the civil service should work with technology providers to expand understanding of social capital.

- Develop the Opportunity Insights / Revealing Social Capital model to produce **bi-annual mapping of economic connectedness**.
- Use **Big Data** proxies (e.g. footfall, transport card usage, mobile phone co-presence, digital interaction networks) to understand social capital exposure and use of social infrastructure.

Government should introduce a statutory duty to assess the impact of major policies and investments on community connectedness.

If social capital can be measured more effectively, social capital impact assessment can be used as a test to inform any government policy. Economic connectedness should be a vital part of employment, skills and growth planning. For example, East Midlands Combined Country Authority includes a strategy for improving social capital as part of its recent Inclusive Growth Commission.²¹

- Require **regional growth plans** to include economic connectedness alongside skills and productivity.
- Define economic connectedness as measurable social value in the **Green Book**.
- Create **Community dashboards** at LSOA/MSOA level, co-designed with local authorities and VCSE partners, to inform local policy and service design.

21) RSA (2025) East Midlands Inclusive Growth Commission, Final Report

Conclusion

Supporting the conditions to improve the economic diversity of friendships and connections in the UK has the potential to improve social mobility and wellbeing at relatively low cost to the public purse.

Sustained positive exposure to people of different backgrounds, particularly at a young age, is vital to expand individuals' openness to connection. Schools are a potent vehicle of connection both for pupils and parents, and admissions should reflect a broad demography, not just a tiny geography. When young people leave school, they should be encouraged to build their connections alongside their skills, through meaningful civic engagement; working on projects that benefit their communities and introduce them to employers.

Exposure is not enough to ensure economic connectedness. Outside of school and work, people are most likely to connect with new and different groups through social activities and third spaces. Connection grows where there is access to welcoming places, clear signposting of opportunities and specificity of purpose. It also requires connection builders to give their time and energy to get things started, and often seed funding and support to make ideas a reality.

The current government's commitment to supporting neighbourhoods through the Pride in Place strategy presents an opportunity to change the way we invest in community connectedness. Social infrastructure and civic capacity are both vital to this change. We need builders of connection, not just buildings for connection.

Community Wealth Funds and Neighbourhood Boards should give people the means to start small, take risks and grow, through micro-grants, light-touch governance, and backbone support. Planning contributions (e.g. Section 106 and CIL) should help sustain this work for the long term, linking local growth to local connection, ensuring that the government's commitment to housebuilding is also a commitment to connection-building.

An explicit aim to increase the diversity of resident connections should run through all local authority strategies, and inform the design of local public services and spaces. This can mean small tweaks in the design of services from family hubs to NHS centres to support connections between service-users, nudges to diversify sports participation in leisure centres, through to more significant considerations for new built environment projects.

Revealing Social Capital shows that innovation in the research and measurement of social capital is key to understanding the impact of community connections and social infrastructure. It shows that understanding the work to improve social connections and economic connectedness means understanding the quality and diversity of connections at a hyper-local level, and building out an evidence base around successful interventions and case studies.

This work shows that who you know is at least as important as what you know to improve upwards mobility. Therefore, we must put as much effort, resource and development into improving social connections between communities and across economic differences as we do into improving skills.

The task is to rebuild the social fabric of our country, to strengthen the bridges between communities and to create a society that is stronger, fairer, and more connected.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to our Revealing Social Capital partners: Neighbourly Lab, BIT, Meta and Stripe, our funder The Nuffield Foundation and our expert Project Advisory Board.

We are deeply grateful for the expert input of the social capital practitioners, policy makers, academic institutions, employers, non-profits and VCSE organisations that contributed to workshops, research calls and peer review in the drafting of this report.

Revealing Social Capital

Friends with Benefits: how diverse social connections drive economic mobility.

