

# **Understanding local areas: making best use of existing data**

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# Understanding local areas: making best use of existing data

This report describes how we can use existing data to predict how people feel about their local neighbourhoods, and how this can be analysed, mapped, and understood to give fresh insights into places that can help design places, services and interventions.

Over the past four years, Social Life has developed a methodology for predicting how residents of local neighbourhoods are likely to feel about key indicators, including their sense of belonging, their fear of crime, trust in their neighbours, and wellbeing.

Using data that is openly available, from government and research councils, we can benchmark what we would expect residents to feel about the neighbourhoods they call home. These indicators are central to understanding social sustainability at the local level.

**This is the basis of much of our work.**

We use our predictive data to inform our understanding of places, we then test our predictions against the reality of what residents actually think, using a number of different methods.

The predictive data we use comes from three national surveys: the Understanding Society Survey, the Community Life Survey and Crime Survey England & Wales. These all ask questions about residents' perceptions of the places they live in.

The sample sizes of these surveys are not large enough to disaggregate responses directly to small local areas. However, we can match this data to small areas using the ONS (Office for National Statistics) "Area Classifications" categories at "Output Area" level. This enables us to see how residents of small areas are likely to feel. This is predictive data, not a robust portrait of the neighbourhood.



# How can we measure social sustainability?

Social Life has developed a framework for understanding how places thrive. This is based on a review of the evidence from the UK and internationally about what makes places succeed or fail, originally commissioned by the Homes and Communities Agency. We call this our “social sustainability framework”.

Social sustainability is often overlooked within the sustainability field and is largely neglected in mainstream debates. Past experience shows that the long-term social needs of new communities are often overlooked in the drive to deliver housing on a large scale. Without the right social infrastructure new communities can quickly spiral into decline.

There is increasing global interest in social sustainability amongst policy makers, academics, governments and the various agencies involved in the process of house building, planning, and urban regeneration. The term originates from the ‘three pillars’ of sustainable development - environmental, economic, social - which date from the 1987 Brundtland Commission to the United Nations.

## Social Life’s framework

Social Life’s framework has been created as a tool to help understand what needs to be put in place to help a neighbourhood to thrive. It has four key dimensions: amenities and social infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; and space to grow.

### The four dimensions of social sustainability



# How can we use statistics to understand local neighbourhoods?

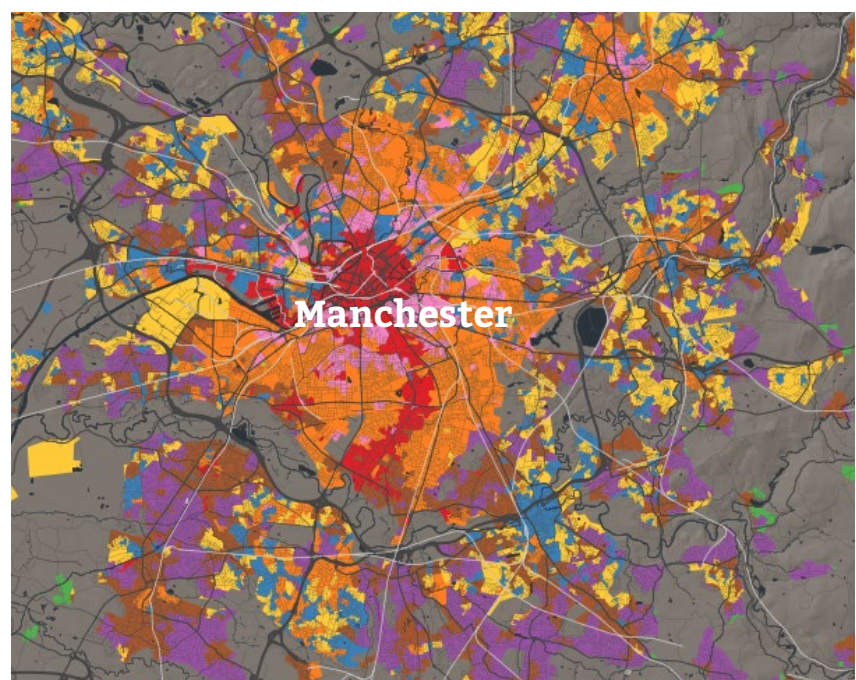
Social Life takes the ONS' "Area Classifications" methods as our starting point.

## What are Area Classifications?

Area classifications have been developed by ONS to understand social attitudes in local areas<sup>1</sup>. Area classifications can give powerful insights which can help inform and imagine place-based projects and interventions. They are based on a range of socio-demographic data for local neighbourhoods, and were first created using 2001 Census data. They have been updated with 2011 Census data. The 2011 area classifications profile geographic areas based on 60 variables from the 2011 Census. These fall into five categories:

- demographic (age, ethnicity, population density)
- household composition (marital status, children)
- housing (tenure and type)
- socio-economic (HE qualifications, car ownership, health)
- employment (unemployment, full-time/part-time, industry)

Area classifications describe broad groupings of areas - or supergroups - and more detailed subgroups. These can be matched to the smallest statistical units used by ONS, "output areas"<sup>2</sup> (the majority of these include between 110 and 139 households). These are known as "Output Area Classifications" or OACs.



OAC map of Manchester, 2011.

<sup>1</sup> for more on area classifications go to [www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/areaclassifications/2011areaclassifications](http://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/areaclassifications/2011areaclassifications)

<sup>2</sup> for more on output areas go to [www.ons.gov.uk/census/2001censusandearlier/dataandproducts/outputgeography/outputareas](http://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2001censusandearlier/dataandproducts/outputgeography/outputareas)

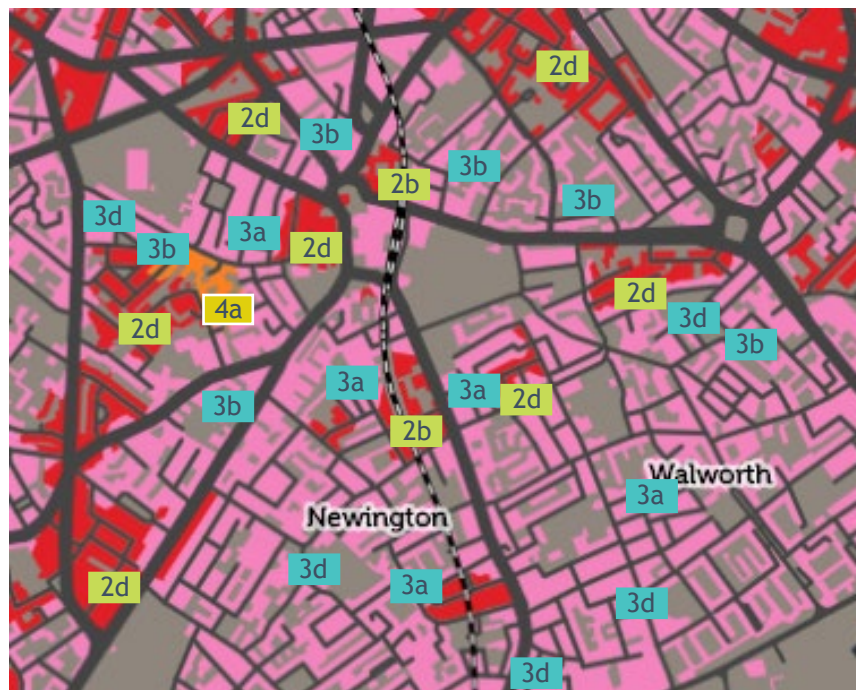


## More on Area Classifications

OAC areas can be identified using the Consumer Data Research centre website [www.cdrc.ac.uk](http://www.cdrc.ac.uk). This was established by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and works with different academic institutions.

A map of OAC areas can be seen at <https://maps.cdrc.ac.uk/#/geodemographics/oac11/default/BTTTTFT/10/-0.1500/51.5200/>

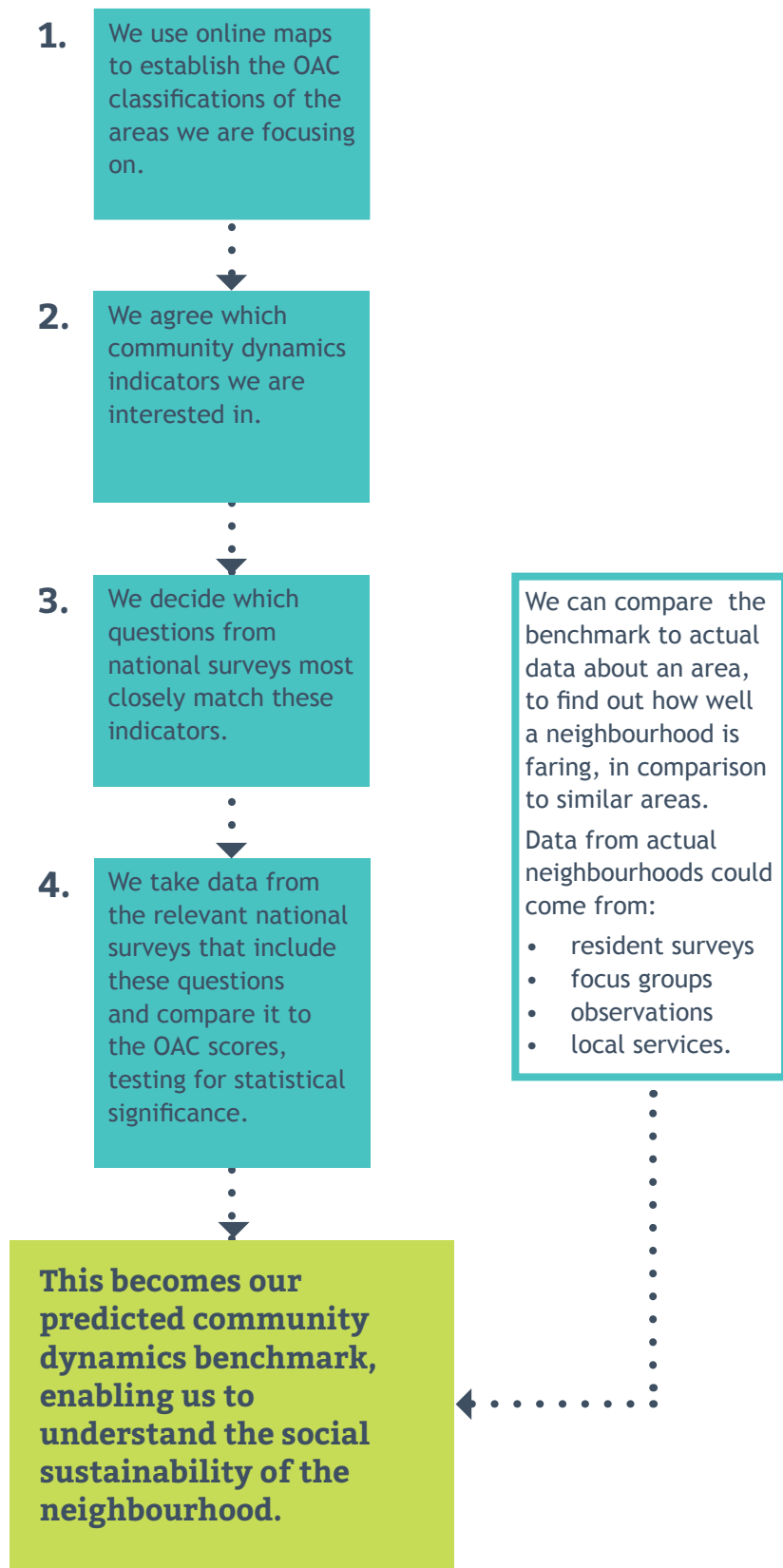
For more on the Area Classifications methodology see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/areaclassifications/2011areaclassifications>



Example of OAC classifications mapped to a local area, looking at the area around Elephant & Castle in London.

In this area the main groups are “3d”, a group ONS call “Ethnicity Central: Aspirational Techies”, and “2d”, named by ONS “Aspiring & Affluent: Urban Cultural Mix”.

# How do we benchmark community dynamics?



# What issues can we benchmark?

The UK is rich in data from different surveys that explore how people feel about the neighbourhoods they live in.

OAC classifications enable us to map survey data to output areas (when it is appropriately coded). We have looked at national surveys held by government and research councils - including the Understanding Society Survey (USS)<sup>3</sup> and the Community Life Survey<sup>4</sup> - and extracted questions that shed light on the social sustainability of small areas.

## Some questions we find useful

	Question	Source
Social & cultural life	[Agree or disagree that] The friendships and associations I have with other people in my neighbourhood mean a lot to me	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] If I needed advice about something I could go to someone in my neighbourhood	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] This local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	Community Life Survey
	[Agree or disagree that] I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood.	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] I plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years	USS
	How well would you say you are managing financially these days?	USS
	How safe do you feel walking alone after dark?	USS
	Do you worry that you might be a victim of crime?	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] People in the neighbourhood can be trusted	USS
	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life overall?	USS
	How satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?	USS
Voice & influence	[Agree or disagree that] I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood	USS
	[Agree or disagree that] People in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood	Community Life Survey
	Can you influence decisions affecting your area?	Community Life Survey
	How important is it for you personally to feel that you can influence decisions affecting your area?	Community Life Survey
	Have taken part in formal or informal volunteering in the last 12 months	USS

## Data sources:

**Understanding Society**, Innovation Panel, Waves 1-9, 2008-2016: Special Licence Access, Census 2011 Output Area Classification. SN 7639

**Understanding Society**, Waves 1-6, 2009-2015: Special Licence Access, Census 2011 Output Area Classification. SN 7629

**Community Life Survey**, 2015-2016: Special Licence Access. SN 8082

<sup>3</sup> for more on USS go to [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)

<sup>4</sup> for more on the Community Life Survey go to [www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey)

# What does this reveal?

Social Life uses social sustainability data mapped to small areas as the starting point for many of our projects. This predictive data tells us how residents are likely to feel about the places they call home. This can be very helpful for those planning and designing schemes and projects, both regeneration schemes and other proposals for existing neighbourhoods, and new housing developments.

Our predictive data also enables us to benchmark neighbourhoods and housing developments against comparable places, by gathering actual data about residents' perceptions and comparing this to what we would expect it to be. This gives us an assessment of how well the area is faring.

Social Life's work often explores how well predictive data is corroborated by residents' experience. We do this formally by carrying out quantitative surveys, and less formally through qualitative research, ethnography and observation.

The next section describes three examples of how we have used our predictive data:

- to understand the social sustainability of existing places: developing a toolkit for Sutton Council in London
- to paint a picture of the quality of life and strength of the community for residents of new housing developments: creating a social sustainability measurement framework for the Berkeley Group
- to inform the design of new services, as part of an innovation design process: contributing to a viability study for a new community arts hub for Wansdworth Arts.





## Example 1:

# Understanding local neighbourhoods: a social sustainability toolkit

Social Life was commissioned by Sutton Council to develop a measurement tool for assessing how well Sutton's neighbourhoods are faring and to test this in Beddington, an area at the southern periphery of London that was a priority for the council at the time.

The council's aim was to develop a toolkit for officers to put social sustainability at the centre of the borough's work on local area programmes, and commissioning for social impact. We have published this as a toolkit, [www.suttonsst.org](http://www.suttonsst.org), to enable Sutton officers, other agencies, and community organisations to use this approach.

In developing the toolkit, a balance had to be struck between the wish to develop a tool that captures the complexity of social sustainability in diverse urban and suburban areas; and the need to be easily replicable at relatively low cost. The framework uses:

- **hard data**, like census data, which can be used to describe the areas we are focusing on. This can also include data from local services, for example schools performance data
- **predictive data** using Social Life's framework to paint a picture of how residents are likely to perceive issues like their safety, wellbeing, and relationships with their neighbours
- **soft data**, including qualitative conversations with individuals and groups, to evidence gathered locally by community organisations.

Data is gathered to test how well the neighbourhood conforms to the prediction, either through a residents survey run by an external research company, or by a more qualitative process of community interviews.

**“A balance had to be struck between capturing the complexity of social sustainability; and the need to be easily replicable at low cost.”**



Sutton Social Sustainability Toolkit

## Example 2:

### Understanding social sustainability in new housing developments

Social Life was commissioned in 2012 by The Berkeley Group to develop a way of measuring the social sustainability of their housing developments. The framework is published in the report “Creating Successful Communities”<sup>6</sup>, this was tested on four developments.

The Berkeley Group’s social sustainability framework is based on three core dimensions: social and cultural life; voice and influence; and amenities and infrastructure, adapted from Social Life’s social sustainability framework. Sitting below these dimensions are 13 different criteria, constructed from 45 questions drawn from national surveys. A residents survey is used to assess how well actual resident opinion compares to predicted data.

Social Life has carried out assessments on three London developments at the mid-point of construction, including Kidbrooke Village, Beaufort Park and Woolwich Arsenal in southeast London<sup>7</sup>. We have evolved the approach with Berkeley to devise a method to assess the social sustainability of developments before they are built, either before or after planning consent. Berkeley have now adopted this approach across all their new developments.

The method has also been used by Countryside Properties to measure the social impact of regeneration of the South Acton Estate in Ealing over time<sup>8</sup>.

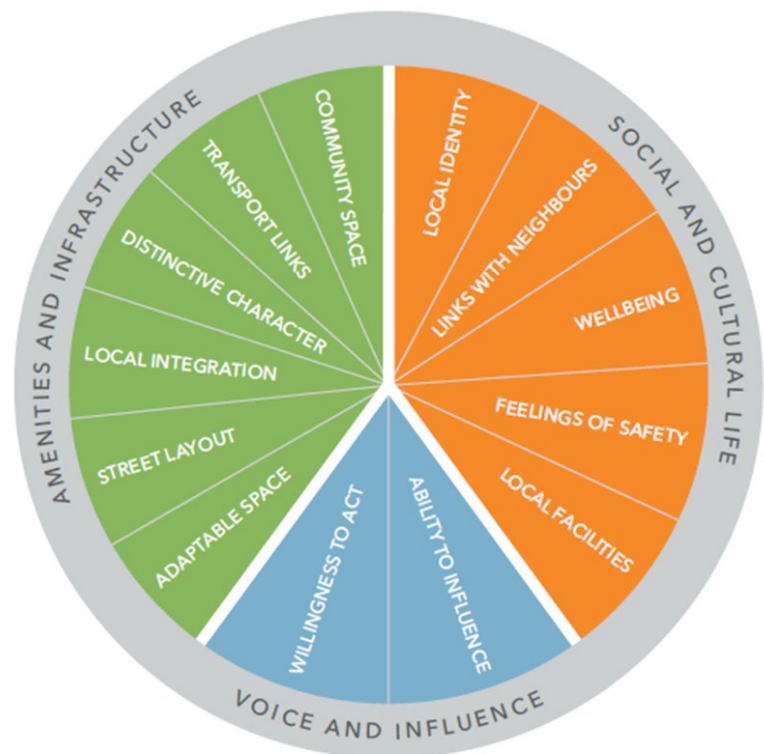


Kidbrooke Village

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Bacon et al (2012) “Creating Strong Communities: how to measure the social sustainability of new housing developments” The Berkeley Group

<sup>7</sup> see “Living on Kidbrooke Village” (2013), and “Living on Woolwich Arsenal” (2014), The Berkeley Group

<sup>8</sup> Social Life (2016) “Measuring the social impacts of regeneration on South Acton”



The Berkeley Group social sustainability framework

## Example: 3

### Assessing social sustainability across a town

Social Life has worked in Corby as part of a European collaborative research project, Bright Future<sup>9</sup>. This brings together partners from Finland, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia and the UK to explore how towns that have been dependant on industry in the past can thrive in the future. Each country team selected a case study, Corby was chosen as the UK case study.

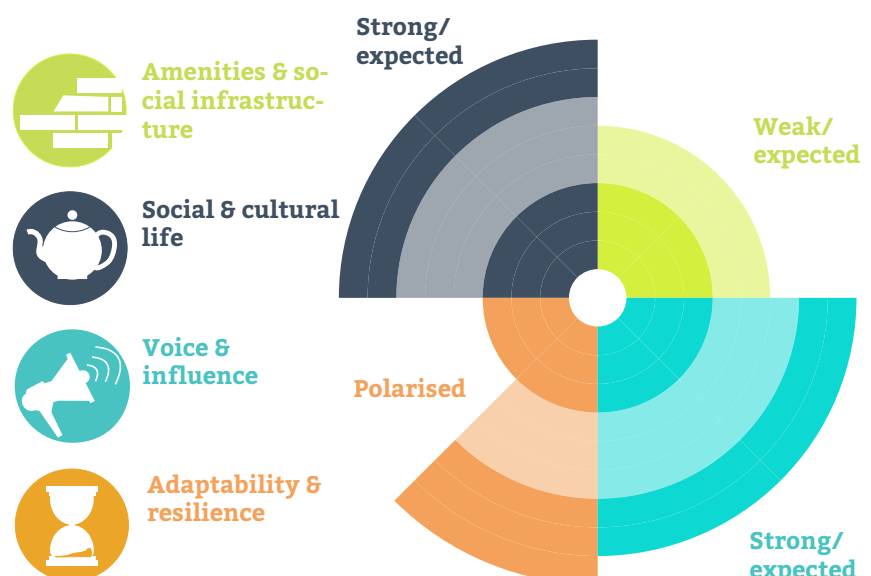
A participatory innovation process generated an understanding of what is needed to help support future innovation, the starting point for this was a social sustainability assessment to explore strengths and weaknesses in the town.

Social sustainability assessments, using Social Life's framework, were carried out in all the case study towns. This drew on different data sources, including Social Life's predictive data, as well as in-depth research into residents' and community stakeholders' perceptions of everyday life.

**“For many, the defining feature of the town are its people – their friendliness, their generosity, their frankness”.**

Corby is one of the fastest growing English towns. It was designated a New Town in the 1950s. The steel industry, which was once core to its identity and economy, closed in the 1980s and since then the town has become dependant on different industries, exploiting its geographical position at the centre of England. The steel industry brought many Scottish people to the town for work, and the history of in-migration has continued. The town has a strong identity and sense of social solidarity. The council and other agencies have been adept at adjusting to change, however automation and economic change threaten longer term stability. All of these factors are reflected in the social sustainability assessment<sup>10</sup>.

#### Social sustainability in Corby: an overall assesment



<sup>9</sup> see [http://www.social-life.co/project/bright\\_future/](http://www.social-life.co/project/bright_future/) for more information

<sup>10</sup> Social Life (2019) "Understanding Corby: a social sustainability assessment"

## Example: 4

### Informing the design of a community arts hub on the Alton estate in Roehampton

Social Life was commissioned by Wandsworth Arts to carry out a viability study for a new community arts hub in Roehampton, as part of the development of a new masterplan for the Alton Estate. The Alton Estate is one of the best examples of modernist social housing in England, drawing on Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation design principles for residential housing.

Predictive social sustainability data gave us valuable insights into the Roehampton community. From the OAC assessment, we saw that the Alton area (the Estate and its immediate surroundings) has a similar psycho-geographic profile to most of inner London, however this is different to the profile of nearby areas of Roehampton. The IMD analysis reveals that most of the Alton area falls into the second lowest quintile of local areas in England and Wales, deprivation is therefore higher than average but not as low as many areas.

**“Predictive social sustainability data gave us valuable insights into the Roehampton community”**

Predictive community dynamics data showed that neighbourliness in areas similar to the Alton estate is likely to be low, as are wellbeing and belonging, although residents are likely to be more likely than the average to believe that “people pull together to improve the neighbourhood” and to be satisfied with the area as a place to live.

At a workshop involving community representatives and agencies in April 2014, we heard that the Estate was well loved for its distinctive architecture and open, green spaces. Other evidence about the estate reflected this sentiment, for example in 2010, a “Social Audit of Roehampton” was carried out for Holy Trinity Church, Roehampton. The report remarked how “the auditor was pleasantly surprised by the level of everyday, caring and courteous exchanges between people making their way through the Estate”.



The Alton Estate

# Further reading

Design for Social Sustainability, Social Life 2012

Creating Strong Communities: how to measure the social sustainability of new housing developments, Berkeley Group, 2012

Living on the Aylesbury Estate, Social Life, 2017

The social impact of regeneration in South Acton, Social Life, 2016

Measuring social sustainability in Sutton, Social Life, 2014

Understanding Corby: a social sustainability assessment, Social Life, 2019

Download all from [www.social-life.co/publication](http://www.social-life.co/publication)

## Social Life

Social Life is an independent research organisation that aims to put people at the heart of places. We work with local authorities, developers and local community groups in the UK and across the globe to find practical ways to build stronger communities.

[www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co)

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