Measuring social sustainability in Sutton

SOCIAL LIFE

Sutton

A Social Life report by
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Introduction

Social Life was commissioned by Sutton Council to develop an assessment tool for measuring the social sustainability of local areas. This is intended to help residents, the council and other agencies plan projects and services that will help Sutton's neighbourhoods to thrive.

The toolkit was developed in early 2014 and tested in Beddington, to inform the council's Beddington Programme.

How can we know how communities are faring?

After a decade of work on sustainable communities by policymakers and professionals much is known about the importance of the quality of the built environment and community facilities, and how these contribute to residents' satisfaction and wellbeing. There is less understanding however, about the practical steps that can be taken to make these aspirations tangible and about what can be done in practice.

Internationally there is growing interest in "social sustainability" as a way to frame these concepts and to rebalance the sustainable development agenda to take account of social as well as environmental and economic needs. A very small number of organisations are currently putting the concept of social sustainability into practice in urban development. The London Borough of Sutton has put itself at the forefront of policy development and thinking in this field by being the first local authority in the UK to develop a social sustainability assessment tool.

This report summarises how the social sustainability assessment tool was developed and tested for the London Borough of Sutton.

About Social Life

Social Life was established by the Young Foundation in 2012 as an independent centre of expertise in placemaking. Our expertise lies in understanding the social dimensions of placemaking and sustainability; how to accelerate local social innovation; and translating these insights into practice and policy.

We are currently working with communities, city authorities, housing providers, planners and architects in the UK, Scandinavia and Australia to develop tools and approaches for planning socially sustainable new communities.

Our work centres on people's lived experience of local neighbourhoods, and we believe that people's wellbeing, resilience, sense of belonging and relationships with their neighbours are key to creating successful places.

Measuring social sustainability

Social Life's social sustainability framework came out of a programme of work, run in partnership with the Homes and Communities Agency, that aimed to synthesise what is known in the UK and internationally about what makes new housing settlements thrive or fail.

The report "Design for Social Sustainability" (2012) set out a framework that emerged from this work, to help understand the social dimensions of community life and how these ideas cam be translated into practical initiatives.
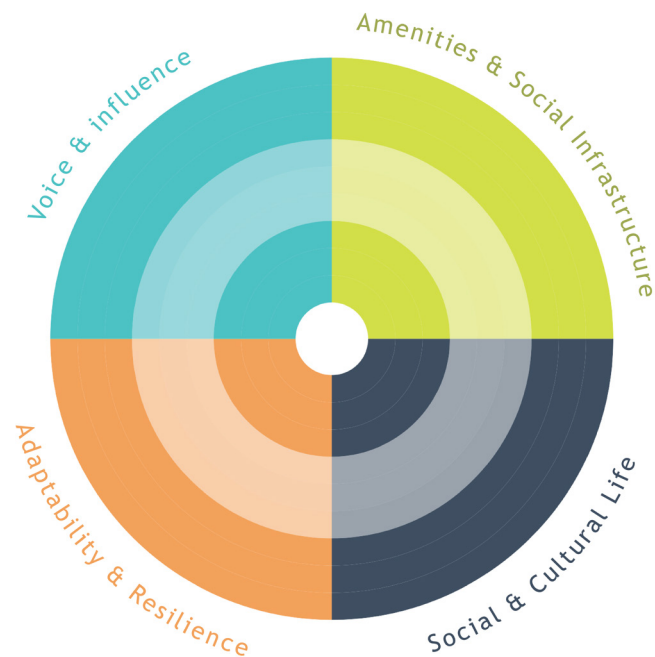
Our approach focuses on factors like belonging, wellbeing, strong local networks and active civil society institutions, as well as good local services and infrastructure, alongside an acknowledgement of the pernicious affects of poverty, disadvantage and inequality.

Social Life's definition of social sustainability:

"A process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve."

The four dimensions of social sustainability

Social Life has evolved the framework for Sutton to capture four key dimensions of social sustainability:

Voice & Influence

Residents' ability & willingness to take action to shape the local environment; governance structures to represent residents & engage them in shaping local decisions.

Social & Cultural Life

Sense of belonging, wellbeing, community cohesion, safety, relationships with neighbours & local networks.

Amenities & social Infrastructure

Amenities & support services in place. Emphasis on schools, social spaces, transport & community workers.

Adaptability & Resilience

Flexible planning; housing, services & infrastructure that can adapt over time; adaptable use of buildings & public space.

Five stage process

There are five key stages involved in carrying out a social sustainability assessment of a neighbourhood.

Set up

- Choose appropriate indicators
- Gather a team
- Identify any relevant local issues in the chosen area
- Identify 'natural neighbourhoods'
- Map the statistical and administrative areas needed for data analysis
- Decide approach to gathering resident views

Stage 2: Gather data

A social sustainability analysis brings together information about residents' perceptions of an area alongside more frequently used data on unemployment and demographics.

- Review available data to find appropriate indicators to populate the framework

Data sources

The framework is designed to use existing data as far as possible, and the range of issues that need to be explored can be quantified through blending different sorts of data collected at the local level. Three types of data are used to quantify the four dimensions.

Data sources

1 **Hard data:** from the UK census and data from other public bodies

2 **Predictive data:** national survey data matched to very small local areas is used to compare the experience of people living in the area with those living in similar places

3 **Soft data:** based on qualitative interviews plus an assessment of the built environment and an audit of community assets

Stage 3: Gather resident input

In an assessment, the data picture that emerges from these different sources is then tested against resident opinion. Residents are asked whether it paints a fair portrait of the area, does it leave out important issues, does it put appropriate emphasis on the different factors that emerge, what underlying factors in the history or current circumstances of the area explain the data? There are two ways of doing this:
* Conduct community conversations
* Carry out a systematic survey using a specialist market research firm

Stage 4: Scoring & assessment

* Score all the data
* Combine the indicator scores into overall scores for each of the four dimensions
* Assess the overall picture genereteed of the area

Overall scores

Overall scores for each dimension are calculated from aggregating the different types of data, and thenidentifying how the scores deviate from would be expected in a neighbourhood of that kind.

The indicator scores are assessed to expose where the bigger – and therefore more significant – social sustainability strengths and weaknesses lie. Scores for the four quadrants are visualised as a circular bar chart:

* a small area indicates the score is weaker than expected

* a medium area indicates that the score is as expected

* a large area indicates a strong score.

Stage 5: Plan & act

Use the social sustainability assessment as a tool for questioning what is known about an area and to think about where strategic interventions could happen in the future.

Working in Sutton

The brief

Sutton'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.

The brief for this work was to create a tool that could be used in the future by Sutton Council staff without the need for extra specialist help. A balance has been struck between the wish to develop a tool that captures the complexity of social sustainability in complex urban and sub-urban areas; and the need to be easily replicable at relatively low cost.

The tool is intended to:

1 **Baseline a community** in terms of its existing social sustainability

2 **Frame a discussion** with residents about the assets and needs of the community

3 **Generate priorities** that inform both area renewal and the commissioning of services

4 **Be capable of being applied across different neighbourhoods** and initiatives in the future, providing a methodology and a common set of terms for use across the authority.

About Beddington North

The population of Beddington North ward was 10,309 in 2011. It is one of the least densely populated wards in Sutton. It has a relatively high proportion of owner occupiers (80 per cent vs the Sutton average of 69 per cent) and a relatively low proportion of social renters (nine per cent versus 14 per cent).

The North Beddington ward is an area that includes significant diversity. It encompasses industrial areas in the north, and neighbourhoods that are more stable and suburban, as well as the conservation area in the middle of the ward.

People living in the ward often relate more with other local centres than to an idea of "Beddington".

Those in the north, living on the Meads estate are more likely to identify with Mitcham, and those in the south with Wallington and even Croydon.

Image (below):
Inidicators used
for assessing social
sustainability for LB
Sutton

Images (below right):
Beddington natural
neighbourhoods

Choosing the indicators appropriate to Sutton

A set of indicators were chosen for each of the four dimensions. The indicators were developed according to the availability of data, the local context and the council's priority areas.

Neighbourhood conversations

We spoke to community representatives and residents to test their views of the priorities, but also to check whether the assembled data aligns with their day-to-day experiences.

Trust & confidence in agencies

Responsiveness of agencies to local issues

Local governance structures

Existence of informal groups & associations

Willingness to act to tackle problems

Perceptions of influence over wider area

Education

Healthcare

Spaces that enable neighbours to meet

Spaces that can be used by local groups

Provision for teenagers, children, older people, families

Transport links

Public space: playgrounds, green space

How people from different backgrounds co-exist

Quality of life & wellbeing

Relationships between neighbours & local social relationships

Relationships between different parts of the neighbourhood

How people feel about the place they live

Sense of belonging & local identity

Feelings of safety

Voice & Influence

Amenities & Social Infrastructure

Adaptability & Resilience

Social & Cultural Life

Extent of under-used space

Capacity of an area to adapt to meet future needs & aspirations

Residents' ability to shape their own neighbourhood in the future

Extent of adaptable spaces & facilities

Natural neighbourhoods

Few local areas are homogeneous – they contain streets with different types of housing design, different tenures, and areas with strong local identities because of their geography or history. The larger the area that is focused on, the more dissimilar small areas within it are likely to be.

This means that issues that are important at the very local level may be masked by averaging data over a larger area.
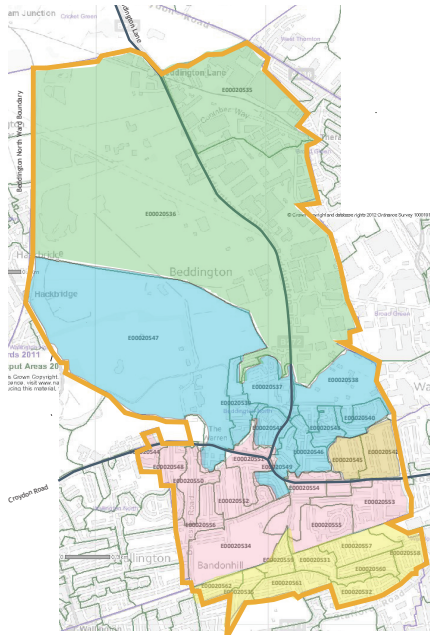
It therefore becomes important to look at data at the sub-ward level as well as the ward level, where possible.

The Beddington North ward contains many different areas with different types of housing and infrastructure.
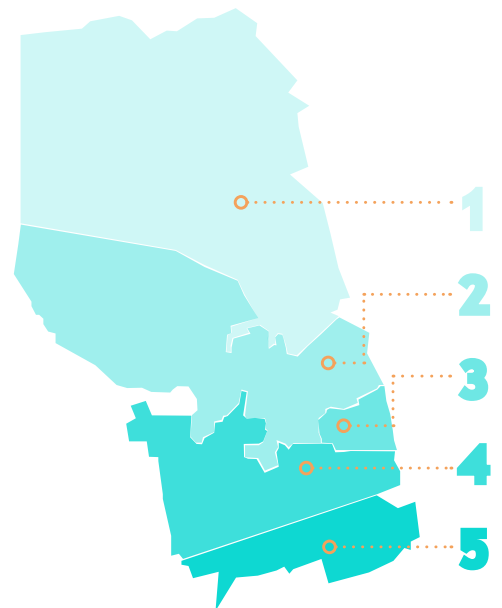
Social Life talked to residents to identify the 'natural nieghbourhoods' within the ward- the neighbourhoods that may not be reflective of any administrative boundaries and instead are areas residents perceive to be important to their daily lives. Social Life asked residents to outline the area that they identified with as their neighbourhood (see map 1). The areas that were revealed by this were then mapped onto existing administrative/ statistical boundaries (see map 2) in order to define the areas to score (see map 3).

1. Natural neighbourhood identified with residents in the middle of the Beddington North ward.

2. Natural neighbourhoods mapped onto existing administrative boundaries (Output Areas).

3. Five different scoring areas identified for the social sustainability assessment.

Image (left): Beddington Village.

Image (right): Overall social sustainability score for Beddington North ward, 2014.

Scoring for Beddington North

Scores were created for each of the separate areas (see p.17) and one for Beddington overall. The smaller areas have different weightings on the overall score due to the variation in population size in each area.

Key:

Voice & influence

Amenities & Social Infrastructure

Adaptability & Resilience

Social & Cultural Life

Voice & Influence

Overall this is strong across Beddington however it varies across the 5 areas. People feel that they can influence decisions about the local area, especially in areas 3 and 4. People who owned their home were more likely to feel that they could influence decisions than people living in social housing. There is low involvement in volunteering in all parts of the ward.

Amenities & social Infrastructure

Beddington scored weakly overall however, there were stronger scores in the south in Areas 3, 4 and 5. There was high satisfaction with health services, schools, and facilities for under 4s, but less with provision for older children. The perception of housing related problems are concentrated in north of ward. Across Beddington there is poor access to public transport, residents have high travel to work times. Overall there is good access to green space.
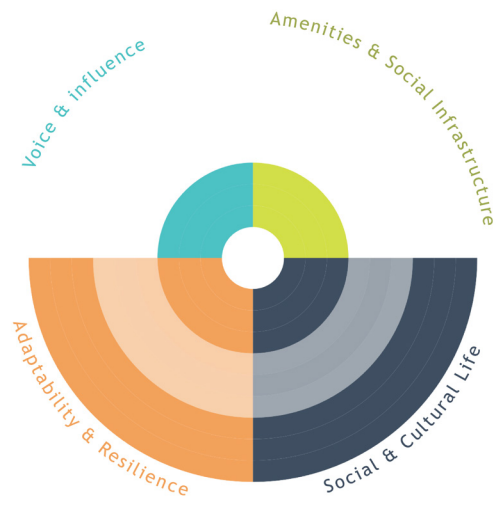
Social & Cultural Life

This is strong overall across Beddington, and within the different neighbourhoods. Residents also have a strong sense of belonging and neighbourliness across all areas, and there are some strong community cohesion indicators. Analysis of neighbourliness, belonging and community cohesion scores, showed that people who owned their home were more likely to feel positive than people living in social housing. Some fear of crime is suggested across all areas. This was particularly marked amongst more affluent people.

Adaptability & Resilience

This is weak across Beddington. There is little physical capacity to adapt to change, in terms of new development or change of land use. Overall there is a sense Beddington does not have the right services and facilities in place to meet the challenges of the next few years, but this is not shared across all areas. There are mixed views about how well Beddington has adapted over the last five to 10 years.

Areas

1
2
3
4
5

Area 1

Area 3 & 4

Area 2

Area 5

Impact

The purpose of the social sustainability assessment is to reveal a picture of neighbourhoods that can not be seen in the statistics that are conventionally used to describe local areas.

Valuable insights emerge from this assessment about the social fabric of neighbourhoods, and how current services and infrastructure are supporting local social life, strengthening the community and boosting resident wellbeing. These are central to plans for future investment, services and initiatives. A social sustainability assessment will also show the gaps, where there are weaknesses in social sustainability, which can be addressed in the future by the council and its partners.

This toolkit has focused on social sustainability, less on economic and environmental sustainability, although elements of these sit within social sustainability. Local data describing the strength of the local economy, how the local population fares in terms of employment, and how environmental sustainability data can be used to complement this assessment.

For more information visit:
www.suttonsst.org

This piece of work was put together with a group of Sutton officers from the Research and Intelligence team, the Beddington programme, and the Chief Executives office.

"I have seen how the tool-kit can help commissioners understand the priorities and issues in a local area and can be used to empower local people shape where they live. I now want to fully integrate this into our outcome focussed commissioning approach to ensure that we are helping local people take decisions based on robust evidence given the difficult conversations about budget reductions that all Council's will have to have with residents for the foreseeable future. Knowing the assets already present in a community is vital to understanding what can be built on to improve that community, the tool-kit enables me to do this."

Tom Alexander
Programme Manager
London Borough of Sutton

"We now have a tool that can be used to quickly & easily understand the strengths & areas of improvement of local communities. This can then be used to prioritise the limited resources we have as a Council to address key issues."

Sam Barker
Head of Research & Intelligence
London Borough of Sutton