

Understanding local areas: making best use of existing data

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This report describes how data can be used to predict how people feel about their local neighbourhoods, and how this can be analysed, mapped, and used to understand places and to design 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. The framework came out of a project originally commissioned by the Homes and Communities Agency, to influence how built environment professionals think about creating new places. We call this our “social sustainability framework”.

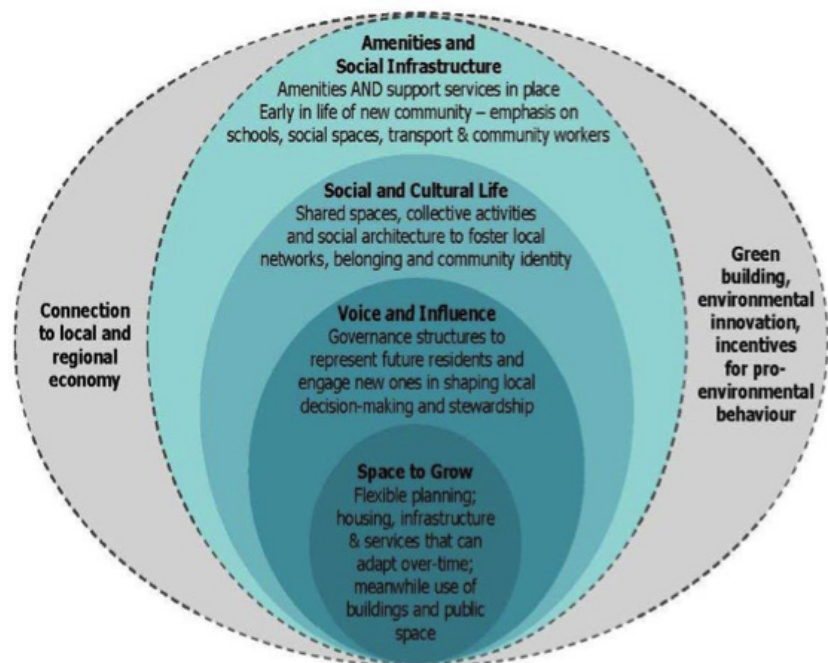
Social sustainability is often overlooked within the sustainability field and is largely neglected in mainstream debates. Past experience shows that the long-term social needs of new communities are often overlooked in the drive to deliver housing on a large scale. Without the right social infrastructure 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 infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; and space to grow.

Social sustainability is often overlooked within the sustainability field



Social Life’s social sustainability framework

How can we use statistics to understand local neighbourhoods?

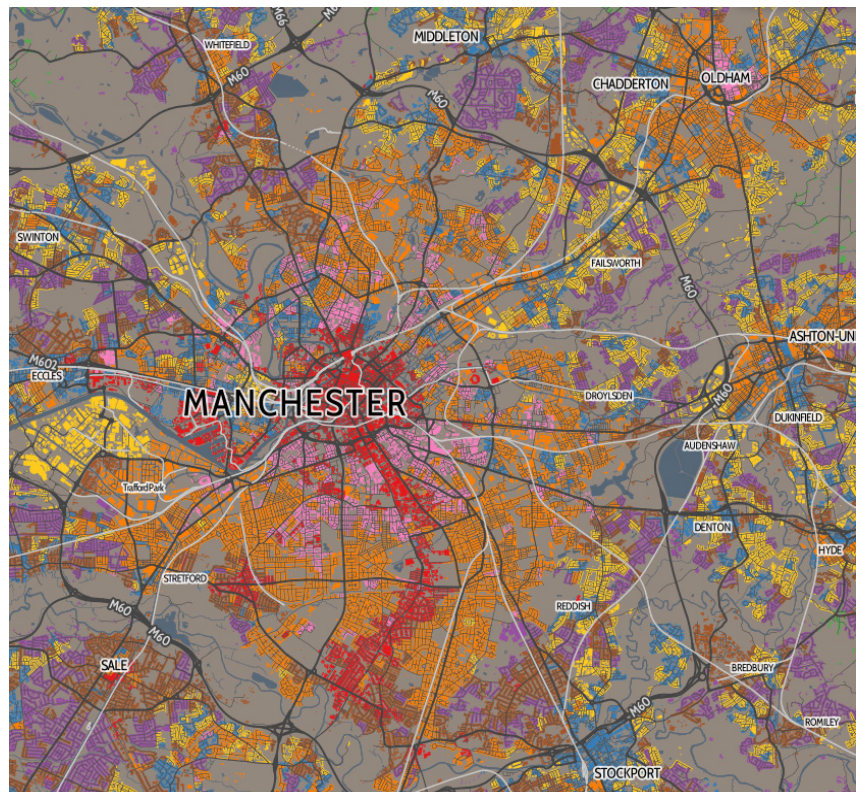
Social Life takes the ONS' "Area Classifications" methods as our starting point.

What are Area Classifications?

Area classifications have been developed by ONS to understand social attitudes in local areas¹. Area classifications can give powerful insights into local areas, 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 and have been updated with 2011 data. The 2011 area classifications profile geographic areas based on 60 variables from the 2011 Census data. 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"² (the majority of these include between 110 and 139 households). These are known as "Output Area Classifications" or OACs.



OAC map of Manchester, 2011.

¹ for more on area classifications go to www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/areaclassifications/2011areaclassifications

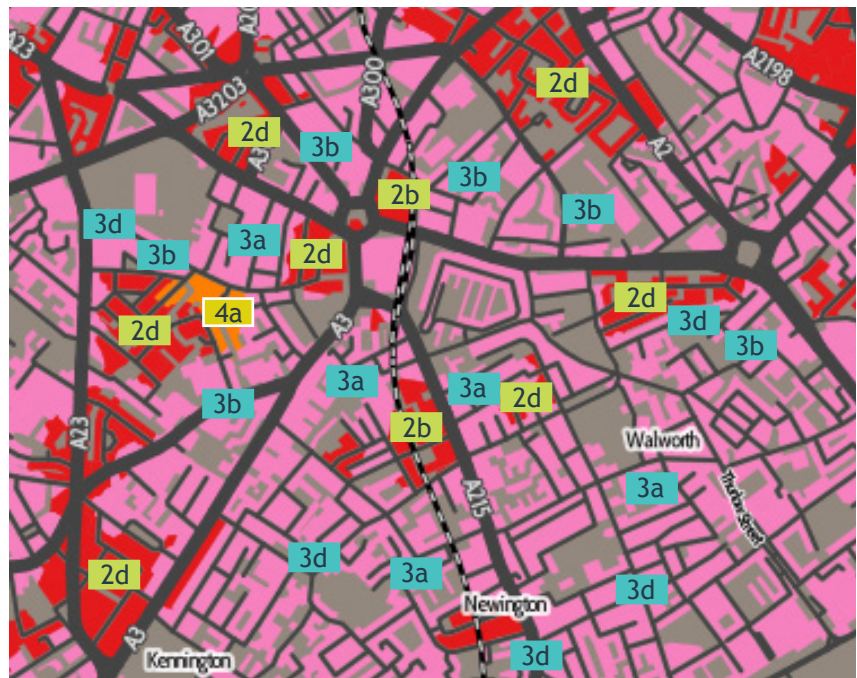
² for more on output areas go to www.ons.gov.uk/census/2001censusandearlier/dataandproducts/outputgeography/outputareas

More on Area Classifications

OAC areas can be identified using the Data Shine mapping platform www.datashine.org, a website from University College London. This is an output from an ESRC Future Research Leaders Project entitled “Big Open Data: Mining and Synthesis” (BODMAS). The overall project seeks promote and develop the use of large and open datasets amongst the social science community.

The OAC map is at oac.datashine.org.uk/#datalayer=oac11_s&layers=BTTT&zoom=11&lon=-0.3382&lat=51.4543

For more on the Area Classifications methodology see www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/products/area-classifications/ns-area-classifications/index/methodology-and-variables/output-areas/output-areas.html



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?

1. We use online maps to establish the OAC classifications of the areas we are focusing on.

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2. We agree which community dynamics indicators we are interested in.

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3. We decide which questions from national surveys most closely match these indicators.

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4. We take data from the relevant national surveys that include these questions and compare it to the OAC and IMD scores, testing for statistical significance.

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This becomes our predicted community dynamics benchmark, enabling us to understand the social sustainability of the neighbourhood.

We can compare the benchmark to actual data about an area, to find out how well a neighbourhood is faring, compared to similar areas

Data from actual neighbourhoods could come from:

- resident surveys
- focus groups
- observations
- data from local services.

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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)³, the Community Life Survey⁴, and the Crime Survey England and Wales⁵ - and extracted questions that shed light on the social sustainability of small areas.

Some questions we find useful

	Question	Source
Social & cultural life	The friendships and associations I have with other people in my neighbourhood mean a lot to me	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	If I needed advice about something I could go to someone in my neighbourhood	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	To what extent do you agree or disagree that this local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?	Community Life Survey 2014-15 and Special License access
	I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood.	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	I plan to remain a resident of this neighbourhood for a number of years	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	How well would you say you are managing financially these days?	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	How safe do you feel walking alone after dark?	Crime Survey for England & Wales 2013-14 & special license access
	How safe do you feel walking alone in this area during the day?	Crime Survey for England & Wales 2013-14 & special license access
	In your opinion how does the level of crime in your local area compare to the country as a whole?	Community Life Survey 2014-15 & special license access
	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life overall?	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	How satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?	USS Wave 3 & special license access
Voice & influence	I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	People in the neighbourhood pull together to improve the neighbourhood	Community Life Survey 2014-15 & special license access
	Can you influence decisions affecting your area?	Community Life Survey 2014-15 & special license access
	How important is it for you personally to feel that you can influence decisions affecting your area?	Community Life Survey 2014-15 & Special License access
	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?	USS Wave 3 & special license access
	Have taken part in formal or informal volunteering in the last 12 months	USS Wave 3 & special license access

³ for more on USS go to www.understandingsociety.ac.uk

⁴ for more on the Community Life Survey go to www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey

⁵ or more on the Crime Survey England & Wales go to www.crimesurvey.co.uk/

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 neighbourhoods: 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. 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, to enable Sutton officers, other agencies, and community organisations to use this approach in the future.

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

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

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 for The Berkeley Group

Social Life was commissioned in 2012 by The Berkeley Group to develop a way of measuring the social sustainability - the wellbeing of residents and strength of a community - of their existing developments. We developed a framework, published in the report “Creating Successful Communities”⁶, initially 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. 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 London⁷. We have evolved the approach with Berkeley to devise a methodology for assessing 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.



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

⁷ see “Living on Kidbrooke Village” (2013), “Living on Woolwich Arsenal” (2014), The Berkeley Group

The Berkeley Group social sustainability framework

Example: 3

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

In early 2014, Social Life was commissioned by Wandsworth Arts to carry out a viability study for a new community arts hub in Roehampton, to feed into 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 has a similar psycho-geographic profile to most of inner London, which is different from the rest of Wandsworth and from 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: if all areas were ranked by their IMD score, the Alton area would be in the second lowest fifth.

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 green-ness. This corroborated other evidence about the estate, 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".

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



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

Measuring social sustainability in Sutton, Social Life, 2014

[CITY DATA REPORT](#)

Download from www.social-life.co/publication

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