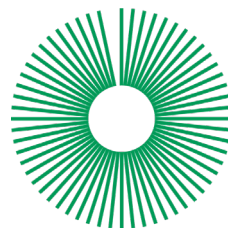




Designers empowering green communities

Reflecting on the skill area part of the Skills for Planet Blueprint

Version 1.0
September 2025



**Skills
for
Planet**



How to use this tool

This tool is intended to be used as a reflective skills audit and a mapping exercise, to enable and support designers to have a deeper understanding of the skill area of Empowering Green Communities. This is a living document, allowing Social Life to update the skills map as future reflective discussions with designers are held, feedback received and gaps identified.

Social Life is hosting free lunchtime discussions on the skill set in Autumn 2025, [contact us](#) for more details if you'd like to take part.

In Version 1.0, September 2025, the document maps the skill area of “Empowering Green Communities” and the three underlying core skills (10-12), as well as their sub-skills as described within the [Skills for Planet Blueprint](#). In the following pages we have suggested reflective questions which can serve as prompts for ranking designers’ confidence with different skills areas. We have also provided reflections on case studies from our own practice and further resources. This tool should be read in conjunction with the wider blueprint.

Skills Map

Skill Area: Empowering Green Communities

Gathering Community Insight [10]

Engage in self-reflection [10.1]

Involve local experts [10.3]

Map components and relationships [10.5]

Spend time with communities [10.2]

Analyse the local system [10.4]

Translate into actionable strategies [10.6]

Prioritising Justice and Equity [12]

Explore the needs of those who are typically excluded [12.2]

Consider any potential unintended consequences [12.4]

Know when to step back and let those with first-hand experience lead [12.6]

Apply an understanding of oppressive and extractive systems [12.1]

Design with who are typically excluded in mind [12.3]

Assess who benefits and who bears the cost of design decisions [12.5]

Nurturing Community Stewardship [11]

Explore communities’ capacity and desire [11.1]

Foster co-ownership from the outset [11.2]

Facilitate conversations about long-term stewardship and legacy [11.3]

Support communities to build their capabilities [11.4]

Be willing to return to the drawing board [11.5]

Designing with communities

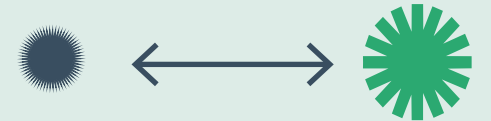
This tool reflects on the Design Council's Skills for Planet Blueprint which maps out the critical green skills that all designers need to be able to put green design into practice. One of the key areas to understand in the transition to green skills as everyday practice is designing with and empowering communities.

Communities are not homogeneous groups of people, they are often organised alongside a common characteristic - a place, interest area or social background. Communities are organised differently, some in a structured and hierarchical fashion, others in a more loose and informal configurations. There are often conflicting agendas within a community and as designers it is important to understand your personal positionally with the community you are designing with, their unique features and capacity to engage with a design process.

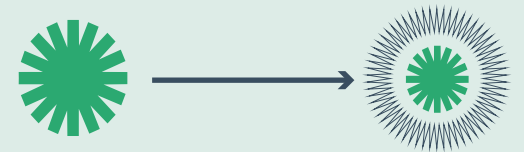
Designer - Community relationships



Designers developing green design skills and understanding communities.



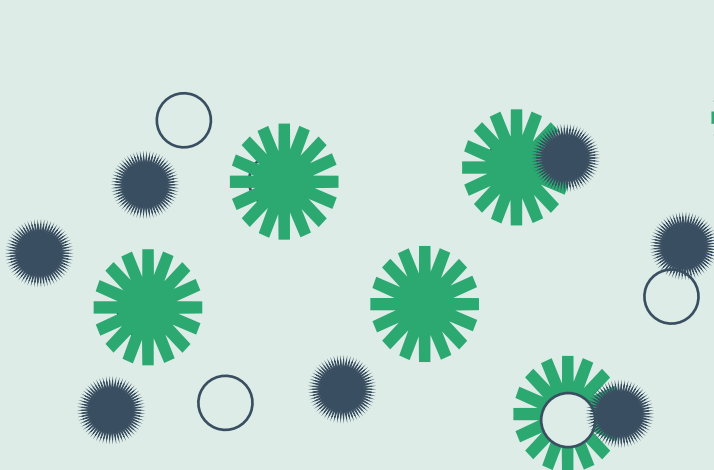
Designers and communities exert pressures on each other.



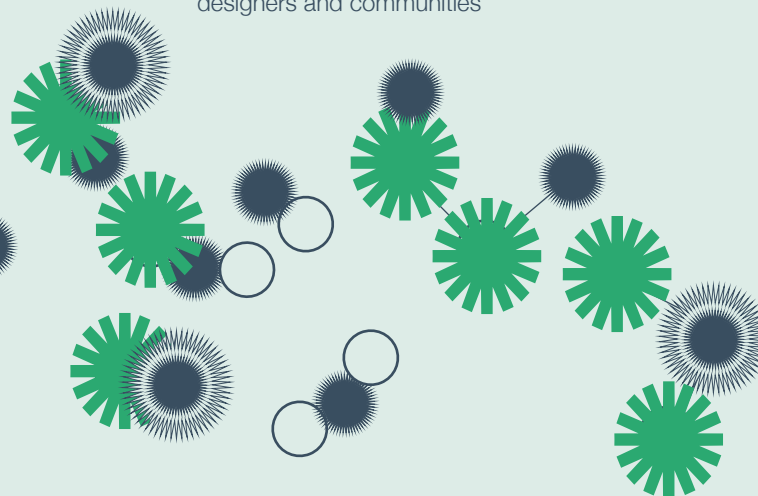
Communities developing design skills and capacity to design.

Transition to a green design shift

Typical design practice

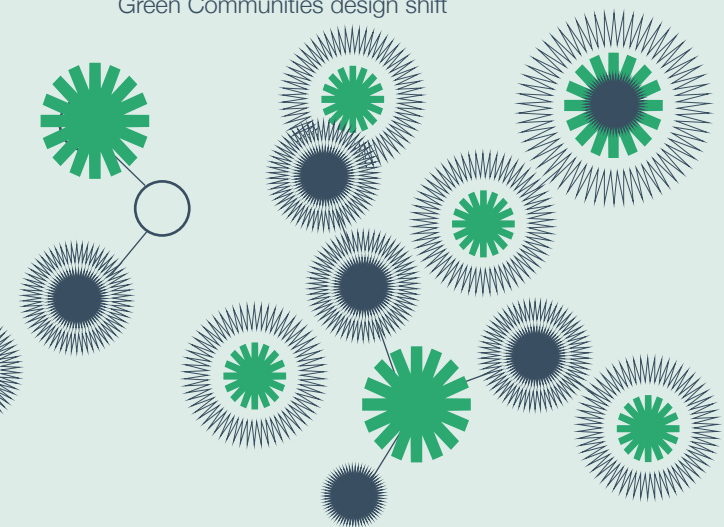


Strengthening the relationship between designers and communities



Green design as everyday practice

Green Communities design shift



Gathering community insight [10]

Engaging with communities early in the process is key for successful understanding of the design problem. Identifying the community early, spending time with them and dedicating space in the design programme and budget to have meaningful interactions are key activities a designer should undertake early on.

Use this matrix to mark your current level of confidence regarding each of the sub-skills.

Skill

Confidence [1-5]

Engage in self reflection [10.1]

Do you question your positionally, social identity and biases when designing? Do you regularly plan for and engage with self-reflection methods such as competencies mapping?



Spend time with communities [10.2]

How often do you visit and spend intentional time in the communities you are working with? Have you engaged in residencies, co-creation projects?



Involve local experts [10.3]

How often do you lean on external local expertise or lived experiences? Do you regularly engage with and reward local experts as collaborators, such as engaging a design panel or local experts?



Analyse the local system [10.4]

Do you understand and engage in systems thinking? Have you considered all aspects of the system within which you are designing?



Map components and relationships [10.5]

Have you considered Human-Human, Human-Non-Human, and Non-Human-Non-Human relationships? Do you map what's already there, do you understand natural and social assets?



Translate into actionable strategies [10.6]

Have you prioritised relationships and build up trust with local partners who can take forward your designs or recommendations? Do you act on feedback?



Reflections:

Overall score:

..... /30

Gathering community insight [10]



Mapping East Birmingham

In late 2024 and the first months of 2025 [we worked in east Birmingham](#) with Loconomy and Birmingham City Council. Our task was to map social and economic assets in three areas in the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy. We used social infrastructure mapping workshops to gather community insights.

Over 500 people fed into the community mapping through 17 community events and workshops. We facilitated a series of asset mapping workshops with the community partners. We then gave them materials and guidance so they could carry out their own mapping in their own communities. The decentralised manner of data gathering was key to reaching deep into the community.

Clapham Park, Community Research

In 2024 and 2025 we worked with Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTHV) and Countryside (part of Vistry) to carry out benchmark research as the start of ongoing assessment of the social value of the regeneration at Clapham Park Estate. We recruited six community researchers and worked closely with them and our field team to collect data through street interviews.

The six community researchers kept us on our toes, questioned critically each of our research decisions and passionately advocated for a better future of the Clapham Park Estate. They helped us design the survey, carry out interviews and analyse the data. Their expert knowledge of the estate and its community helped us to shape the most effective research approach.

Beehive Social Infrastructure

We conducted [social infrastructure assessment](#) in 2022 of the neighbourhoods surrounding the Beehive Retail Park to the northeast of Cambridge city centre. Social Life was contracted by Railpen Investments to carry out this assessment to inform the future development of the site with a review of existing community assets, amenities and local perceptions of the area.

In Cambridge we conducted not only street interviews, but also observations. We looked for and asked people about which spaces they use, what they value locally, whether they participate in any groups or networks in the area, any barriers they face to accessing spaces, and how they perceive change locally. The work directly informed the ground plane design of the Beehive centre.

See more:

Working with Community Researchers Toolkit, TUOS and DERA: [#](https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/dera/research-within-communities/community-researcher-toolkit)

Innovating places: a new role for "place difference" - Saffron Woodcraft & Nicola Bacon, Social Life: [#](https://www.social-life.co/media/files/WoodcraftBaconInnovatingplaces.pdf)

Nurturing community stewardship [11]

Building trust with communities in the process of design is important to encourage long-term buy into the outcomes and foster stewardship. To do so a designer needs to be able to listen and act on feedback, respect community members' existing skills and create opportunities for knowledge exchange.

Use this matrix to mark your current level of confidence regarding each of the sub-skills.

Skill

Confidence [1-5]

Explore communities' capacity and desire [11.1]

How do you acknowledge communities' skills and priorities in your design process? Is this an ongoing process that enables community needs and insights to shape design iteratively and over time?



Foster co-ownership from the outset [11.2]

Which tasks do you need to do, which tasks can you teach others to do? Have you understood who has power over the long-term?



Facilitate conversations about legacy [11.3]

What skills have you shared, or what knowledge have you imparted for the community to be able to continue the work themselves?



Support communities to build capabilities [11.4]

Are you allowing people to grow alongside you, train them? Do you embed opportunities for communities to learn, train, develop and apply their skills?



Be willing to return to the drawing board [11.5]

How have you designed in a way in which it can be un-designed? Have you recorded all work and information properly to be able to return to particular points? How do you act on feedback?



Reflections:

Overall score:

..... /25

Nurturing community stewardship [11]



Brent Youth Hub

Between August - September 2022 we [worked with young people](#) to find out how living around Church End, NW10 were experiencing their local area and what their needs and aspirations were for a new youth hub. This research fed into a series of co-design workshops that culminated in a social value strategy design for the new Youth Hub in the area.

Forest CLT: a social listening exercise

In 2020 [we worked with Forest CLT](#) - a Community Land Trust for Waltham Forest - supporting them to carry out a social listening exercise, speaking to 81 people around the St James area. We worked with the CLT to develop questionnaires and trained CLT members in carrying out street interviews.

Grahame Park Estate

Social Life was commissioned in 2023 by the housing association Notting Hill Genesis to carry out an [assessment of the social impacts of regeneration](#), and to understand how local priorities and needs can inform future phases of planning, design and management. We worked with agencies and local organisations closely to embed the framework locally.

Our experience of working with young people has taught us the importance of meeting with them in places and spaces they feel comfortable. We partnered with United Borders, a local youth organisation to help us make contact with local youth and train four local young persons to help us administer the surveys. Establishing trust can take a long time and is important to have a local partner.

The aim of this research was to help understand what the community valued in the area, what they felt was missing and what priorities there were in developing new spaces and facilities. It was important for Forest CLT to conduct this survey coming out of lockdown as this gave a unique perspective on services that locals felt that they needed during a time of unprecedented stress.

We encountered generally a supportive and engaged community, eager to discuss their needs. We took on board the feedback from community members and re-worked the existing Theory of Change on the estate to embed community stewardship and reported needs as core indicators to be monitored. The framework was collectively owned by a group including local community organisations.

See more:

Practical Hope, Inspiration for Community Action, TCPA: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/practical-hope-inspiration-for-community-action/>

Prioritising justice and equity [12]

Design processes are never absolved of power dynamics and designers need to be able to recognise whether and how their work is challenging or strengthening existing inequalities. Being able to acknowledge the limitations of the design process and be transparent and honest with communities is key.

Use this matrix to mark your current level of confidence regarding each of the sub-skills.

Skill

Confidence [1-5]

Apply an understanding of oppressive and extractive systems [12.1]



How are you considering your own role in the work you are doing?
How did you get the role and who from?

Explore the needs of those typically excluded [12.2]



How much of the community are you interacting with?
Have you made extra effort to meet those who may be unable to attend meetings or workshops?

Design with who are typically excluded in mind [12.3]



Who are you designing for? Have you considered all abilities and accessibility needs?

Consider any unintended consequences [12.4]



Have you considered impact holistically? Do you know how your work will be used and by whom?

Assess who benefits and who bears the cost [12.5]



Is what you are doing necessary and adds value to the community?
Are you engaging in extractive research or design?

Know when to step back and let those with first-hand experience lead [12.6]



How can you de-center yourself from the work you do? Have you given yourself paths out of the work?

Reflections:

Overall score:

..... /30

Prioritising justice and equity [12]



Arts and Culture in Health Ecosystems

This research was led by Leeds Beckett University in partnership with Dr Janet Harris, Social Life and Locality. It aimed to explore what works for connecting community anchor organisations, delivering arts and cultural activities and/ or managing natural and community assets in areas of social deprivation to the wider public health system.

We used a participatory case study design. The four community anchors engaged in the project all reflected on how they delivered activities to address health inequalities. Barriers and facilitators to innovation and community mobilisation were discussed, as well as the people and place-based assets needed to embed arts, cultural and natural environment activities.

Addressing Health Inequalities

This was a partnership between Lewisham Council, Sevenfields PCN, the Sevenfields Health Equity Fellow, Downham Dividend Society Community Land Trust (CLT) and Social Life. Downham CLT is led by a resident Community Health Champion, and four more residents of the Sevenfields area were recruited as Community Health Champions to work from 2023 to 2024 together.

In this project we took an asset-based and a trauma-informed approach. An asset based approach recognises the strengths and resources within a community. A trauma-informed approach recognises that the impacts and triggers of generational trauma, of discrimination and racism in the everyday experience of living on low incomes can damage individuals and communities.

Aylesbury Estate

We have conducted social impact assessments on the Aylesbury Estate in 2024, 2022 and 2017 for Notting Hill Genesis. We explored how the regeneration is affecting well-being and people's sense of neighbourliness and belonging. The research aims to capture experiences of people who might not otherwise engage through walking ethnographies, focused workshops and interviews.

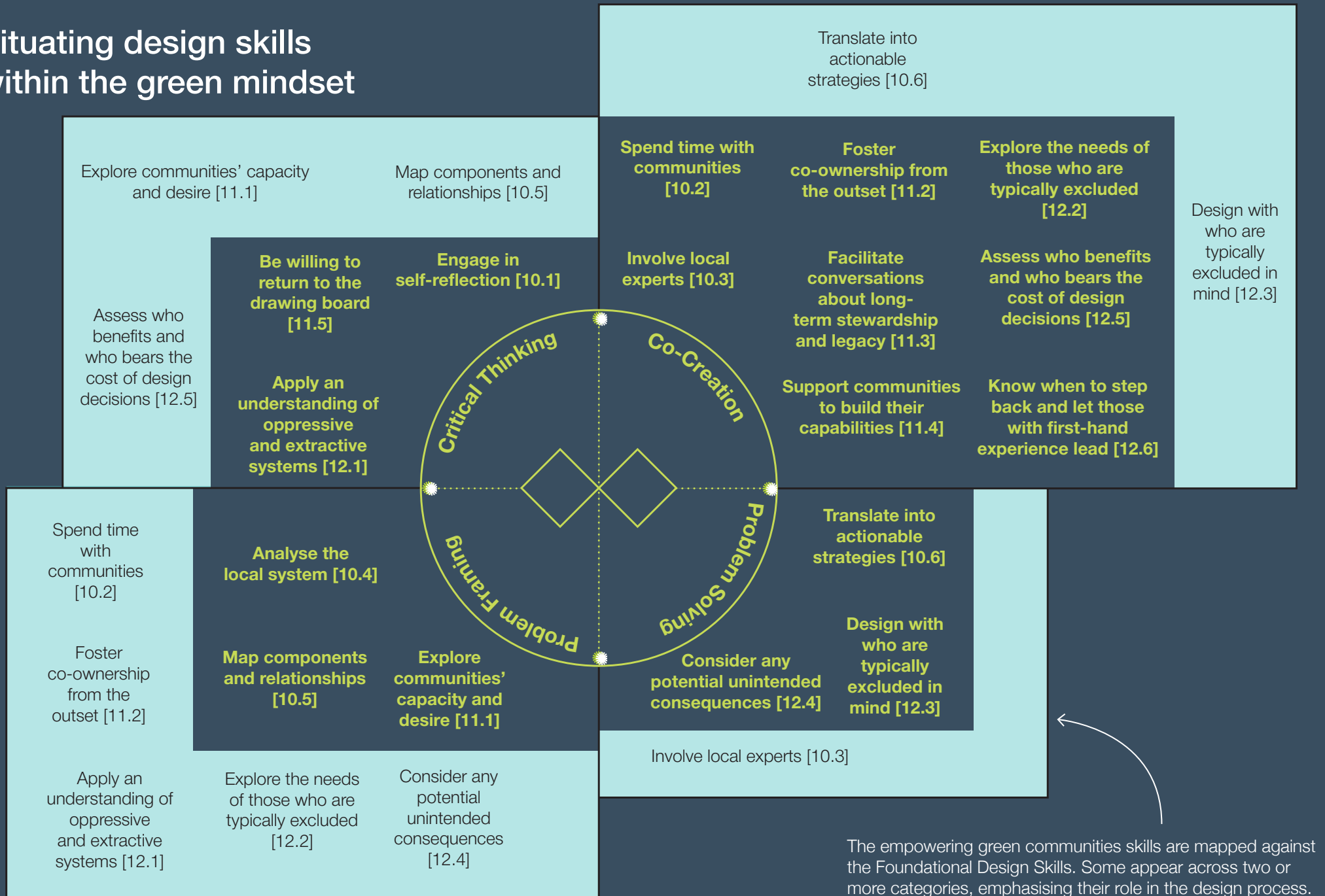
To be able to build a representative picture of the estate we engaged in multiple ways with different groups. We ran workshops with young people, conducted street interviews with residents, in-depth interviews with local stakeholders, walking ethnographies with local residents, local trader interviews, ethnographic observations and interviews with former residents online and in-person.

See more:

Appreciative Inquiry, Involve UK: <https://www.involve.org.uk/resource/appreciative-inquiry>

We Don't Settle, Birmingham: <https://wedontsettle.com/resources/>

Situating design skills within the green mindset



Designing for Social Sustainability

How we think about communities in Social Life?

We see communities at the heart of social sustainability, which for us is 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.

We have developed a framework which we use throughout our projects as a tool to engage with and interrogate social sustainability. It helps us to think about the core elements needed to empower local communities.



Designing for social sustainability: a tried & tested framework,
https://www.social-life.co/publication/designing_for_social_sustainability/



About Social Life

Social Life was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally.

www.social-life.co

Social Life's a Design Council Corporate Partner.

Nicola Bacon (Founding Director) and Simeon Shtebunaev (Senior Researcher) are Design Council experts.

This tool was developed by Nicola Bacon, Simeon Shtebunaev and Toby Pollard, with the support of Social Life's wider team. If you would like to share your reflections with us, please email hello@social-life.co

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September 2025