GOOD GROWTH BY DESIGN

RECOVERY

ROUNDTABLE

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

MAYOR OF LONDON

The *Good Growth by Design (GGbD) Recovery Roundtable* series invites Mayor's Design Advocates and other external experts to discuss the most pertinent topics facing London's built environment in the wake of the global health crisis and its ensuing social and economic impacts.

This seventh *Recovery Roundtable* brought together eleven participants, including Mayor's Design Advocates and other practitioners from the public, private and civic sectors, to explore the role of social infrastructure in London's response to the pandemic. The session was chaired by Jules Pipe, Executive Director Good Growth, who described social infrastructure "from local libraries to football clubs" as "the glue that holds London's neighbourhoods together." Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement, Debbie Weekes-Bernard, framed the discussion and highlighted the role of the built environment stating "if we do not plan, design and manage it well, the built environment can serve to separate and isolate".

Social infrastructure has played a key role during the Covid pandemic, promoting social integration, addressing our collective need for spaces of exchange, shared experiences, conversation, and participation. Mass volunteering, a rise in mutual aid, and informal networks of care have emerged as vital lifelines for many people. But many of the more formal spaces and networks have also been frayed by the

pandemic, with local libraries closed, and classes and clubs unable to continue under restrictions.

Successful social spaces depend on the individuals or groups that give them meaning. Local social infrastructure ecosystems involve facilities, spaces, groups and community leaders that are specific to that locale. If one part of a local ecosystem is lost it can have a huge effect for that neighbourhood.

High streets already have a range of important social functions. They are the setting for public life and face-to-face contact. They provide cultural footholds and offer opportunities for Londoners to meet and build meaningful and lasting relationships. They also provide access to vital information and support, especially for vulnerable groups. A focus of recovery will be to rebalance commercial activities with community purpose, creation of social value, and new opportunities for civic participation.

We ask participants to consider what role social infrastructure should have in London's recovery response, how we can take account of and make the most of what's already there and promotes spaces that work with and for Londoners. Below is a summary of key reflections and propositions, and the role that the Greater London Authority should play in the recovery.

FLORA SAMUEL
University of Reading

The home: 'What does social infrastructure mean? One of the most resounding things to come through my research is that the home is the nexus of resilience. It is the absolute generator of equality, and housing has to be included here somehow.'

Green space: 'Fields In Trust has a measuring tool for suggesting the amount of green space people should have, and I think we ought to have a uniform approach to how much green space is available to everybody.'

Integration: 'Community spaces and volunteering needs to be enhanced. FabLabs, innovation, entrepreneurship, and local business all needs to be joined in with it.'

Consultation and mapping: 'We need to develop ongoing, real-time mapping and consultation with communities [as some can take a long time to reach]. The technology is nearly there to have communities constantly feeding in to local development plans, proposals, and post-occupancy evaluation.'

BHARAT MEHTA CBE
Chief Executive of Trust for London

Local ownership: 'It's about local ownership. Whether we're talking about schools, libraries, etc., if people don't have local ownership then I think it's pointless. There's a real danger of everybody's space becoming nobody's space. Or worse still, it's owned only by certain people.'

Mutual aid groups: 'In terms of the latest experiences with Coivd, we've seen the huge importance of mutual aid groups. [These need to be further encouraged], and we need to avoid the bear hug of bureaucracy, in terms of making them come into line with all the requirements the charity commissioners or other regulators may require.'

Public space: 'The public realm and public space is critically important under Covid, particularly as we see many more people working from home. A lot of people don't have any green space or outdoor space, which again connects to housing design.'

CHRISTINE GOODALL
HEAR Equality and Human Rights Network

Libraries: 'The situation with the pandemic has really highlighted just how much communities were reliant on libraries for all kinds of purposes: internet access, classes, activities, meeting rooms for the voluntary sector, and so on.'

Mapping: 'HEAR has an ongoing project that's focused on social network mapping, with the aim of building solidarity and communication between community sector organisations in London. We have found that mapping networks is vitally important, so you can see the connections. It's not just about finding out what's there, but how they are connected.'

ARMAN NOURI
LB Enfield

Funding: 'At best community centres have been neglected over the last 40 years, at worst they've been actively suppressed. But they are great bastions of social integration within our neighbourhoods.'

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Stewardship: 'There's a really interesting tension between residents saying 'there's no space for us to meet', and these often quite beautiful community centres two minutes away lying empty with either very bad management or bad programming. It's important to consider the long term stewardship of these spaces.'

Public capacity: 'More investment needs to be given to local authorities to hire engagement specialists, to upskill those officers who aren't engagement specialists – in things like co-design, participatory planning and other methods of engagement.'

Neighbourhood design champions: 'Investment also needs to be given to neighbourhood groups. In Lewisham, on the Achilles Street Regeneration, for example, they put a lot of time into upskilling residents to become design champions. This needs to become the norm. I think it will really bring benefits to social integration.'

DAISY FROUD
Mayor's Design Advocate

Physical spaces: 'While social infrastructure is not the physical spaces alone, in a culture of austerity we have lost a lot of these spaces. So we have to fight for them, and not say they are not the point of social infrastructure.'

Boding and bridging spaces: 'Robert Putnam differentiates between bonding and bridging capital. Bonding spaces are where if you are a marginalised group you can come together and regroup, to see yourself and reflect. But bridging spaces are where social integration happens, and where we can recognise each other as citizens who share a city and who produce a diverse city together.'

Role of architects: 'The area I find most fascinating is the master plan or the area action plan. That is where, when you're working in a participatory way and thinking about production and maintenance of social infrastructure, you do your best stuff.'

Co-design at large scale: 'I think it's important that we don't just involve community members in co-design at the level of individual spaces. Some people will be interested in this stage when something is tangible, but many others will be interested in shaping and reshaping that ecosystem in the first place.'

Participation as social infrastructure: 'Participation itself is a form of social infrastructure. The space of process is the space of social infrastructure. We need to support those processes and see them as essential to getting the physical spaces we need at the end of it.'

Social infrastructure is political infrastructure: 'Social infrastructure is the space where we recognise ourselves as a society and where we continue to produce space in society together. It is the space where democracy happens and it should be the absolute priority, particularly in these recovery times.'

AJ HAASTRUP
Every One Every Day

Enabling residents: 'Much of the work we do is enabling residents to imagine new projects in spaces. From starting a community garden with your neighbour, to taking over your street as a play street, these experiences are what builds social infrastructure, by reshaping people's potential for the areas they live in.'

Motives: 'People tell us 'I've lived on my street for the last ten years and I've never met my neighbours', or 'I really want to learn to create a new future for my kids'. So this need for people to reimagine their localities is at a high level. And these kinds of projects allow these motives to become practical.'

Building platforms: 'As an organisation our work is focused on building 'platforms', to enable things to sit on top of each other. From the school to local organisations to mutual aid groups, it forms an ecosystem that works into the social infrastructure and creates an experience for people. Without the experience you just have empty spaces.'

ADAM KHAN
Mayor's Design Advocate

Increased relevance: 'I think the work that was being done with social infrastructure before the pandemic was absolutely right and incredibly exciting, and its importance has only doubled because of that. And there's probably more consensus and support for it now, whereas it might have felt a bit marginal a year or two ago.'

Regain confidence: 'I think it's really urgent that we somehow get out of crisis mode. The joining up of local authorities and local communities taking on stewardship roles has been put slightly on ice because of the pandemic, and there's a lot of nervousness about how to do participation right now. It would be really good to see a clear template to provide confidence.'

Digital participation: 'In our projects we assumed that moving this participation to the digital would reach more youth, and actually it doesn't. We realised that reaching out to young people heavily relied on the casual being there physically in space.'

HILARY SATCHWELL
Mayor's Design Advocate

Role of design: 'Design is really important for social infrastructure, for meaning and identity, whether people feel welcome; for functionality, flexibility, and longevity, how things work over time; and because it brings delight, taking people outside of their day-to-day challenges.'

Formal vs informal: 'There are key differences between formal social infrastructure, things like schools, parks, play spaces, which we understand we can't do without, and the less formal social infrastructure, like pubs, cafes or street corners. Even a well designed street corner can make a big difference, and play a really important role as social glue.'

Not too neutral: 'We know from the research that buildings that are too blank or trying to be too neutral can be harder for people to engage with. And that means they can't engage with each other quite so well. Spaces need to feel that they're owned by people and that people care about them.'

Toolkits: 'Some good practice guidance here would really help people to know what is successful in social infrastructure, and give good practice examples of spaces that work, as well as the processes of how they were delivered and owned. A toolkit, or benchmarks, to outline what people need to think about.'

ROBIN HUTCHINSON MBE
Trustee and Chair of Creative Youth, Director of the Community Brain

Flexibility: 'We've been opening a variety of what we call 'chameleon' spaces, which are about how can you have something that responds to the many needs of people at any time. One of the challenges we've got at the moment is the tension between liberation and control, and design versus use. Spaces accidentally have use designed into them, which precludes them from being used in other ways.'

Playgrounds not circuses: 'We're about giving people permission to do what they've always wanted to do. It's creating playgrounds for adults. But increasingly I'm concerned that we're now going to have to create circuses as well. In Covid we've seen people's ability to adapt, but there's a danger that we're going to put a process around all of this that prevents it from happening again.'

Enabling: 'We try to remove the traditional management bits that bog people down: the insurance, the accounts, etc. There's actually very few people running around saying 'Can I be the treasurer? Local Authorities need to [allow for community ownership] and stop thinking they're the cavalry and everyone is pleased to see them.'

SIAN WILLIAMS
Director of External Policy, Toynbee Hall

Kindness and connection: 'Kindness and connection are the most important things over and above anything else. So whatever spaces we create, they need to facilitate connection in a kind way.

Connection: 'For example, we've got lots of young private renters in the area, they don't need food, but they don't have family nearby, and their networks through work have been lost, so they need a way to connect. They've been helping to deliver food to people who need it from the food bank run out of Toynbee Hall.'

Ownership: 'In terms of ownership, we've been trying to move away from saying 'we want to run these activities, do you want to get involved?' Instead we're saying 'we've got a space, how would you like to use it? How can we help you do that?'

Permission: 'How do we draw back the veil? [To make these possibilities evident to people?] How can we help give people a sense of permission that they don't need to wait for someone to tell them they can do something? Instead we want to empower people, to say 'Of course you can do it, Let's talk about how we can make it happen.'

JACQUI ROBERTS
CEO Shoreditch Trust

Investment: 'What is there to support people to take part? Academic evaluation, impact measurement etc, they all need people to lead that. Grant funding, like Power to Change, is a good step forward in supporting people to take part, but there also needs to be investment in building the confidence of people to take part.'

True consultation: 'Sometimes it feels like some of those companies brought in to do consultation are really just trying to get planning permission. Consultation should be a genuine research and exchange with communities.'

Collaboration: 'In our work with [design] professionals we work with communities in partnership to support the design of the space, but also how people interact with the space and access services as well, which is really key to taking ownership of the space.'

FURTHER READING

Social Integration in London: a snapshot of the Mayor's approach
Shares insights from the Survey of Londoners on issues relating to social integration, equalities and fairness and how the Mayor is tackling these issues through a range of programmes.

The Value of People Power report - Nesta
Includes an economic analysis of the value of people power and explores how public services can better value the contribution of citizens.

London Community Response Survey dataset
Presents results of a weekly questionnaire sent to a cohort of frontline civil society organisations from April 2020. The results are being used inform the pan-London response to the pandemic.

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Mayor's Design Advocates, Advocate Organisations and GLA staff are inputting into a [shared repository](#) of literature, which is a useful resource in framing built environment issues in the COVID context.

CONTACT

Sarah Considine, Good Growth by Design programme manager
SarahE.Considine@london.gov.uk

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