



# Engagement and participation

Understanding people and place

# Who is Social Life

Social Life works with built environment professionals, including architects, planners, regeneration teams, designers and investors, to put social value and sustainability at the heart of place.

At the core of our work is understanding how people's day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment – housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets – and how change, through regeneration, new development or small interventions impacts the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. Our work is underpinned by our Social Sustainability Framework, developed for Homes England.

Our clients and collaborators range across the public and private sectors, third sector, housing associations and academic institutions.

## Creating successful places

The rich local insight gained through our engagement, and the relationships built through local collaboration, allows us to help our clients, partners and communities to create and maintain socially sustainable, successful places.

We are keen to work more closely with design teams to take forward masterplans and area strategies, and with councils and developers to maximise the social value of built environment change.

# How we do community engagement

Social Life uses in-depth engagement with local communities to investigate the different factors that impact everyday life. The insights and knowledge gained through our engagement are used to prompt tangible changes that improve quality of life.

We start with a recognition of community assets and make sure that we compensate residents and community groups for their time.

We use our knowledge and experience of social research to ensure robustness in how we gather and analyse data.

## Our approach to engagement



**Focusing on people and place**



**Engaging early**



**Empowering local people**



**Embedding in communities**



**Listening and understanding**



## Empowering local people

We start by identifying and recognising the assets and strengths of the local community. We are clear and transparent about the differences between consultation, engagement and co-design.

Giving people a sense of ownership of decision making can lead to better wellbeing, local pride and improved social sustainability.

## Embedding in communities

We go to the places and spaces where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us. We build community capacity as part of our engagement process.

We pride ourselves on building strong relationships with the communities we work with, including people who are vulnerable and people who agencies often struggle to engage.

On some projects we have trained members of the community as paid researchers or health champions.

## Focusing on people and place

Social Life focuses on the relationship between people and place; our engagement seeks to understand both the spatial qualities of a place and its impact on everyday life.

When there is change to the built environment there can be opportunities to improve everyday life for everyone. But change can also undermine wellbeing and security, particularly for those with the least power.

## Engaging early

Our engagement often happens before designs, projects and interventions are developed, and may continue long into the lifetime of a place.

We think it's essential to involve communities as early as possible and continue this involvement throughout, working with trusted groups and organisations that are rooted in the area.

*"It has been an eye opener for me. I've lived here for so long and only 15 years later I am getting to know my neighbourhood"*



Community Researcher

*"I really like our team and I'm so delighted that we are working so well with the local GP."*



Community Health Champion

*"Thank you so much. We felt heard."*



Stakeholder interviewee feedback



## Listening and understanding

At the core of our work is respect for the people we engage with. We take time to listen and to understand an area before we start asking questions.

Our approach helps the people we want to hear from feel comfortable and valued.

We believe it is important to feed back what we've learnt to the people and groups we've spoken to. Our process is always inclusive, accessible, transparent and robust.

*"I was impressed with how you all stayed and listened to what residents told you after the survey. It is not easy because you are doing an impartial job, but I hope it helped for you all to visualise what the answers meant. As I said a few times, the residents have never been able to express themselves to an independent group before and I think that helped them today."*

Resident feedback



## Our methods

We design our engagement to suit the needs and context of each project and to ensure full accessibility. For this, we draw from a menu of complementary methods. These include:



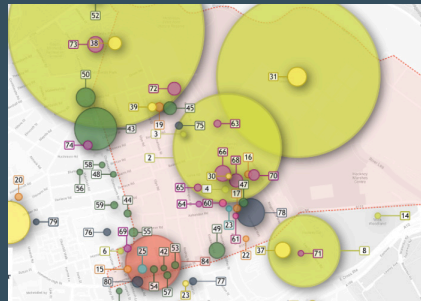
co-design workshops



face-to-face outreach



community events



asset mapping



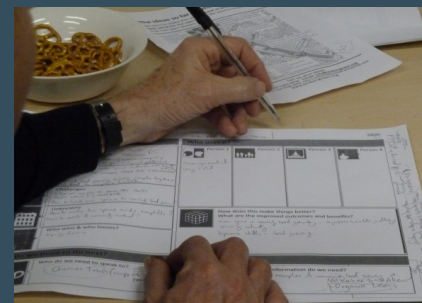
walking ethnographies



online forums and surveys



arts-led methods



deliberative workshops



gamification

# Example projects

## Southwark estates collaborative design

In 2024 Southwark Council Public Health commissioned Social Life to work with residents on three of the borough's largest estates, collaboratively designing a £50k project for each estate to support residents' health & wellbeing.

To understand local needs, assets, priorities and aspirations we carried out:

- face-to-face interviews across the three estates
- online surveys
- workshops
- observations
- desk research.

Tenants & Residents Associations were engaged as paid community partners to support the work.

Social Life will continue to support and evaluate the three projects in 2025.



[https://www.social-life.co/project/southwark\\_residents\\_health\\_and\\_wellbeing/](https://www.social-life.co/project/southwark_residents_health_and_wellbeing/)

## Grahame Park Estate

In 2023 Social Life was commissioned by Notting Hill Genesis to work on the Grahame Park Estate in Barnet. Our first task was to speak to residents and community stakeholders to understand everyday life and the impact of the 15 year regeneration programme. From this we devised a measurement framework. Barnet Council then commissioned us to do further work to align these indicators to the work of the multi-agency strategic planning group.

We spoke to 200 residents, these interviews lasted half an hour on average. In total we spent over 100 hours out and about having conversations on the estate. We also carried out walking interviews and ran a series of collaborative design workshops to develop the framework.



[https://www.social-life.co/media/files/May\\_2024\\_Grahame\\_Park\\_Summary\\_report\\_v6.pdf](https://www.social-life.co/media/files/May_2024_Grahame_Park_Summary_report_v6.pdf)

# Example projects

## Brent youth anchor social value framework

In 2022 Social Life, in partnership with ZCD Architects, working with young people to co-design a new youth space in Church End, North London on behalf of Brent Council.

A team of young researchers were trained to work alongside Social Life, gathering insights from their peers. They helped run a series of design workshops and created a social value framework to shape the space and how it would be managed in the future.



➤ Social value framework for the hub co-designed with young people from Church End



➤ [https://www.social-life.co/publication/new\\_youth\\_hub\\_for\\_church\\_end/](https://www.social-life.co/publication/new_youth_hub_for_church_end/)

## Grosvenor wellbeing research

In 2024 Social Life was commissioned by landowner Grosvenor to assess key wellbeing indicators in the central London neighbourhoods of Mayfair and Belgravia. This included:

- extensive face-to-face interviews across both areas
- online surveys to increase participation
- in-depth workshops.

We also mentored four young people from Westminster, offering fieldwork training and support designing and running workshops for their peers. One of the young people has now joined our fieldteam.

Our findings have been used by Grosvenor to develop their strategic plans for the two areas.



➤ Our fieldteam in Mayfair & Belgravia

## Benefits of our engagement approach

- Robust and grounded insight and knowledge, working with the grain of a place and making best use of what exists.
- Support for place strategies, local plans, masterplans and design codes.
- Collaborative design methods for projects and places.
- An approach that aims to build trust and community ownership.



**Social Life is based in Elephant & Castle in south London but we work across the UK and internationally. We work with the private, public and third sectors, as well as community and neighbourhood groups, on research, advisory, strategy, engagement and practical projects. Our team brings together sociologists, ethnographers, architects and urban planners with engagement and policy specialists.**

**If you'd like to collaborate or find out more, we'd love to hear from you:**

▶ Explore our work: [www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co)

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