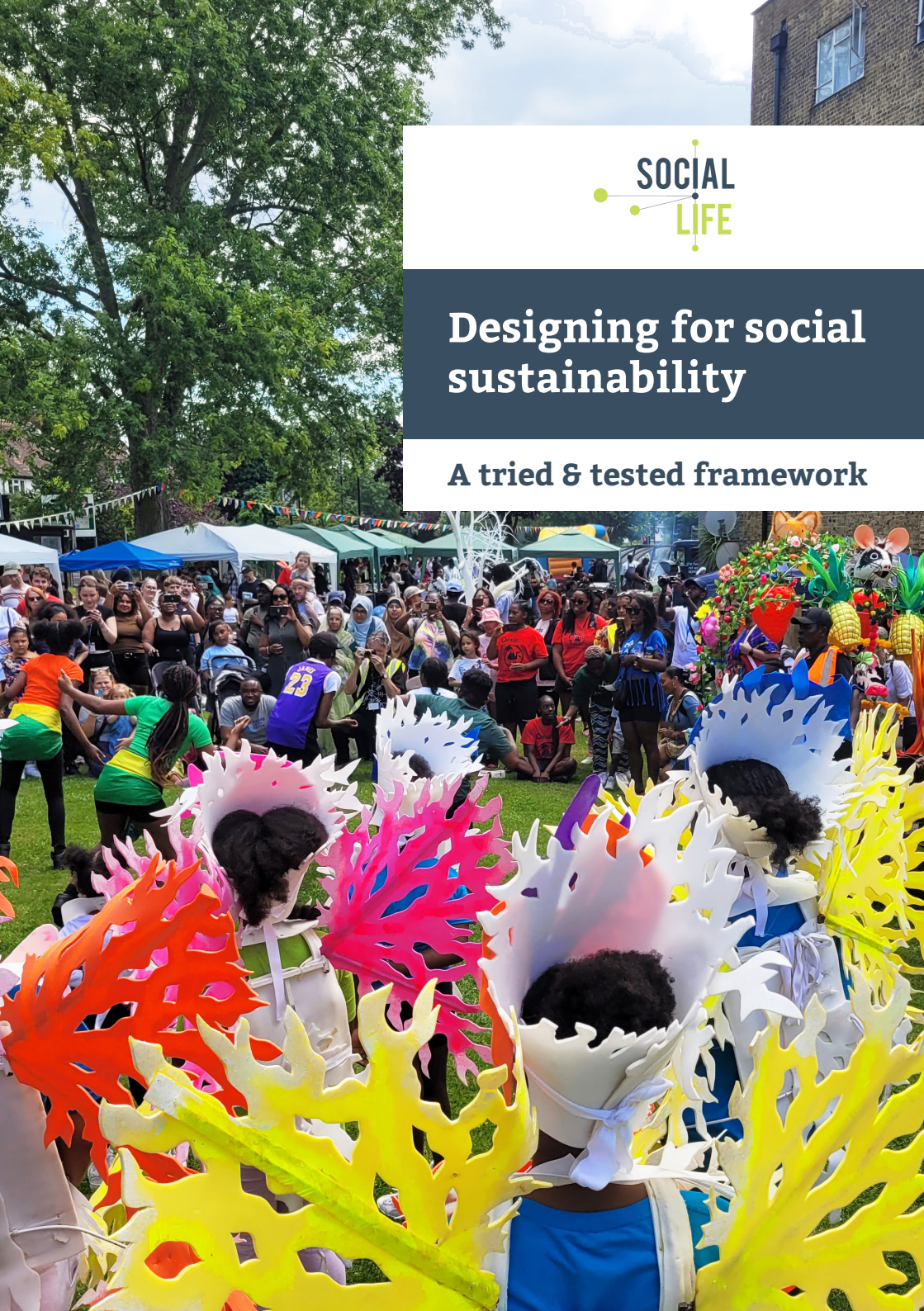




# Designing for social sustainability

**A tried & tested framework**



# What is social sustainability?

“Design for Social Sustainability”<sup>1</sup> was first published in 2012. It set out a framework for planning, design and measurement to help housing and built environment professions improve the way they create communities as well as homes. Over a decade on, this work has fresh relevance as housing policy refocuses on housebuilding at scale. In the past we have seen too often how easy it is to overlook the social needs of communities in the drive for delivery and how this has consequences for new and longstanding residents.

Design for Social Sustainability built on a body of work that explored why new housing developments fail, and what is needed to make them thrive. The housing crisis gives urgency to the task of creating and renewing cities and communities that are socially, as well as economically and environmentally, sustainable. Our cities need to be equipped to meet the challenges of population growth, migration and climate change; this is an international issue as well as a pressing problem in the UK.

Social sustainability continues to be understated in mainstream sustainability debates and practice. Priority has tended to be given to economic and environmental sustainability. Despite its relevance to debates about social value, the Sustainable Development Goals and, in England, to the National Planning Policy Framework, there are few practical resources that directly address how to create places that are socially sustainable.

Managing the long-term costs and consequences of poor social design and social failure is an issue of public value and political accountability. Our experience built up over a decade demonstrates the value of our tools to embed social sustainability in the planning, design and stewardship of place.

## Our definition

**“Social sustainability 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.”**

<sup>1</sup> S Woodcraft, N Bacon, L Caistor-Arendar, T Hackett (2012) “Design for Social Sustainability: a framework for creating thriving new communities”. [www.social-life.co/publication/Social-Sustainability](http://www.social-life.co/publication/Social-Sustainability)

# Our framework

Our framework focuses on four elements that are essential to build new communities that will be successful and sustainable in the long term: **Amenities & Social infrastructure; Social & Cultural life; Voice & Influence; and Adaptability & Resilience.**

All four elements are needed in every place, however social success and sustainability cannot be prescribed and described in the same way as standards for green building or job creation. Flexibility is needed to reflect local circumstances and the particular nature of every community and its residents.



Social Life's social sustainability framework (2024)



Our field researcher talking to a resident of the Grahame Park Estate, north London

## The scale of need

Globally, urbanisation is placing stress on social and physical infrastructures. Six out of 10 people are forecast to live in urban areas by 2030<sup>2</sup>. This international housing crisis is driven by increasing housing costs, growing inequality and shortages of affordable homes.

Over the last decade since the framework was created we have developed a greater sensitivity to spatial justice, to the values of green space, nature and the outdoors and to the urgency of the climate crisis. The pandemic starkly demonstrated the importance of community resilience and adaptability in the face of shock.

In the UK we now have a government committed to building new towns and urban extensions and making existing urban areas more dense, with a clear aim to tackle our entrenched housing crisis. In this drive towards rapid house building, we must take care and consider what type of places and communities we are creating. New housing must be sustainable and support wellbeing and quality, creating homes and communities; it must deliver social value to places and communities as well as meeting housing targets.

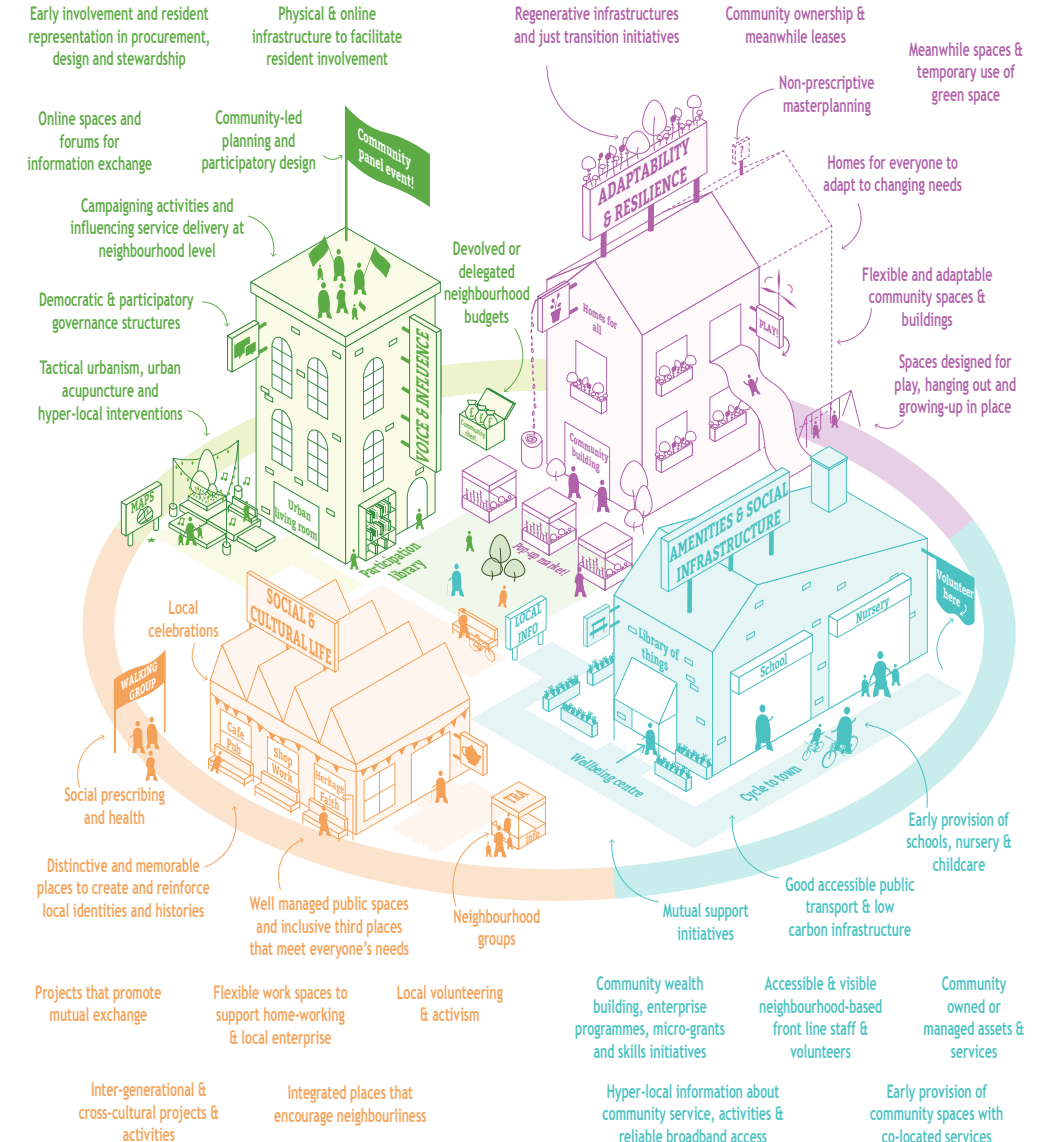
Our building blocks illustrate examples of actions that agencies can take to boost each dimension. This is not intended to be a complete list. It shows that what boosts social sustainability is familiar practice, things that agencies can take forward in their mainstream work.

### Voice & Influence

- Early involvement and resident representation in procurement, design and stewardship
- Physical & online infrastructure to facilitate resident involvement
- Online spaces and forums for information exchange
- Community-led planning and participatory design
- Campaigning activities and influencing service delivery at neighbourhood level
- Democratic & participatory governance structures
- Tactical urbanism, urban acupuncture and hyper-local interventions

### Adaptability & Resilience

- Regenerative infrastructures and just transition initiatives
- Community ownership & meanwhile leases
- Non-prescriptive masterplanning
- Meanwhile spaces & temporary use of green space
- Homes for everyone to adapt to changing needs
- Flexible and adaptable community spaces & buildings
- Spaces designed for play, hanging out and growing-up in place



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/urbanization-0#:~:text=The%20world%20is%20becoming%20increasingly,around%20two%2Dthirds%20in%202050>

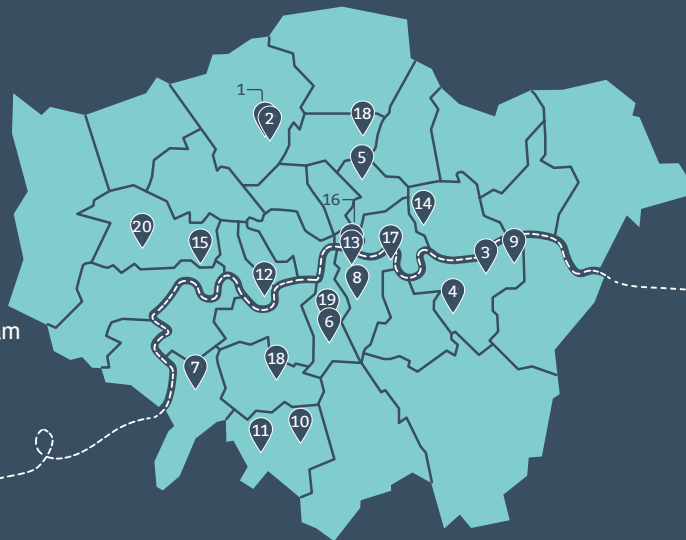
# Where we've worked

Our framework has been used in the UK, in Europe and South Korea. It has proven to be flexible in adapting to different places and different uses. Its overall structure holds in very different contexts, in spite of cultural and national differences in concepts and definitions and in public policy.

We believe the simplicity of our framework is a key element of its value. We have seen how using the framework can bridge silos and agency barriers and galvanise innovation and fresh thinking.

## Where we've used the framework in London:

1. Grahame Park
2. Beaufort Park
3. Royal Arsenal
4. Kidbrooke
5. Woodberry Down
6. Clapham Park
7. Cambridge Road
8. Aylesbury Estate
9. Thamesmead
10. LB Sutton (Beddington)
11. The Hamptons
12. Imperial Wharf
13. Empire Square
14. Tall Trees Park, East Ham
15. Acton Gardens
16. St Thomas St
17. Canada Water
18. Tottenham
19. Moorlands Estate
20. Southall Gasworks



## Where we've used the framework internationally:



# Applying the framework

## Social sustainability as a measurement tool



In South Acton we have been commissioned by Acton Gardens LLP, a joint venture between Countryside (now Vistry) and L&Q, to assess the social impact of the regeneration of the South Acton Estate. Our work started in 2015 and we are about to publish our fourth assessment. This has given the development team insight and evidence. A short set of recommendations have been actioned after each assessment that have influenced community development, social infrastructure planning and the phasing of redevelopment.

[www.social-life.co/publication/social\\_impacts\\_regeneration\\_S\\_Acton\\_assessment\\_3](http://www.social-life.co/publication/social_impacts_regeneration_S_Acton_assessment_3)

## Social sustainability as a tool for innovation

The social sustainability framework was tested in Finland, Holland, Slovenia, Romania and the UK as a tool for helping communities and municipalities tackle the problems of the decline of small urban towns. The “Bright Futures” project was supported by JPI Urban Europe.

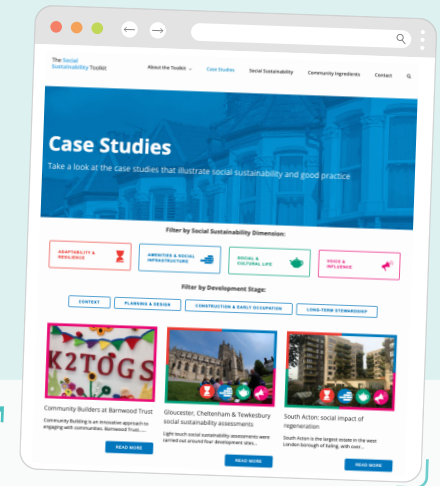


[www.jpi-urbaneurope.eu/project/bright-future/](http://www.jpi-urbaneurope.eu/project/bright-future/)

## Improving the social value of new development

Improving the social value of new development: Gloucestershire-based Barnwood Trust commissioned a website bringing together case studies and examples of social sustainability targeted at all the different agencies engaged in housebuilding in the country, from parishes to planning authorities, community groups and large scale developers.

[www.socialsustainabilityglos.org/case-studies](http://www.socialsustainabilityglos.org/case-studies)



## From our work, we have learnt that we need to pay attention to:



Safeguarding the social and environmental assets of local areas, to build on what is protective and supports people to thrive in what can be difficult circumstances.



Meeting the needs of residents in different circumstances including people living precarious lives.



Raising our collective game to minimise the negative environmental consequences of demolition and rebuilding, making better decisions about the balance between social, environmental and economic trade-offs.

# Using the framework

We have used the framework as a tool for:

- Planning & design of new developments, area regeneration and redevelopment
- Monitoring & evaluation of the impact of built environment change
- Building an understanding of local places to inform actions taken by different stakeholders from communities to public authorities and private developers.

In the UK there is a new imperative to build homes at scale and to create communities that are sustainable, through brown or grey-field site development, town extensions or the next generation of new towns.

Our social sustainability framework is a tried and tested tool to use at key stages of new development and regeneration.

We want to use the framework to improve the quality of new house building by working with different agencies and organisations. This could be through short interventions or larger scale involvement.

Get in touch if you would like to work with us, or just to speak more about our ideas: [nicola.bacon@social-life.co](mailto:nicola.bacon@social-life.co)

## 1. Planning & land use

Potential clients: public sector planners, developers, planning consultancies, master-planning teams



Critical dimension at this stage: Voice & Influence (followed by Social & Cultural Life and Amenities & Social Infrastructure).

## 2. Design & development

Potential clients: developers, housing associations, architects, master-planning teams



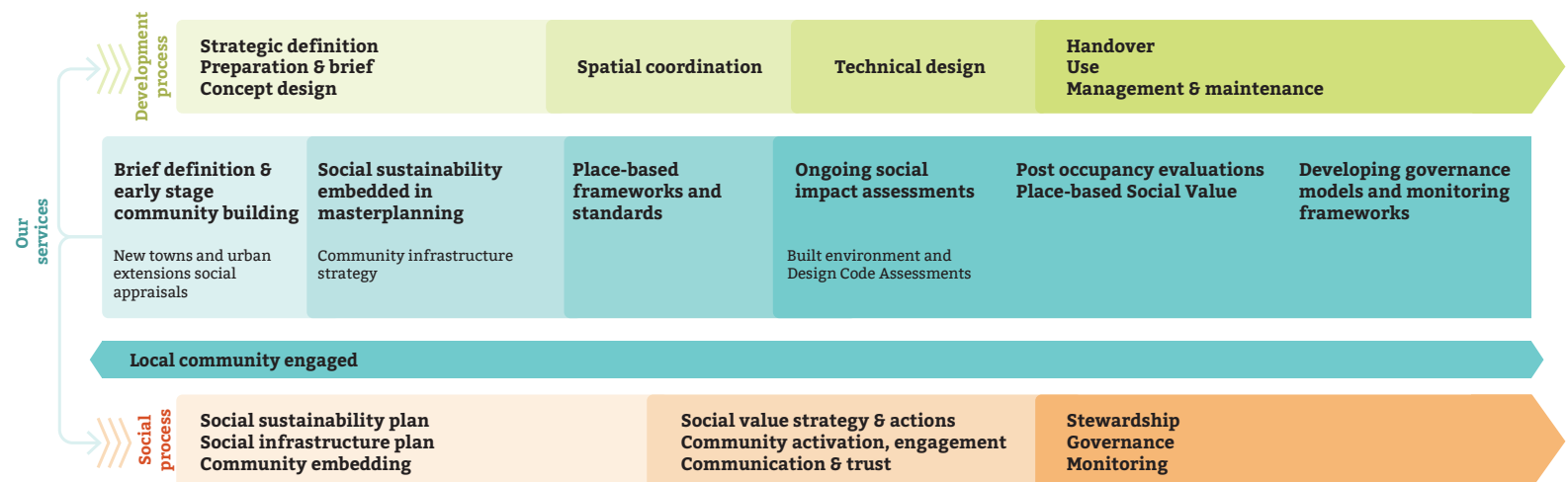
Critical dimensions at this stage: Amenities & Social Infrastructure and Voice & Influence (followed by Social & Cultural Life and Adaptability & Resilience).

## 3. Stewardship

Potential clients: local authorities, housing associations, developers with long-term stake in the area.



Critical dimensions at this stage: Adaptability & Resilience and Social & Cultural Life (followed by Voice & Influence and then Amenities & Social Infrastructure).





**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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