



**national network
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improvement**

The 3ni Social Capital Score

**Capturing the creation of social capital
at the hyper-local level**

**A framework for neighbourhood-level
measurement of community resilience**

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*Adam Coutts, Diego Mauricio Diaz Velásquez,
Millie Dessent, Dan Crowe*



Executive summary

Social capital is essential for communities to thrive. It's the network of bonds, connections and everyday interactions that hold a place together and open doors to new opportunities. The evidence for why it matters is now substantial: in 2025, 3ni teamed up with Demos and Local Trust to publish a series of papers on social capital which, together, concluded that social capital is one of the most important but neglected factors in explaining how economic growth can be kickstarted, health outcomes improved, and resilience built in the neighbourhoods that need it most (Haldane & Halpern, 2025).

Yet despite social capital's importance, there is no single, agreed way to measure it. Tools like the Community Needs Index (developed by Local Trust and OCSI) are valuable, but they capture a broader picture of foundational social infrastructure – physical assets, local services, green spaces. Other existing approaches like the ONS social capital measures and DCMS' Community Life Survey don't operate at the neighbourhood level, covering regions or the country as a whole.

As things stand, a fundamental gap exists between where social capital is **created** – in neighbourhoods, where people meet in pubs, parks and community centres – and where it is currently **measured**: at regional and national aggregate levels.

This is where 3ni's Social Capital Score comes in: it captures information the measures we already have do not. Roughly 55% of its variation is independent of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, and 84% is independent of the Community Needs Index. In plain English: the Social Capital Score sees things those measures miss, in the places they were not designed to see.

The Social Capital Score provides England's first comprehensive neighbourhood-level measure of social capital across all 33,755 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs). With an average population footprint of approximately 1,700 residents, the Score is the first social capital measurement to actually reflect the walking-distance communities where trust and social networks are built through daily, regular interactions at the corner shop, school gates or football club.

Drawing on academic and policy research on how social capital functions and can be fostered, this paper sets out the case for neighbourhood-level measurement. It presents the rationale, methodology and policy applications of the Social Capital Score, and reports the headline findings of its first statistical release.



1. Introduction:

The case for measuring social capital

The development of the Social Capital Score (SCS) is not just another index for researchers and policymakers to ponder over. It taps into a general mood in the country: that social relationships between people from different backgrounds are not what they once were. Polling shows that whilst there is now a persistent perception of social division across the country (IPSOS, 2025), we can take heart that the vast majority still believe their neighbourhood is a place where people can form meaningful connections – no matter their personal backgrounds or circumstances (DCMS, 2025).

Earlier this year, government signalled its intention to help strengthen those communities facing disproportionate cohesion and resilience challenges. *Protecting What Matters: Towards a More Confident, Cohesive and Resilient United Kingdom* outlines its commitment to improving resilience and social cohesion nation-wide, “strengthening local communities so they feel secure, full of opportunity and worth being proud of”, with a clear understanding that much of this work must be done in the neighbourhoods where it is currently weakest (MHCLG, 2026).

Much of the government’s plans involve amplifying, supporting and encouraging the work of “ordinary people and civil society groups” who are bringing neighbours together to “engage meaningfully and build the bonds that are so important to our social fabric” (MHCLG, 2026).

This aligns with the objectives of the Pride in Place (PiP) programme and its commitment of up to £20 million each of long-term funding and support for 284 of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK. Referencing 3ni’s Social Capital Series 2025, it is **rooted in importance of neighbourhoods and social capital**: “Strong neighbourhoods and communities are vital to drive growth.

Strong social capital contributes to improved outcomes in wellbeing, education, crime and health. It also fosters innovation, reduces transaction costs and facilitates better decision-making. Social trust, a key part of social capital, is strongly linked to increases in productivity and income” (MHCLG, 2025).

Phase one funded 75 towns across the UK. The 169 PiP phase two neighbourhoods (146 of them in England) were identified using a compound measure of deprivation (Index of Multiple Deprivation) and community need (Community Needs Index), accounting for the impact of high levels of disadvantage and low levels of social infrastructure. In February 2026 an additional 40 neighbourhoods were announced for inclusion in the programme, targeted at areas where community cohesion was weakest.

Whilst the Pride in Place programme and Protecting What Matters have set out a real ambition, they have lacked the data to act on it at the right scale. Where social capital has been eroded, what kind of social capital has gone, and which streets have lost the most: regional and national figures cannot answer these questions – but neighbourhoods can.

Neighbourhoods are where social capital and cohesion are actually created and sustained: the daily interactions between local people over the garden fence or at a gym class. The 3ni SCS is the first attempt to map social capital at that scale across England – identifying which hyper-local areas should be the priority for investment, and helping to inform what types of community activities or infrastructure might deliver the greatest social and economic returns.



2. What is social capital and why does it matter?

Social capital is the basis of a thriving community. It's what makes things happen locally: the weekly activities and gatherings, annual events and celebrations, local community groups and mutual aid networks that bring people together and make them feel part of something they're proud of.

Although the term can sound abstract, social capital is anything but. It's the notification on the street WhatsApp group or neighbourhood Facebook page when someone needs a hand or has something to share. It's the laughter from the stay-and-play toddler session or knit-and-natter at the community centre. It's the ukulele band or community choir practising on a Tuesday night, the conversations at the school gates, the community meal or local repair café. These small, human moments add up to something with real weight.

Last year, 3ni collaborated with Demos and Local Trust to publish the 2025 Social Capital series, inspired by 3ni's work in Stoke-on-Trent. The second report developed a more tangible definition of social capital, and after a rigorous literature review, the definition developed by Kawachi and colleagues (2008) was adopted as offering a suitable, pragmatic framework that can be measured and applied practically: social capital is the sum total of "the resources available to individuals and communities through their social relationships and networks."

Originating from public health and social epidemiology, the definition encompasses the support we find through friends, neighbours, and local institutions – from help with childcare and financial assistance to information about job opportunities and mental health support. This is not a one-way, transactional relationship: individuals benefit from the support and resources that living in an area with high social capital provides, but there is also an implied reciprocal, mutual nature to the relationships and networks through which assistance and opportunity flow, with aggregate benefits for the community as a whole.

Evidence from 3ni, Demos and Local Trust's social capital series alongside academic and policy literature from the past decade has shown just how important social capital is to creating thriving, dynamic and resilient neighbourhoods:

- **Social capital supports economic growth.** Higher social capital is associated with improved information flows, lower transaction costs, improved labour market functioning and higher trust leading to stronger institutions and more investment in public goods (Haldane & Halpern, 2025).
- **Social capital improves social mobility.** Where we live shapes who we know, and who we know shapes where our lives go. Raj Chetty et al (2022) showed that a child from an economically deprived background growing up in an area with more cross-class friendships sees their lifetime income rise by 20%. The Behavioural Insights Team (2025) Friends with Benefits study, focused on the UK, found low-income children in places with more 'long ties' earn around 26% (£2,690) more annually as adults than those in the least connected areas.
- **Social capital builds cohesion.** The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) have highlighted robust domestic and international evidence that areas with a rich web of social capital, grown on a foundation of diverse and accessible social infrastructure, are more capable of responding to crises and least likely to be at risk of civil disorder (Coutts & Díaz Velásquez, 2025). On the flip side, polling of 13,000 adults after the summer 2024 riots showed that the areas most impacted suffer from lower social connection and higher isolation (UCL Policy Lab, More in Common & Citizens UK, 2025).
- **Social capital fosters happy, healthy and safe neighbourhoods.** This is something we've seen first-hand at 3ni, working in neighbourhoods that have a diverse range of grassroots groups, networks and community-based activities, and the contrast with areas where civic associational life and foundational social

infrastructure has been hollowed out. Social capital can improve mental health outcomes, lower mortality risk and encourage positive health behaviours; it lowers the risk of crime and supports crime-preventative behaviours and norms; and it provides a protective shield for children and families living in disadvantaged communities (Coutts & Díaz Velásquez, 2025; Coutts, Xia & Wang, 2025; Coutts & Lesiak, 2025).

The three dimensions of social capital

Any robust measurement of social capital must draw on its three interlocking dimensions to capture the full spectrum of social networks and relationships that exist in neighbourhoods. The academic literature distinguishes three ways that social capital functions, each providing a specific set of benefits for communities to:

Get by.

Bonding social capital refers to ties among people from similar households and backgrounds that enable them to get by and live well together – the strong connections within families, friendship groups, and communities of shared identity. These relationships provide immediate practical support, emotional sustenance, and the foundation of trust upon which broader connections can be built. They are what help people to get by in both day-to-day life and at times of crisis (Putnam, 2000).



Get on.

Bridging social capital describes connections between people from different backgrounds and households – what Granovetter (1973) termed the ‘weak ties’ that prove crucial to getting on and ahead in life. These connections form through workplaces, volunteering, sports clubs and shared activities, and enable diverse groups to access resources and opportunities they would not otherwise have. They are what help people get on in life, opening doors and connecting people to new experiences, possibilities and outcomes.



Get things done.

Linking social capital connects individuals and communities with institutions – relationships with local government, public services and centres of power that enable communities to influence decisions affecting their lives (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). This collective efficacy helps communities get things done: from saving a local pub and renovating a community centre to improving local transport provision and activities for children and young people.



3. The measurement gap: Why existing approaches fall short

It has been well established that social capital is foundational to happy, healthy and resilient communities. And yet there is a lack of appropriate instruments that can measure it in the place where its existence or absence is most striking: in neighbourhoods.

Operating at regional or national levels, existing approaches measure social capital at a scale that is too great to get to grips with the large variations in access to social capital that exist between neighbourhoods across the country.

While the loss of social infrastructure has been nationwide, its decline has often had the greatest impact on the neighbourhoods that were already most socially and economically deprived (Local Trust, 2024). This has had a knock-on impact on the strength of the social fabric in these neighbourhoods – on the opportunities to bond with neighbours and connect with others who share the postcode.

Other factors also shape the presence or absence of social capital at a neighbourhood level – such as the design of the built environment or the occurrence of shared workplaces (King et al, 2019; Fiorentino, 2023). Busy roads next to school gates that prevent parent conversations or bifurcate neighbourhoods; large open spaces that act as ‘green buffers’ but separate communities; local people forced to commute elsewhere for work every day – each of these factors profoundly shapes whether connections can form and, if they can, what form they take.

One important thing the SCS makes harder to avoid: low social capital is not a property of communities. It is a property of what has been done to them. The neighbourhoods with the lowest levels of social capital (the highest SCS and highest levels of community need) are the neighbourhoods where the state, the market, and civic institutions have retreated furthest. The community centre has

closed. The library has moved into town. The bus service has been cut. The social club is now flats. Each loss removes another place where people might have met. The cumulative effect is what the SCS measures.

Naming this matters. The story of such under-resourced neighbourhoods is not a story about people who stopped trying. It is a story about the slow withdrawal of the things that make trying possible.

We need neighbourhood-level data capture and analysis to target interventions directly to those communities where social capital is weakest, deploying resource only where it is most needed and yielding the greatest potential social and economic returns on investment. The table below reviews the existing major UK approaches to measuring social capital, their strengths, and – most critically – their limitations when it comes to designing the neighbourhood-level interventions that boost social connection and trust in the sports halls, bingo clubs and parent-toddler groups where it is most likely to be created and retained.

Measure	How it works	Strengths	Limitations	Local use
ONS Social Capital Measures	Periodic reports drawing primarily on survey data to assess dimensions including trust, social networks, and civic participation.	National coverage enabling UK-wide comparisons. Consistent methodology allowing time-series analysis. Covers multiple dimensions of social capital.	Data reported at regional or national level only – cannot identify neighbourhood variation. Sample sizes insufficient for sub-local authority estimates. No spatial dimension reflecting where social capital is created.	Not possible
Community Life Survey	Conducted by DCMS; provides detailed UK survey data on civic participation, volunteering and neighbourhood relationships. Some iterations have included Output Area Classification data enabling limited geographic analysis.	Rich detail on volunteering, civic engagement and neighbourhood attitudes. Long time series enabling trend analysis. Some geographic classification enabling broad area-type comparisons.	Small sample size means data must be apportioned to Output Area level using classification group membership – an approximation that assumes all areas of a "type" are equivalent. Cannot capture within-type variation. Multiple years must be pooled to achieve any geographic granularity.	Approximate use only
Understanding Society	The UK Household Longitudinal Study provides rich individual-level data including social networks, trust and civic participation, with geographic identifiers enabling some area-level analysis.	Longitudinal design enabling tracking of change over time. Rich individual-level data on social networks and support. LSOA identifiers available under secure access conditions.	Designed for individual and household analysis, not neighbourhood-level measurement. Sample too sparse for reliable estimates at LSOA level – most LSOAs contain zero or very few respondents. Secure access requirements limit practical use for local policy application.	Too sparse

4. The 3ni Social Capital Score: Methodology

The SCS is the product of a year's work with OCSI – Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, the team behind the Community Needs Index (CNI) and a longstanding contributor to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The full technical methodology is published alongside this paper as the Social Capital Score Technical Methodology Paper, with further information available in a Frequently Asked Questions.

- **Three dimensions, drawn from the literature.** The SCS is built around the bonding-bridging-linking framework that has emerged as the most usable taxonomy in the social capital literature (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004; Kawachi et al 2008). Bonding social capital captures close-knit ties between people who live nearby and share circumstances: neighbour-to-neighbour trust, mutual support, the sense of belonging. Bridging captures the wider, weaker ties across difference that bring information, opportunity and exchange. Linking captures the vertical connections between communities and institutions of power: local government, public services, civil society.
- **A basket of indicators for each.** Each dimension is constructed from a set of indicators drawn from established academic and ONS practice. They include direct neighbourhood-level measures and survey-based measures, apportioned to neighbourhood level using the standard Output Area Classification approach used in government statistics for small-area work.
- **Construction.** We quality-assure the indicators, orient them consistently, standardise them by rank, and combine them into dimension scores. We apply shrinkage estimation against the Local Authority District to improve reliability where small numbers make raw values unreliable. The IMD uses the same technique. We then standardise the dimensions through an exponential transformation that gives more emphasis to the worst-performing areas and

controls cancellation between them, so an LSOA with very low bonding capital is not pulled back into the middle of the distribution by a high score on linking, and vice versa. We combine the three transformed dimensions with equal weights.

- **Is the SCS just a re-weighting of existing measures?** We asked that question first. The SCS overlaps with existing measures of deprivation and community need, and it should. Neighbourhoods with weak social capital tend to be neighbourhoods with multiple disadvantages, a measure that found otherwise would be the suspicious one. The test is whether the SCS adds information. The SCS shows a moderate-to-strong relationship with the IMD 2025 at LSOA level ($r=0.672$, $R^2=0.452$) and a weaker but still meaningful relationship with the Community Needs Index 2023 ($r=0.396$, $R^2=0.157$). Translated: roughly 45% of what the SCS measures is shared with the IMD; the other 55% is not. For the CNI, the independent share is closer to 84%. The SCS identifies something distinct, and it identifies it at the geographic scale where social capital lives.

5. Policy implications and applications

The 3ni Social Capital Score transforms social capital from an abstract concept discussed in academic papers into an actionable policy tool. By providing a robust and consistent measure of social capital at the neighbourhood level, it allows researchers and policymakers to distinguish between those with the most and least social capital – and to do so with the granularity that actually matters for targeted investment.

The outcome of the first SCS shows the 20 LSOAs with the lowest levels of social capital in England span ten different Local Authority Districts but are concentrated in post-industrial urban centres – especially across the North and the Midlands. Analysis shows significant overlap between low social capital and established deprivation measures: all 20 LSOAs with the lowest social capital scores fall within the top 20% of deprived areas on the IMD 2025 (OCSI & 3ni, 2026).

The SCS does two things at once. It identifies neighbourhoods where deprivation and weak social fabric coincide: the places where intervention is most urgent. It also identifies neighbourhoods that are similarly deprived but where social capital has held: the places that prove regeneration is possible and that have networks and assets others can learn from.

This complements the Neighbourhood Recovery Pipeline proposed by the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, a ten-year pathway for sustained investment in the 424 English MSOAs that contain the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods: the 146 already receiving Pride in Place funding and a further 278 that have not (ICON, 2026). The Pipeline is defined at MSA scale, the level at which Pride in Place allocates resources to populations of 5,000 to 15,000. The SCS works one level below, at the LSOA, so it can identify which streets and neighbourhoods within those wider footprints have lost the most social capital and which have retained it. Used together, the Pipeline sets the order in which places are reached, and the Score sharpens the targeting within each one.

The argument for the SCS is not that government should spend more, although a further expansion of long-term investment under the Pride in Place programme for areas that have experienced decades of deindustrialisation, asset-stripping and austerity is surely warranted. It is that government should spend the same money on better-evidenced things, with a clearer sense of who is leading the work. Communities should be in the driving seat of local change. The role of central and local government is to put the data, the resource, and the decision-making in their hands – and knowing where to support and when to stand back.

An additional aspect of practical application involves the dynamic but consistent nature of the Score. The first iteration of the SCS develops a conceptual framework that provides the basis for future releases, as indicators were chosen on the basis of regular collection and publication. Similar to the IMD model, this accounts for potential future changes to the baskets of indicators, enabling the Score to benefit from the most accurate and useful data for measuring social capital while also allowing for comparison of a neighbourhood's relative ranking as a snapshot in time.

This will support the ongoing development of our understanding of social capital and its functions, while also enabling policymakers to adjust and fine-tune interventions based on refreshed understandings of the state of play at the neighbourhood level. We can't rebuild what we can't measure – and now, for the first time, we can measure it where it matters.

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3ni is a social value partnership, bringing together policy, practice, evidence and data to transform neighbourhoods across the country. By creating a space for collaboration and innovation, we're working with local government and the wider public sector to drive meaningful, lasting change where it's needed most. At 3ni, we believe that real transformation starts from the ground up.

Through our national network for neighbourhood improvement, we're sharing and shaping the best and next practices that help rebuild disadvantaged communities. Our research, events, and activities are designed to support local government and public sector partners in learning what works – and, more importantly, putting it into action.

For more information about 3ni:

Email: info@3ni.co.uk

Visit: 3ni.co.uk

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This is Capacity CIC, Suite 3A, 24 Queen Avenue, L2 4TZ.
Registration Number: 13356461.