

Measuring the social impacts of regeneration in South Acton:

Results of the third social sustainability assessment

Summary report
September 2021



About the research

This report describes the findings of a research project exploring how the Acton Gardens regeneration programme is affecting people living in South Acton in Ealing, West London. The research took place between April and September 2020. This is the third round of this research, building on previous social sustainability assessments in 2015 and 2018.

The research was commissioned by Acton Gardens LLP – a joint venture between Countryside Properties and L&Q. It repeats questions used in two earlier rounds of research in 2015 and 2018 by Social Life, adding questions about the impact of COVID-19.

The purpose of the research was to explore the social impacts of regeneration, to better understand local priorities and needs, and to influence the planning, design and management of future phases of development. The research findings are a snapshot of how residents are experiencing regeneration halfway through the programme, when new housing has been developed at scale but large areas of the older estate are still occupied.

This research took place during the extraordinary period of the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the restrictions following the first lockdown in March 2020 were eased. The research method and approach took account of the need for social distancing, to keep residents and interviewers safe. The findings need to be put in the context of the time, when people’s relationship to the place they lived changed as schools shut and many people found themselves staying at home. Residents became dependent on the few facilities that were open and available, especially on what could be done outside.

This was a unique time, when pressures and stresses on residents were unprecedented. National data shows a decline in wellbeing and a rise in anxiety after March 2020. Carrying out research at this time captured the experience of a community living through crisis. The difficulties of life were reflected in many conversations and survey responses. The research gives valuable insight into residents’ experiences of the pandemic and how relationships, social networks and the work of different agencies supported resilience and helped people get by.

The project uses a framework for measuring the social sustainability of new housing and mixed-use developments originally developed for The Berkeley Group by Social Life and Professor Tim Dixon of the University of Reading in 2012. Extra questions have been added to capture the impact of COVID-19 and living through restrictions. Acton Gardens LLP will repeat this assessment every two to three years throughout the regeneration programme.

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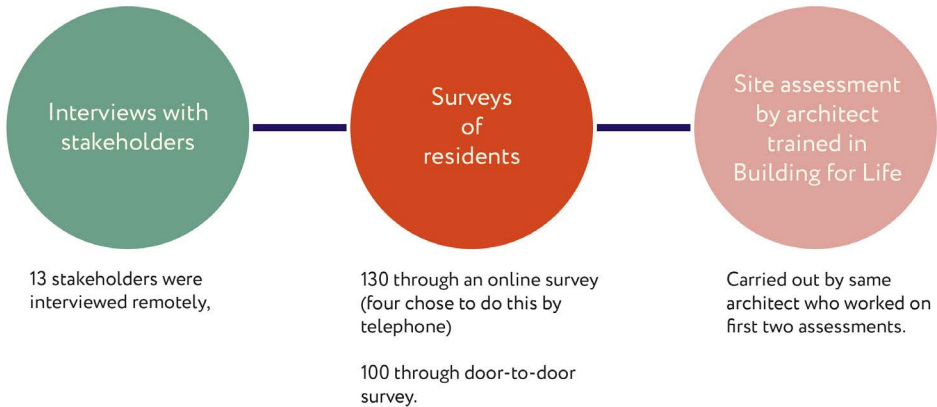
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Research method

Between July and September 2020, 230 people took part in a household survey of the South Acton Estate and Acton Gardens. Of these, 130 people completed the online version of the survey (four took up the option to do the survey over the telephone); 100 people took part through a door-to-door survey.

Residents were asked about their feelings about their neighbourhood and community life, their opportunities to influence or be involved in decision making and their views of the regeneration programme, as well as their experience of COVID-19.

The residents survey was complemented by stakeholder interviews and a survey of the built environment and how it was supporting wellbeing and community life.



Differences from the 2015 and 2018 assessments

The data collection approach for this third social sustainability assessment had to adapt to a challenging context. Data was gathered through a mixture of on- and offline methods to ensure social distancing and the safety of residents and interviewers.

The constraints of data gathering mean that the data does not match the tenure profile of the estate as it has done in previous assessments. Ealing Council secure tenants are under-represented in the survey, because of difficulties contacting this group by text and because door-to-door interviewing was only possible in blocks where doors opened to the outside (to allow interviewers to keep a two metre distance from people being interviewed).

Because of these limitations, survey findings are described as trends rather than precise figures and there is less confidence in the robustness of the results than in previous years.



Summer BBQ, July 2019

Key findings

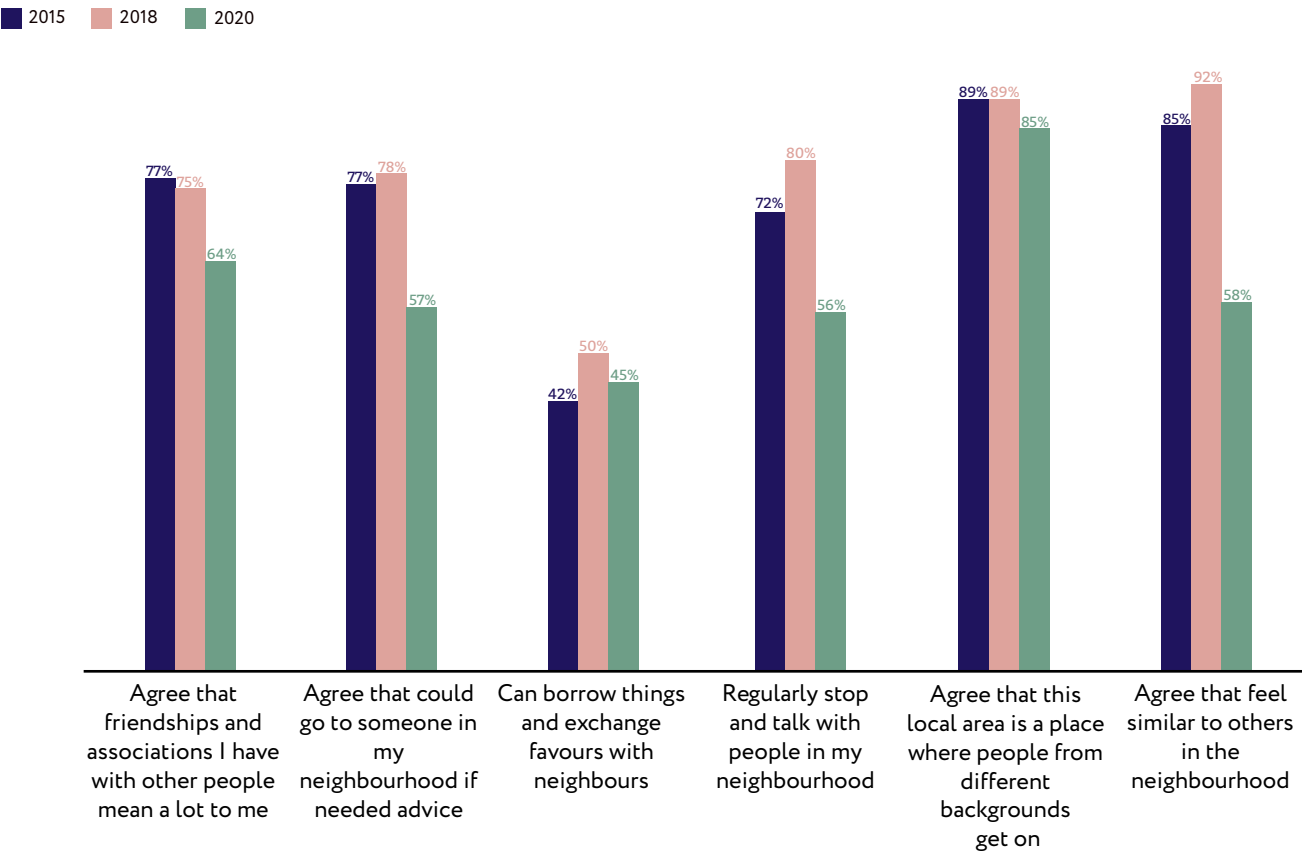
- Residents and agencies came together to support the community during the pandemic, setting up food distribution, supporting vulnerable people and providing laptops for children and young people at school. Many residents were involved in this who had not previously been active in the community.
- The pandemic has exposed the number of residents in food poverty, incomes have fallen for many residents and concerns over the affordability of new homes have increased. Many families lack what they need to support their children's education: half of the families surveyed whose children were being home schooled said they did not have the right equipment to support their children to learn.
- Neighbourliness, belonging and wellbeing all decreased between 2018 and 2020. These factors of everyday life are likely to have been impacted strongly by the experience of the pandemic. National data shows a sharp fall in wellbeing after March 2020.
- People surveyed living on the older estate, and in the new housing, reported some different experiences. On the older estate wellbeing and people's sense of financial security fell noticeably. On the new development relationships with neighbours and perceptions of safety declined. There is some evidence of residents in Acton Gardens organising activities and creating new local networks.

- While the majority of residents surveyed continue to support the regeneration, concerns continue to be expressed by longstanding residents about the impact on their social networks and supports.
- There are still some concerns about how best to provide social infrastructure for the whole area and fears that what now exists will not be enough for the needs of the growing future community. There is an awareness that people moving into other nearby housing developments will also place demands on local social infrastructure.
- Residents' priorities for the future, for the regeneration, and their views about what supports their quality of life reflect experiences during the pandemic. In 2020 they put a greater emphasis on green space, the quality of home, facilities and services, and personal finances than in previous years.
- The new Acton Gardens Community Centre and the relocated Bollo Bridge Youth Centre are settling into their new buildings. Some issues were raised about the way that services have been relocated and loss of sensitivity of provision.
- There is a wish to see more social and retail spaces across the area, and a fear that without these the area risks becoming sterile.
- Influence and willingness to act are strong, however new issues about perceptions of safety are emerging. This may be linked to the disruption of regeneration, and reflect broader anxieties linked to the experience of living through COVID-19.



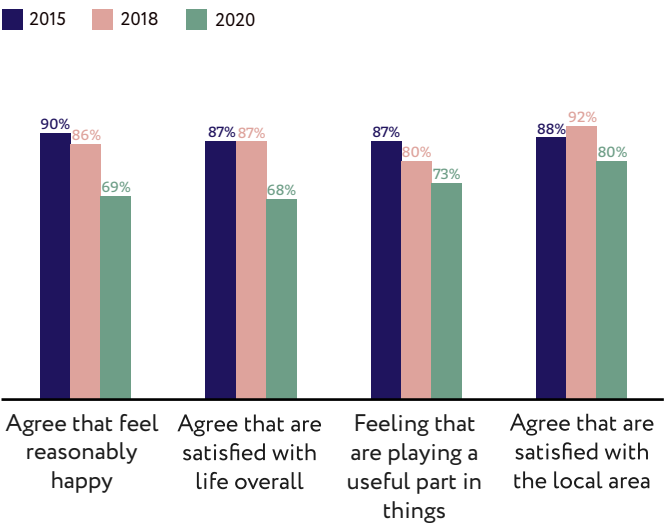
Food delivery volunteers, Summer 2020

Neighbourliness indicators by year



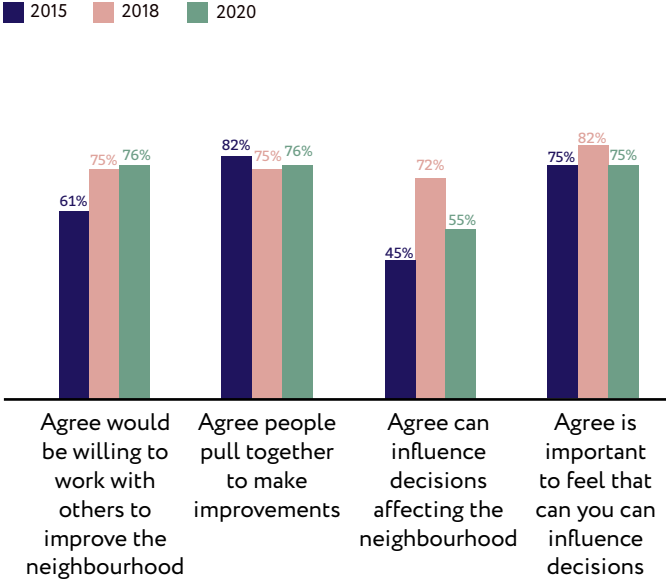
N= 227-230 (2020), N=349-353 (2018), N = 274-288 (2015)

Wellbeing indicators by year

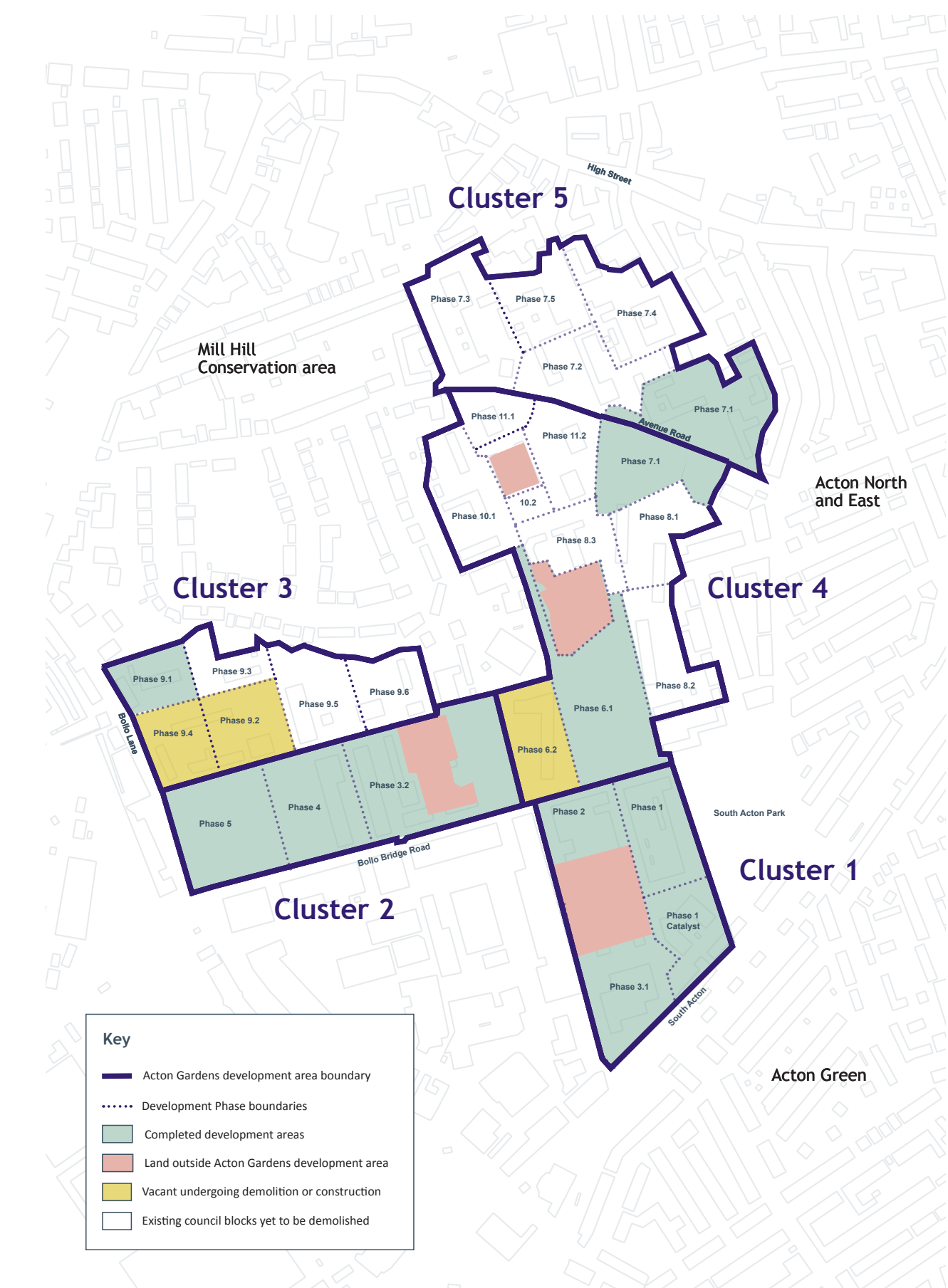


N= 203-225 (2020), N=337-252 (2018), N = 274-286 (2015)

Voice and influence indicators by year



N= 209-219 2020, N=323-342 2018, N = 198-251 2015



Who is living in South Acton?

The residents survey gives us a snapshot of the area and who is living there today. The population is changing as new residents move into the area, and longstanding residents of the South Acton Estate either move to new homes in Acton Gardens, or to other homes away from the estate. Across the footprint of the South Acton Estate regeneration programme, the total number of homes on the estate grew from 1,471 in 2015 to 2,305 in summer 2020.

Tenure change from 2015 to 2020 in Acton Gardens

- In 2015, at the time of the survey there were 310 new homes on Acton Gardens built by Acton Gardens LLP and by Catalyst housing association. By 2020 this number had increased to 1,740 homes.
- In 2015 there were 68 new social rented homes on Acton Gardens. By 2020 this had increased to 474.
- In 2015 there were 19 shared ownership homes on Acton Gardens. In 2020 there were 193, plus 18 shared equity homes earmarked for South Acton leaseholders.
- In 2015 80 privately owned homes had been built on Acton Gardens, in 2020 this number had risen to 719.
- By 2020 112 L&Q-managed private rented homes had been built. An unknown number of people rent privately from leaseholders in the older and new homes.

The social sustainability assessment

The project uses a research framework for measuring the social sustainability of new housing and mixed-use developments originally developed for The Berkeley Group by Social Life and Professor Tim Dixon of the University of Reading in 2012.

The third social sustainability study of South Acton in 2018 showed that the residents continued to share strong bonds of support and neighbourliness, and feel a strong sense of belonging and connection to the area. The 2018 assessment revealed that residents of the new housing were becoming more comfortable with their neighbours and the area. This third assessment showed how this neighbourliness and social solidarity has been challenged by the pandemic and how, in the new development, neighbourliness has been put under strain. It continues to reveal a gap in everyday experience between social housing tenants and private owners and renters.

Social and Cultural Life

- In summer 2020, on both the older estate and in the new development, the scores for indicators within the Social and Cultural Life dimension fell. For people on the older estate, wellbeing declined most sharply, from stronger to weaker than expected. In the new homes, feelings of safety fell. In both areas, perceptions of local facilities also declined.
- In 2015 South Acton Estate received a more positive assessment than Acton Gardens for Social and Cultural Life. By 2018 there had been an improvement in these scores for Acton Gardens, particularly for local identity and links with neighbours. Some of these improvements proved to be fragile in the face of the pandemic, with neighbourliness falling on Acton Gardens between 2018 and 2020. On the older estate, neighbourly relationships scores continued to be strong.

Voice and Influence

- Residents' sense of influence remained strong in 2020, as in 2018. In both the new and older areas, willingness to act scores strengthened, from expected to stronger than expected. This reflects residents' willingness to work with other people locally to improve the neighbourhood.
- This continues the trajectory since 2015 of gradual strengthening in this indicator. This appears to have been affected less by the pandemic than other areas.



Over 55's event, July 2019

Music performance, July 2019

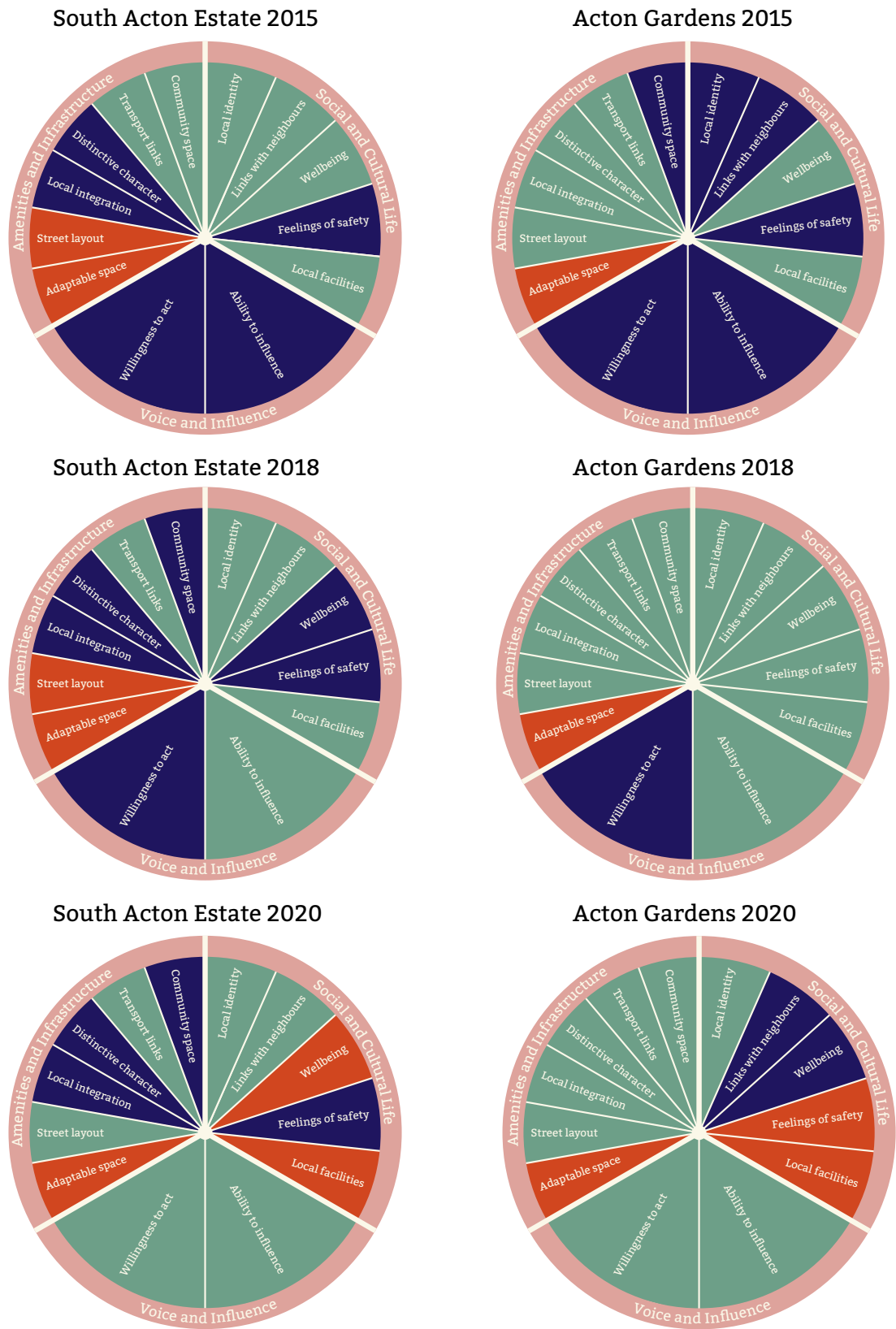


Amenities and Social Infrastructure

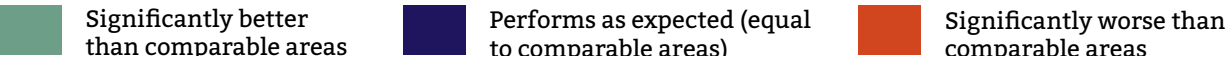
- The Amenities and Social Infrastructure scores for Acton Gardens are higher than for the South Acton Estate, reflecting improvements to housing design and the public realm. However for both areas, scores improved between 2018 and 2020.
- Acton Gardens is given a positive assessment for five of the indicators – transport links, distinctive character, local integration, street layout and community space. South Acton Estate is given a positive assessment for two indicators, transport links and street layout.

Views of the regeneration

- A majority of interviewees think that the regeneration is successful in improving the quality of life of residents, although the percentage reporting "overall positive" feelings about this has fallen since 2018. Overall residents involved in the survey feel informed about the regeneration project.
- Residents placed higher importance on the quality of open spaces, housing quality, safety and the affordability of housing than in 2018. Housing mix and the availability of new housing were lower priorities than in previous years.
- People living on the older estate prioritised housing affordability and housing quality. People living in new developments prioritised improving the quality of open spaces and community safety.
- These priorities reflect the needs of the community during the pandemic, when the home, outside space, and personal finances all became more important.



Scoring explained:



Recommendations for Acton Gardens LLP

A critical task for the regeneration programme will continue to be to help newer and longer-standing residents to find a shared sense of community, to interact in their everyday lives and to build common interests and bonds. This will support existing communities to adapt to change, and new residents to adapt to their new surroundings and develop their sense of belonging as part of the wider community.

1. The community board should be reviewed to explore how it can become more strategic, involve more residents and link more effectively to informal on- and offline networks in both the older estate and within the new development.
2. The energy and commitment revealed by the community response to COVID-19 needs to be nurtured, so new networks and groups can continue support residents during the pandemic and afterwards. These have the potential to become the foundation of new groups and activities that bring together people from different tenures and backgrounds.
3. It is important that Acton Gardens LLP works with partners to address food poverty now, and over coming months and years while the economic impact of the pandemic plays out; and also to understand how financial issues are increasingly colouring the decisions and attitudes of many residents.
4. There is an appetite to see more retail and social facilities in the development that are used by different demographics; this informal social infrastructure can also help support social integration.
5. There is a need to develop a long-term strategy for the provision of social infrastructure that meets the needs of the entire community, balancing activities that are best provided in a central hub and those that are most effective when more dispersed.
6. It is important to continue to support long-term council tenants and leaseholders, and to be aware of the stress and challenge to their wellbeing that the process of moving can bring.



The research team

The report was written by Nicola Bacon, with research and analysis by Christina Bayram and Alix Naylor. Professor Tim Dixon acted as academic reviewer.

The online and door to door survey were carried out by Savanta ComRes, using questions developed by Social Life. The site survey was carried out by Matter Architecture.

Social Life is a social enterprise, created by The Young Foundation in 2012 to become a specialist centre of research and innovation in the social life of communities. All our work is about people's relationship with the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric and wellbeing of local areas. For more information visit www.social-life.co