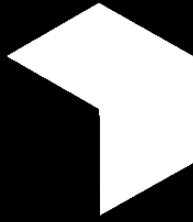# Friends with benefits

How to connect communities to create opportunities

BIT

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

UK friendships bridge income divides. We analysed 6 billion friendships from 20 million UK Facebook users. Low-income people have 47% of their friendships with high-income people, compared with 39% in the US. The South shows far more mixing than post-industrial areas in the North East.

Cross-class friendships link to higher earnings for low-income children. Low-income children who grow up in areas with the most cross-class connections earn 28% (£2,924 per year) more at age 28 than those from the least connected areas.

'Long ties' predict who escapes poverty. Friendships beyond usual social circles strongly predict mobility, especially in deprived neighbourhoods. Small increases in friendships with no mutual connections matter. Areas averaging just one additional long tie per 100 friends see low-income children earn 9.3% (£959 per year) at age 28.

Most connections form locally but segregation limits mixing. Neighbourhoods and schools are where most friendships form, yet both remain segregated by income. Even in mixed areas, people often stick to their own economic group. Universities excel at cross-class mixing but remain less accessible to people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Proximity alone does not create bonds. Shared activities do. Our research across 20+ neighbourhoods revealed that placing diverse economic groups together fails without meaningful interaction. Inclusive workplace cultures and community activities with universal appeal create opportunities for people from different backgrounds to connect.

Neighbourhood design shapes social divides as powerfully as community centres unite them. Built environment features like school gate layouts that facilitate parent conversations can enable cross-class connections as much as poorly designed spaces block them.

Small interventions can build lasting bridges. We recommend reforming school admissions to mix income groups, creating civic service programmes that unite young people across divides, and shifting power to residents through community asset ownership and participatory budgeting.

1 Why social connections matter

Social capital describes the connections, shared values, and trust that form in communities, helping people work together for everyone's benefit [1]. Our relationships shape critical life outcomes, from the jobs we get [2], to whether we end up in jail [3], to our overall wellbeing [4]. Yet UK policymakers have largely overlooked social capital, partly due to measurement challenges and limited evidence on how to build it.

Recent studies by Raj Chetty and colleagues used Facebook friendship data to map social capital across US communities and identified strong links between social networks and economic outcomes [5, 6]. They found that economic connectedness (the extent to which people from lower-income backgrounds form friendships with those from higher-income backgrounds) is a key driver of intergenerational social mobility.

To test whether similar patterns exist in the UK, we analysed 6 billion friendships from 20 million UK Facebook users (58% of the adult population). This revealed patterns of economic connectedness, network cohesion and civic participation across the country, and how these relate to social mobility and other life outcomes.

This report summarises findings from three research components, led jointly by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), Meta and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), with support from Neighbourly Lab, Opportunity Insights and Stripe Partners:

- **Quantitative research:** Analysis of social capital, social mobility and other life outcomes, revealing where connections form and their impact on opportunity (see full working paper on SocArXiv).

- **Qualitative research:** Ethnographic research uncovering the specific neighbourhood features that foster or hinder connections (see full report on Neighbourly Lab's website).

- **Policy design:** Practical recommendations for strengthening social capital across the country, developed with communities and policy experts (see full report on RSA's website).

2 Social connections and opportunity

UK friendships bridge income divides, but not everywhere

High-income people in the UK have more high-income friends, but social networks are less stratified by class than in the US. People below median income form nearly half (47%) of their friendships with those above median income in the UK, compared with approximately 39% in the US [5]. However, social capital varies widely across the UK. Affluent metropolitan areas, particularly London and surrounding regions, have the most friendships across income levels. Post-industrial areas like South Wales and North East England have far fewer cross-class connections (see Figure 1). We also measured several other dimensions of social capital across UK neighbourhoods. Interactive maps and downloadable data are available on our website.

Figure 1: Economic connectedness across the UK.

Notes: Map shows the average share of high-income friends, low-income people have in each postcode district across the UK. Postcode district boundaries do not correspond to London city boundaries, creating unusual map patterns.
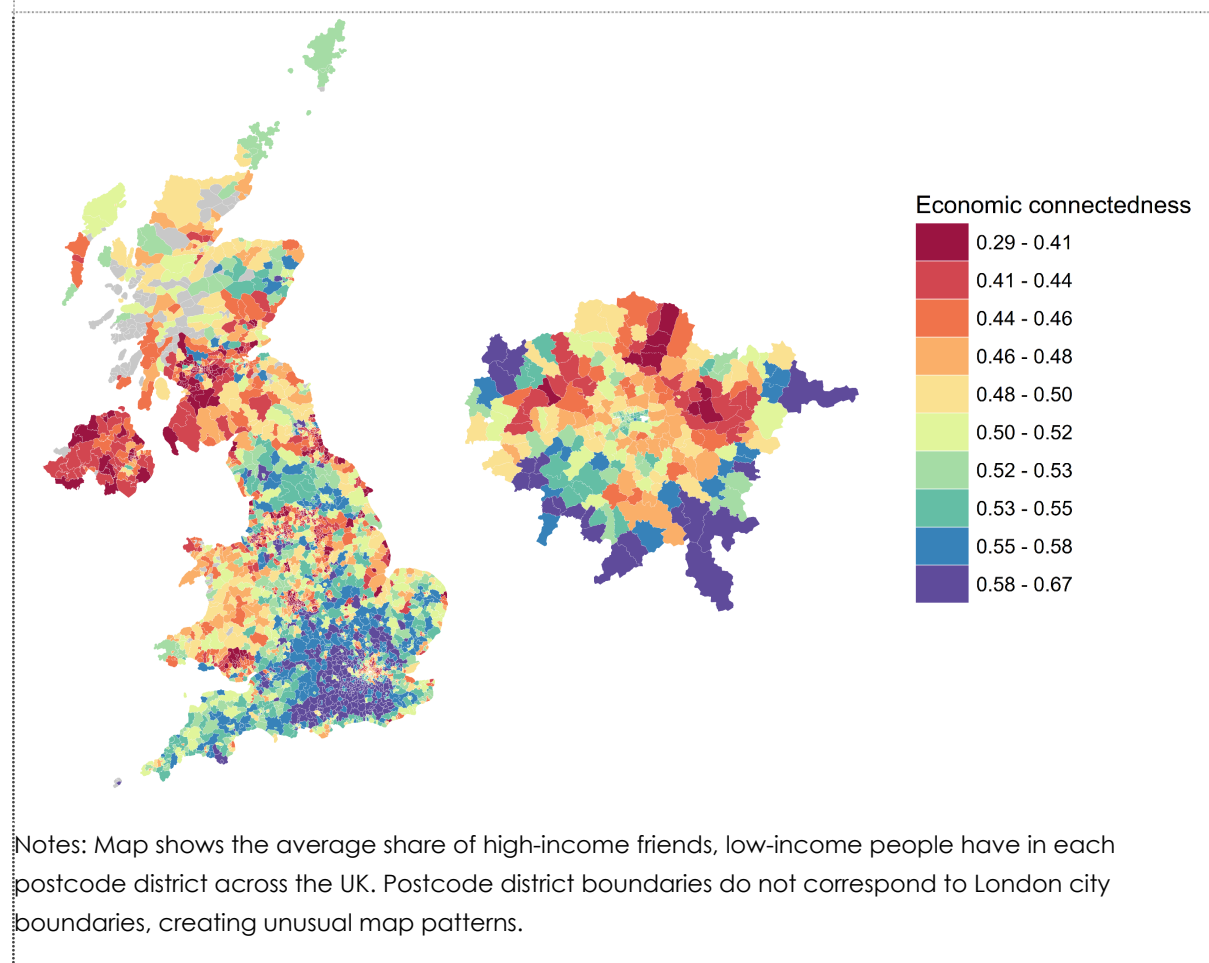
Cross-class friendships and long ties link to higher social mobility

To explore the relationship between social capital and geographical differences in social mobility, we analysed the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. We mapped the earnings at age 28 of children who were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at 16, examining patterns across English local authorities (see Figure 2) and postcode districts [7].

Figure 2: Social mobility across England.

Average adult income rank for FSM children

- 31.16 - 34.08
- 34.08 - 35.49
- 35.49 - 36.61
- 36.61 - 37.26
- 37.26 - 38.11
- 38.11 - 39.04
- 39.04 - 40.13
- 40.13 - 41.54
- 41.54 - 42.80
- 42.80 - 50.18
- NA
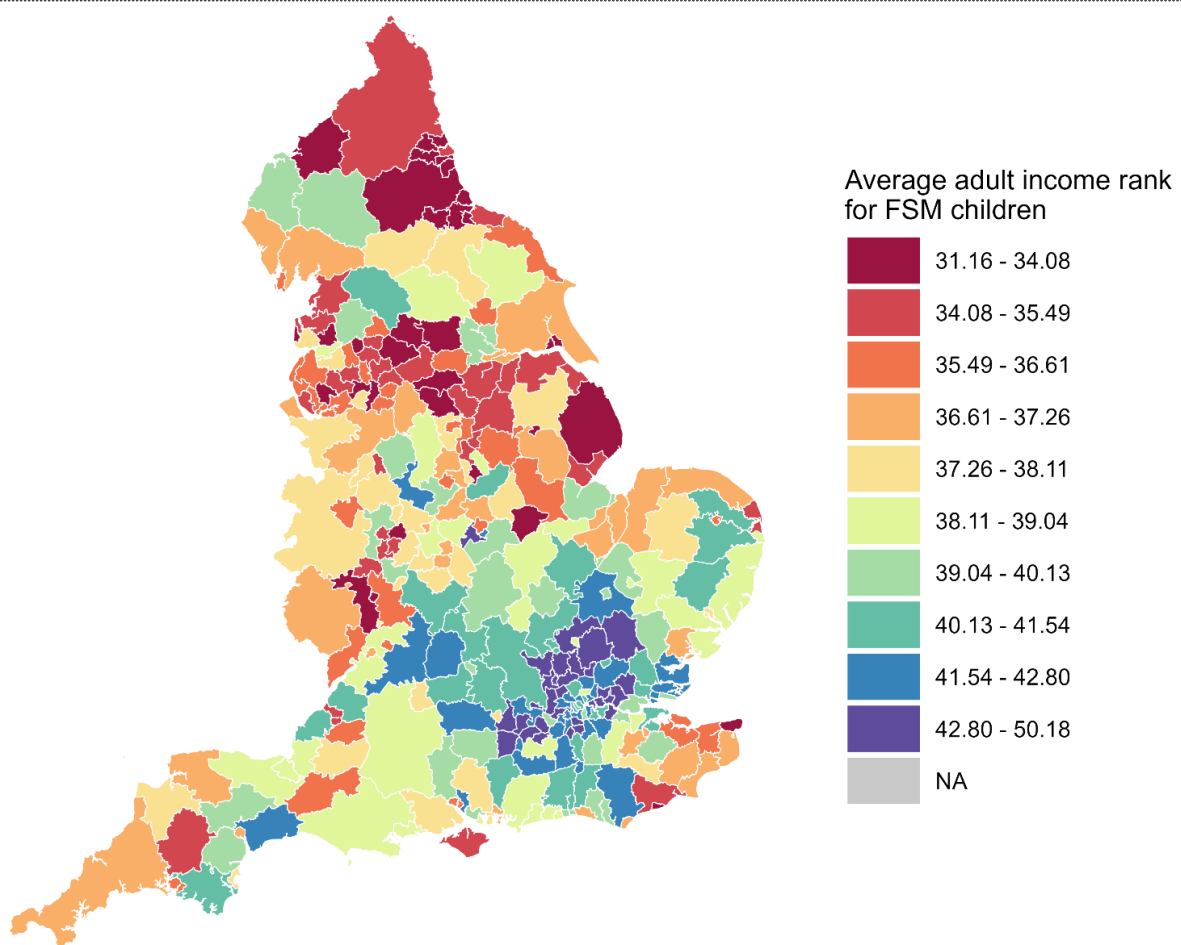
Notes: Map shows social mobility across English local authorities, measured as average income rank at age 28 of children eligible for free school meals at age 16 in a given local authority.

Combining these data with our social capital measures reveals that areas with higher economic connectedness show greater upward mobility. Low-income

children from the top 10% most economically connected local authorities earn about 28% more per year (£2,924) at age 28 than those from the bottom 10% least connected areas.

Another Facebook measure strongly linked to social mobility is the long-tie ratio. This measures the share of friends with whom people have no mutual connections (isolated friendships that do not overlap with other social circles). These friendships are rare, making up only about 3% of people's total friends, but the earnings differences are substantial: low-income children growing up in areas with more long ties (90th versus 10th percentile) earn approximately 26% (£2,690 per year) more at age 28. Each additional long tie per hundred friends in an area is associated with a 9.3% (£959 per year) increase in earnings for low-income children.

Our findings show relationships, not proof of cause and effect. We cannot be certain that social connections directly improve mobility, as other factors like area wealth might influence both. To test this, we compared our social capital measures against the strongest other area-level predictors of mobility, including income, education and health outcomes. The financial advantage of higher long-tie ratios and economic connectedness remains strong even after accounting for these other factors (see Figure 3).

While our economic connectedness findings align with previous US research, the long-tie ratio was only moderately predictive of mobility in that context. Our data cannot tell us exactly why these connections might matter, and friendships with zero mutual friends need not be special in themselves. They may simply be one marker of what really matters—having connections that take you beyond your immediate circle and into different social worlds. Bridging across social boundaries exposes people to new information, perspectives, and opportunities [8]. For those from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is often precisely what is lacking to level the playing field with affluent peers, who tend to inherit broader networks from their parents.

Figure 3: Social capital's relationship with social mobility versus other area characteristics.
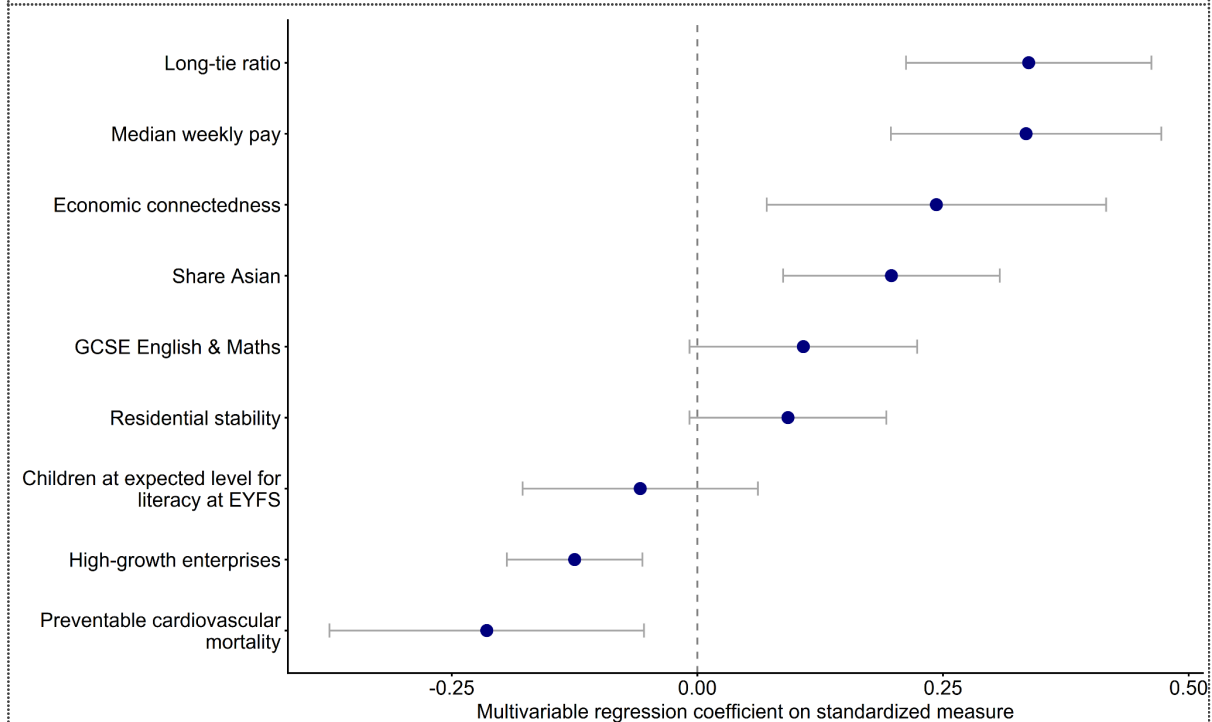
Notes: Local authority-level multivariate regression of social mobility on economic connectedness, long tie ratio and other neighbourhood characteristics that strongly predict social mobility. Both the outcome and dependent variables are standardised to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The regression is weighted by the number of FSM-children in each LA. Intervals represent 95% confidence intervals calculated using heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

Long ties matter most in deprived neighbourhoods

Our main analysis uses local authorities, a commonly used geographic unit for studying regional inequality in the UK. We also created the UK's first social mobility statistics at the postcode district level. This more granular neighbourhood data reveals an important pattern when examining long-tie ratios, social mobility and neighbourhood deprivation together (see Figure 4).

Affluent areas (left) show high social mobility regardless of their long-tie ratios. The most deprived neighbourhoods (right), however, show a striking split: those with more long ties (higher up) achieve strong upward mobility (blue), while equally deprived areas with fewer long ties (lower) show much worse mobility (red and orange). In

other words, having friends beyond your immediate circle may matter most in places that lack other opportunities.

The pattern plays out on the Essex coast, where Westcliff-on-Sea and nearby Canvey Island have similar levels of deprivation. Low-income residents in Westcliff have an average of five long ties per 100 friendships, compared with just four in Canvey Island. This one-friend difference corresponds to children from low-income families in Westcliff earning around 19% (£2,200) more per year.

Figure 4: Long tie ratio, social mobility and neighbourhood deprivation.
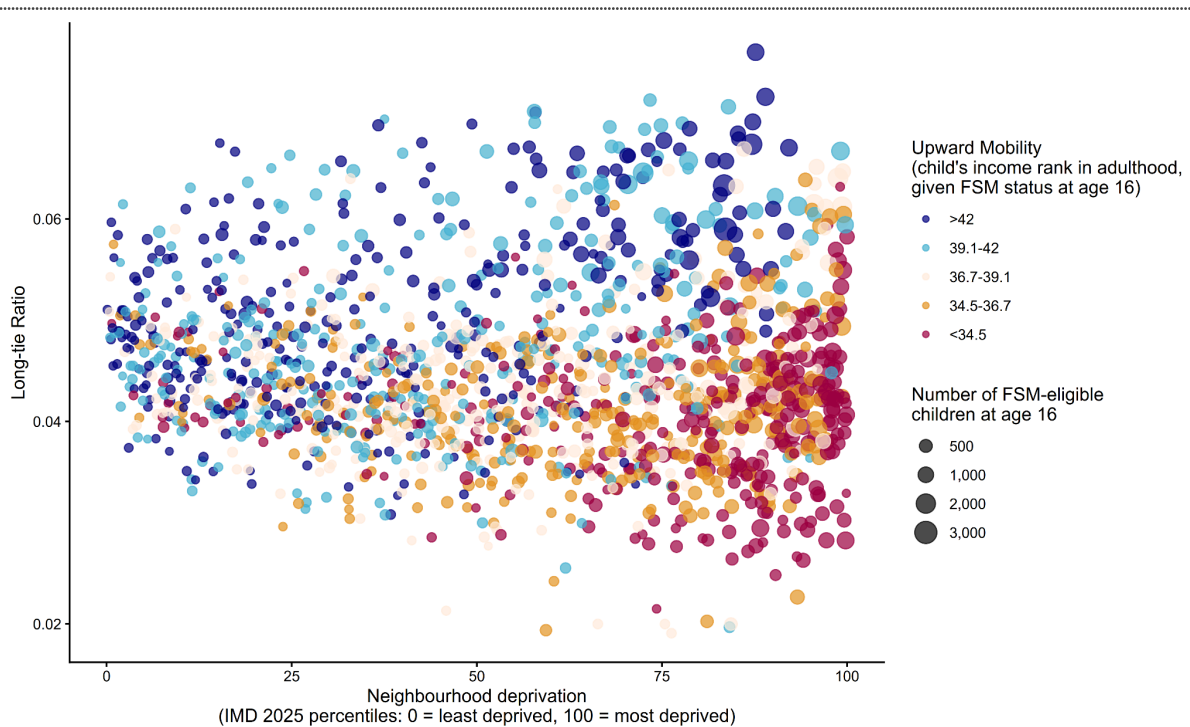
Notes: Each point is a postcode district in England, plotting the long tie ratio against IMD 2025 deprivation percentile (0 = le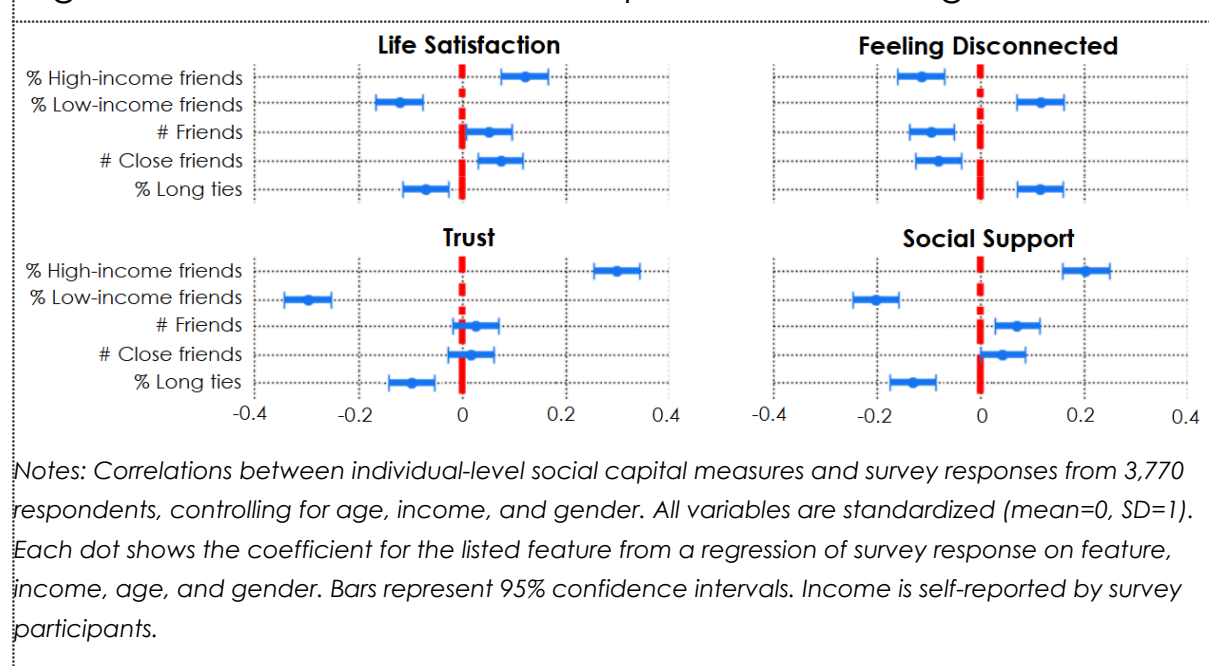ast deprived, 100 = most deprived). Points are coloured by upward-mobility quintiles to show how cross-income connectedness varies across the deprivation gradient.

3 Social connections and outcomes beyond opportunity

Social connections are linked to greater wellbeing but bridging social circles may come with trade-offs

We also examined how social capital affects life outcomes beyond social mobility. We surveyed 3,770 adult Facebook users in the UK to understand how social connections relate to self-reported wellbeing. Respondents with more friends (particularly more high-income friends) and tighter-knit networks report better wellbeing across multiple measures: greater life satisfaction, less isolation, higher trust and stronger social support (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Social connections and personal wellbeing.

Notes: Correlations between individual-level social capital measures and survey responses from 3,770 respondents, controlling for age, income, and gender. All variables are standardized (mean=0, SD=1). Each dot shows the coefficient for the listed feature from a regression of survey response on feature, income, age, and gender. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Income is self-reported by survey participants.

These patterns hold even after controlling for an individual's income, age and gender. After accounting for personal income, individuals with the highest proportion of very high-income friends (about 1 in 5 friends in the top income decile) reported 5% higher happiness levels and 23% greater trust compared with those with the lowest proportion (about 1 in 40 friends in the top decile).

However, while having more high-income friends links to better wellbeing, having more low-income friends shows the opposite pattern. This suggests income bridging may benefit lower-income people more than higher-income ones. Long ties also show conflicting effects. While they may support economic mobility, people with more long ties reported lower life satisfaction, greater disconnection, less trust and reduced social support.

Again, these are correlational findings. We cannot say whether a higher share of high-income friends causes greater wellbeing or whether happier people simply form more such connections. The link between long ties and lower satisfaction may also reflect other factors such as higher residential mobility or lifestyle differences, rather than the connections themselves directly affecting wellbeing.

More social capital, better grades and fewer preventable deaths

We also examined how social capital relates to education, health and crime outcomes. Areas with more cross-class friendships have better GCSE results, fewer preventable deaths and lower crime rates. Areas with a higher long-tie ratio show similar patterns with educational attainment, but not with mortality or crime.

When we account for other area characteristics like income and employment, a more nuanced picture emerges. For education, the long-tie ratio remains one of the strongest predictors of better GCSE performance. For health, cross-class friendships remain one of the strongest predictors of lower preventable mortality. For crime, neither social capital measure shows a robust relationship once we control for other factors. This does not mean social capital is unrelated to crime. It may work indirectly through other community factors, but unlike with social mobility, education and health, any influence appears to operate through these broader area characteristics rather than directly.

4 Where social connections form

Most friendships form in neighbourhoods and schools, but patterns vary by income

We can trace the origins of roughly half the friendships we analyse to specific settings. Of these, most form in people's local neighbourhoods, followed by secondary schools, with smaller shares from universities, workplaces and other social settings. However, income shapes where people make friends. Higher-income individuals form far more friendships at university than lower-income people, likely reflecting unequal access to higher education (see Figure 6). Lower-income people, meanwhile, form a larger share of their friendships in their local neighbourhoods.

Figure 6: Relative friending shares by setting and socioeconomic status.
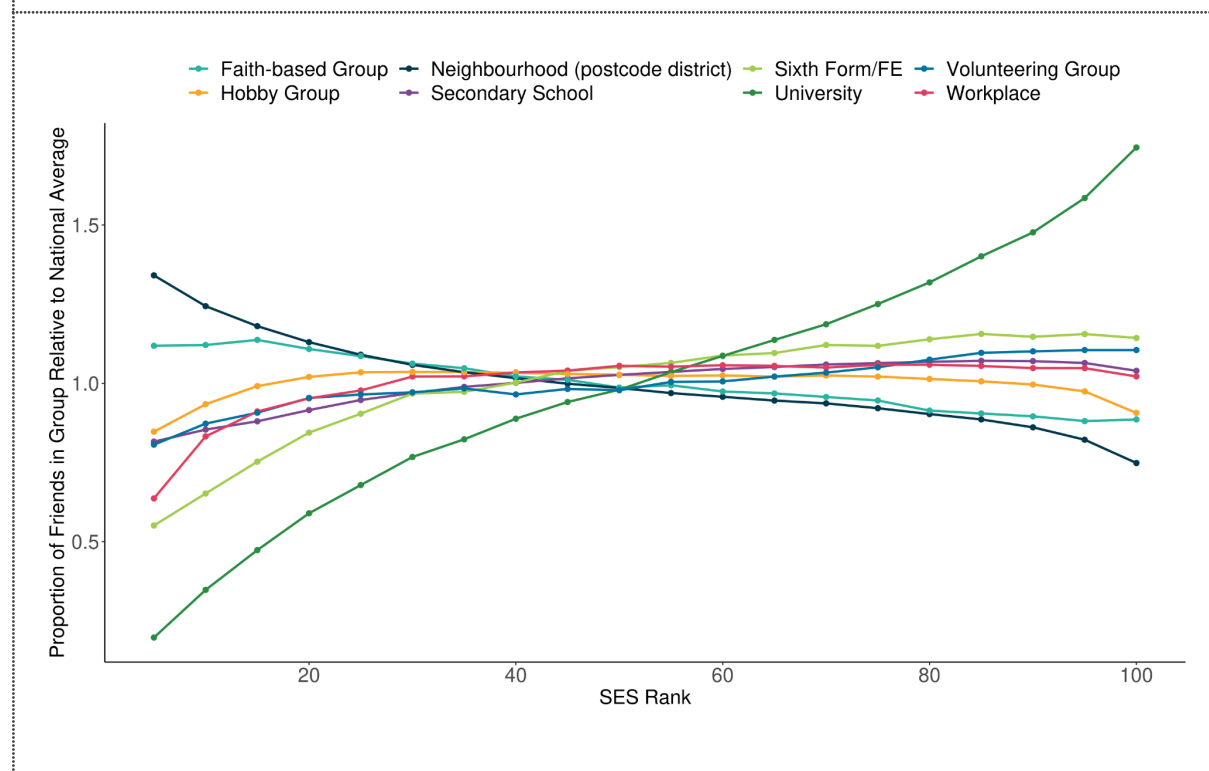
Universities promote cross-class friendships amongst their students

Whether friendships formed in these settings cross class lines depends on two factors: **exposure** (whether low- and high-income people share the same spaces) and **friending bias** (whether they befriend each other when they do). Both vary across settings:

- **Neighbourhoods**, where most friendships form, face challenges on both fronts. Residential segregation means low-income people encounter few high-income neighbours. Even in mixed neighbourhoods, high friending bias means people mostly befriend within their own economic group.

- **Secondary schools** show more potential. Students from different backgrounds are more likely to befriend each other at school than in other settings. However, schools remain largely segregated by income, limiting opportunities for cross-class friendships.

- **Universities** are where low-income people are most likely to make high-income friends. Most students come from high-income backgrounds and readily befriend across income lines. However, inequalities in access mean low-income people attend university far less often. Though those who do typically make cross-class friends.

Long ties vary by geography, not income

Long ties are connections outside one's usual social circles and make up only a small fraction of people's networks. Nearly 80% form outside the social settings we can track (e.g. neighbourhoods, schools, universities, workplaces), so we cannot pinpoint where they most often originate. This makes intuitive sense. Long ties have no mutual friends in common, whereas common social settings are precisely where we build interconnected circles of people who know each other.

However, we can establish how these connections vary across different groups. While our main measure of long ties focuses on lower-income people's networks, comparing across income groups reveals remarkably similar patterns. People have similar shares of long ties regardless of whether they are high or low income. Long-tie ratios vary by geography, not individual wealth. Urban neighbourhoods tend to have higher long-tie ratios, likely because more diverse social networks naturally

form in cities, though this is not universal. We also find that long ties are roughly equally likely to connect people within the same income group as across income groups. They are almost as likely to link two high-income people, or two low-income people, as they are to bridge between high and low incomes.

5 What makes communities connect

To understand why some communities build stronger social connections than others, we visited over 20 UK neighbourhoods, speaking with residents about their experiences of local life. We conducted in-depth interviews with residents from different economic backgrounds in 8 of them. We specifically chose neighbouring 'outlier' communities with unusually high or low cross-class connections but otherwise similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. This allowed us to identify what helps or hinders social connections beyond economic or demographic makeup.

Researchers visiting these comparison neighbourhoods were blinded to which had high or low social capital. While the neighbourhoods were similar in socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, residents' accounts of community life revealed clear differences. Researchers correctly identified the more connected neighbourhood every time, showing how our Facebook measures reflect tangible differences in how communities function.

Community infrastructure enables cross-class connections but faces funding and volunteer challenges

From cities on the south coast to rural villages in the North, UK neighbourhoods share common meeting places like churches, community centres, libraries, and pubs. In areas with weaker cross-economic connections, these spaces run fewer activities or stand empty most days. Well-connected communities offer multiple daily activities, from drawing classes to group walks, appealing to diverse interests. Two Birmingham libraries illustrate this (see Figure 7). Stirchley's notice board (left) buzzes with local events whilst Bearwood's calendar (right) remains sparse.

Active community spaces need volunteers to keep running, with retirees often forming the backbone. Collingham, a Nottinghamshire village with high levels of economic connectedness, exemplifies this. Retired residents volunteer to run the library, produce a monthly magazine, and coordinate activities, finding both purpose and friendship in the process. This reliance on unpaid labour appears across communities nationwide and often follows funding cuts that eliminated paid staff positions.

Figure 7: Activity boards in Birmingham libraries.
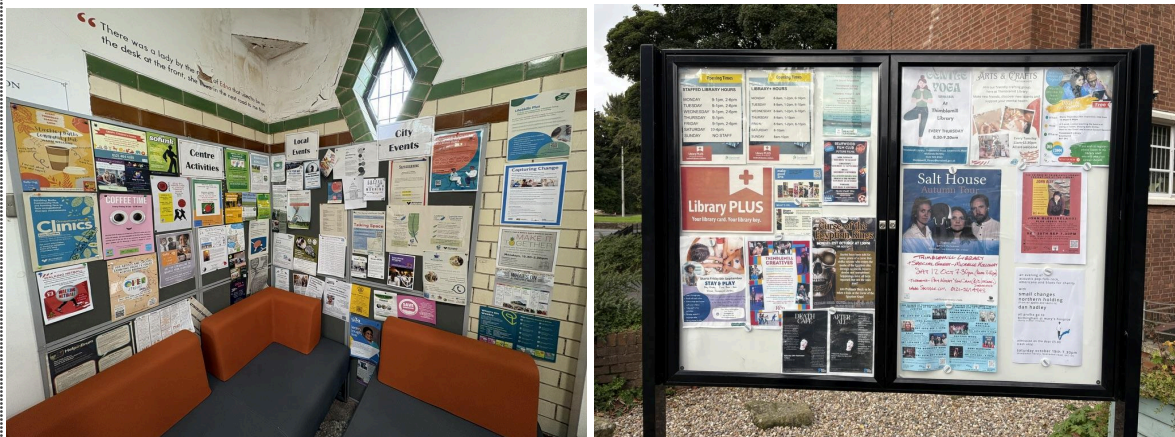
Left: Activity board in a library in Stirchley, Birmingham. Right: Activity board in a library in Bearwood, Birmingham

Family hubs are another social space that drives cross-economic connections in our research neighbourhoods. These spaces bring together parents from different economic backgrounds through activities with universal appeal, particularly infant classes. At the Clovelly Family Hub close to Southampton's Derby Road, newborn care sessions unite parents around their shared experiences of early parenthood, regardless of income.

Neighbourhood layouts drive divisions or connections

Beyond community spaces themselves, the built environment also shapes how well people form new connections. Some neighbourhoods have wide pavements or quiet squares where parents naturally linger after school drop-off. Stone Cross near Polegate, where cross-group connections are weak, is different. A busy road by the school gate forces parents to queue for collection with nowhere to stop and chat.

Turning the school run into an opportunity to connect

Small design changes can transform neighbourhood dynamics. In one area we studied, Anya (name changed) noticed parents at school drop-off and collection exchanging only brief greetings before hurrying away. With nowhere to linger, conversations never developed. She convinced the local community centre to open for post-drop-off coffee, creating a space beside the school

> where parents could gather. This simple change drew a diverse crowd,
> connecting people who would not otherwise meet.

The built environment's influence extends beyond school gates. Green spaces can divide as much as connect. Railway lines created 'the wrong side of the tracks' and motorways carved up communities. Parks can do the same. Where large parks and woodlands separate neighbourhoods, we found sharp income and social divisions. Areas without these green buffers transition more gradually between economic groups.

Bradford demonstrates this clearly. Parks fragment its north-eastern suburbs into distinct communities, whilst the parkless southern areas blend more seamlessly. This pattern repeats across Britain, particularly where affluent suburbs meet inner-city neighbourhoods. While green space investments bring undeniable benefits, planners should be mindful that placement and design choices can either strengthen or fragment neighbourhood connections.

Building bridges, not just buildings

Many of Britain's most connected communities did not form overnight. Whether fishing families in northern villages or immigrants who settled decades ago along Southampton's Derby Road, intergenerational ties are often what bind these communities. Policy cannot replicate what time builds. Adding economic diversity to a neighbourhood does not automatically create cross-class connections.

MediaCityUK exemplifies this challenge. The BBC and ITV hub built on Salford's former docks placed media professionals right beside Ordsall's established working-class community, yet the two groups barely interact. Despite living as neighbours, without shared environments or activities to bring them together, proximity alone fails to bridge economic divides.

Stirchley in Birmingham shows another path. Its co-operative history and workplace culture help long-term residents and newer arrivals mix more naturally. Cadbury's social club and organised events spilled into pubs and local sport, mixing people across pay grades. Land Rover's no-suits culture reduced visible hierarchy and encouraged everyday friendships across status lines.

Anchor employers as sources of connections

Jacqui (name changed) moved to Stirchley in the 1980s. Three generations of her family worked at the Cadbury Factory. Her husband got his first job after meeting a director in the local pub and rose from the factory floor to management. He played sports with colleagues from all pay grades and socialised with managers and factory workers alike. These connections beyond the workplace shaped the inclusive neighbourhood where her family built their lives.

Today's co-ops like Loaf bakery and Birmingham Bike Foundry emerged from local activism building on this industrial heritage. These member-owned ventures reinvest in the community, supporting affordable housing and organising workshops that attract diverse crowds, from teachers and shop staff to students and engineers. The neighbourhood's affordable meeting points turn proximity into connection.

> *"This isn't like the yuppie neighbourhoods in London – people from all different backgrounds actually mix and come together here."* – Stirchley resident.

6 How to build stronger connections

Bridging connections are strongly linked to social mobility. Communities need two things: settings that bring diverse groups together, and social infrastructure that intentionally converts this contact into meaningful relationships. Our recommendations draw on evidence reviews, community workshops in our research sites, and roundtables with policymakers and experts. The proposals below show how policy and practice can help create the conditions for stronger connections.

Start young, mix early

Most connections form locally in neighbourhoods and schools, making early encounters between different backgrounds crucial for building bridging ties. Yet schools increasingly segregate by income. Top performers shrink catchment areas to manage demand, driving up house prices and creating wealth barriers. The best schools have 5 percentage points fewer Free School Meal pupils than average [9].

England's School Admissions Code should be reformed to support economic integration through FSM balancing quotas or randomised admission lotteries. Ofsted should assess how schools foster social mixing, from classroom practices like rotating seating to inclusive extracurriculars, and parent engagement. Schools can design their culture to encourage connections across backgrounds, through mixed-ability teaching, accessible after-school clubs, and co-located services.

Brighton & Hove leads on school integration through admissions reform

Fair admissions can already be achieved locally. 90% of secondary schools control their own admissions but require coordination between Local Authorities and Academy Trusts. Brighton & Hove Council pioneered locally led fairer admissions in 2024, reserving places in community secondary schools for Free School Meal pupils. FSM pupils within catchment get priority, then those outside, ensuring economic diversity across schools. From 2026, they will reserve 5% of places for children in single-school catchment areas. Local authorities do not need to wait for national reform.

Civic service programmes offer another route to early bridging connections. The National Citizen Service had its flaws (e.g. diverting money from local youth services, limited reach, and over-reliance on short summer programmes). However, it demonstrably improved social connections and cohesion among its participants [10]. We propose regional civic service programmes with three key features: easy enrollment for all young people, small cross-class teams tackling local projects, and delivery by community organisations rather than central government. Programmes would link to employers and education providers, provide skills certification, and give young people from different backgrounds the sustained contact our research shows builds bridging connections.

Break bubbles

Most friendships form in neighbourhoods, making local services and social infrastructure critical for building relationships from proximity. Community facilities like Family Hubs create the most mixing when they offer activities that appeal across different backgrounds. Team sports offer another powerful lever for bridging divides [11]. However, we found that even when people from different backgrounds play football at similar rates, they still tend to play with people from their own social groups.

To break these patterns, leisure centres could adopt strategic nudges like offering discounted rates for teams formed through random enrollment that bring together people from different backgrounds, with standard rates for self-selected groups. The same approach could work beyond sports. Community centres could offer reduced fees for cooking classes or art workshops where participants are randomly paired across backgrounds. These small changes could turn routine local activities into opportunities for social mixing.

Footy Addicts turns open local football into everyday connections

Footy Addicts is a UK website and app where anyone can join nearby casual five-a-side football games. Open sign-ups mean players share the pitch with people beyond their usual circles, week after week. According to their own data, the platform helped create over 84,000 connections last year. Those repeated, low-stakes encounters turn strangers into teammates and, possibly,

friends. Simple design choices like easy entry and light local hosting show how everyday sport can mix groups.

Let communities decide

Social infrastructure needs sustained funding with genuine community control to foster bridging connections. We propose three approaches. First, micro-grants (£500-£5,000) for grassroots initiatives with minimal application requirements. People running community projects should spend their time on those projects, not filling out endless forms. Second, community wealth funds with resident-led boards to direct investment through participatory budgeting. Local residents would control how funds are allocated, voting on which community projects receive support based on what they know their neighbourhood needs. Third, support for community asset ownership, giving locals first refusal when valued buildings go up for sale. This prevents valuable community spaces like pubs and halls from becoming private developments.

Success depends on reducing administrative burden. For bigger initiatives, that means multi-year funding, supporting core costs rather than just projects, and letting communities define their own success rather than imposing rigid targets. This ecosystem would let small ideas grow into community-owned assets, with residents deciding what matters most for building local connections.

Collingham rescues its village pub through community ownership

When the Royal Oak pub in Collingham in Nottinghamshire was at risk, neighbours formed a community-owned society to save it. Locals chipped in small share investments, which drew in a flexible mix of grants, loans, and in-kind help to reopen the doors. The key was not one big cheque. It was patient, community-controlled funding with minimal hoops and real say for residents. Giving more places simple seed grants, resident-led investment pots, and first refusal on valued buildings can turn closing assets into everyday hubs that knit people together.

7 Conclusion

For the first time, we comprehensively mapped social capital across UK neighbourhoods using 6 billion friendships from 20 million Facebook users. UK friendships bridge income divides more often than in the US, but regional differences are stark. Low-income children who grow up in well-connected areas earn up to 28% more at age 28. Friendships outside immediate social circles prove especially powerful in the most deprived neighbourhoods, where they are strongly linked to social mobility. We cannot prove causation, but the patterns are compelling.

Visiting 20+ neighbourhoods revealed why some connect diverse groups while others do not. The difference shows in the details. Community centres packed with activities versus bare calendars. School gates with benches for conversation versus hurried queues. Workplaces where the factory floor drinks with management versus those where they never meet. Even neighbourhoods mixing rich and poor can remain disconnected. Without intentional planning of places and programmes, simply living nearby fails to foster connection.

We believe that what works in connected communities can scale. It starts with giving communities real control over funding and assets. It requires school admissions that blend backgrounds, youth initiatives crafted to bridge divides, and settings and experiences that transform closeness into friendship. Investments do not always need to be large to create meaningful change.

Policymakers have spent generations working on equalising access to economic and human capital, but have overlooked social capital as a similarly vital resource. Building bridges between people may be the most important infrastructure investment we never make. The data shows us where to start. The communities show us how.

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