

Minimum Acceptable Place Standards



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Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings of exploratory research examining the possibility of reaching public consensus about the minimum acceptable standard that places should meet. It outlines the methodology that was used to explore the idea of acceptable place standards, and sets out the framework of a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard (MAPS) that was developed through the research. The report also explores how this work may be taken forward and developed as a tool for assessing the adequacy of places at a local and national level.

Founded on the established Minimum Income Standards (MIS) methodology, with its focus on building consensus through deliberative focus groups, MAPS stands in contrast to existing place standards. Where place standards have previously been developed they have tended to be concerned with particular aspects of place or on defining minimum conditions within specific localities rather than with minimum place standards that may apply across all locales. In developing this new approach to place standards, MAPS has started from the point of view of members of the public and sought to test how far it is possible to establish a minimum acceptable place standard based on public consensus.

The MAPS research has shown that it is possible to reach broad level consensus about what places need to have and be like in order to reach an acceptable minimum standard. This consensus is captured in the MAPS framework that sets out both the key domains and the necessary features of place. The three key domains of MAPS, which emerged from the deliberative focus groups, are access to services and facilities, how neighbourhoods look and how safe they are, and community and neighbourliness within places. In terms of services and facilities, groups discussed key components that should be present in the immediate area where people live, conceived of in terms of being within walking distance or in the neighbourhood. These included features such as primary and secondary schools, public open spaces and community hubs. Groups agreed that other services and facilities central to places reaching a minimum acceptable standard could be further afield, within about 20 minutes travel time away (either by car or public transport). These included access to hospital-based accident and emergency and supermarkets. Finally in terms of services and facilities, groups determined that in order to reach MAPS, there were a number of services that should be delivered into, or otherwise available in, neighbourhoods, such as rubbish collection, broadband and public transport. A key focus for the discussions within groups in relation to these latter features was on the quality of the services that should be delivered. Groups also identified how MAPS might be configured in rural compared with urban areas. In this way the groups focused on access and the time it should take to reach services and facilities as a key determinant of MAPS.

In relation to how neighbourhoods and areas further afield should look and how safe

they are, groups agreed on, for example, the need for safe travel and the importance of maintaining public space, emphasising the links between public safety and how places look and feel. Groups also stressed the importance of the relationship between places and people and were clear that notions of community and neighbourliness should feature as part of a minimum place standard. However, in practical terms operationalising notions of community or building expectations of neighbourliness into MAPS was seen as constituting a challenge as this was as much about people as about place.

The overarching purpose of this research was to see to what extent the method developed through the MIS programme could be applied to place and it is clear that broadly speaking, the MIS method does provide a useful template for exploring standards in relation to place. Beyond this the MAPS framework developed here does provide a tool through which the current state of places may be assessed, and perhaps the most fruitful future use and development of MAPS lies in its value at the local level as one of an arsenal of instruments to be put to use by communities in identifying existing local assets and establishing local priorities. The research does, however, raise some key questions in relation to place standards, principally in relation to how quality and acceptability are defined in relation to place, and how ideas regarding minimum place standards may be operationalised and translated in to a measure or set of measures of place. What MAPS has revealed is that while members of the public have reached broad consensus regarding the key domains and features that mean places reach an acceptable minimum, the next step – drawing lines and determining thresholds in relation to quality – is a far more difficult task.

Despite the difficulties associated with developing a measurable place standard akin to the benchmark provided by the Minimum Income Standard, MAPS does provide an important contribution to an understanding of what it is that all places *need* in order that they do not fall below a minimum acceptable level.

1. Introduction

What do people see as the minimum acceptable standard that places should meet? What makes places acceptable? What makes places unacceptable? This report presents the findings from research undertaken with groups of members of the public aimed at exploring ways of asking these questions and what the answers to these questions might look like.

There are established and well-evidenced connections between income and living standards within the UK, but sufficient income is not the only prerequisite of an acceptable standard of living. Place is also an important influence on people's lives and, potentially, on their life chances; if two people are both in receipt of similar income, the individual living in a place that does not meet minimum acceptable standards for place may have a very different quality of life and standard of living in comparison to the other. Although the last ten years have witnessed an increase in the available data on places, research on place effects and a growing interest in place standards, much of this has centred on top-down, data-driven exercises rather than on asking people what they think places need to have in order to reach a minimum acceptable standard.

In defining and researching a minimum standard as set by the public a useful parallel is found in the effective methodology adopted to set a standard for minimum acceptable household incomes. The Minimum Income Standard for the UK is the income that people need in order to reach a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in the UK today, based on what members of the public think. It is calculated by specifying baskets of goods and services required by different types of household in order to meet these needs and to participate in society. In the MIS method, a sequence of groups have detailed negotiations about everything a household would have to be able to afford in order to achieve an acceptable living standard. These lists are very detailed and include everything from socks to washing machines, dental costs to telephone call charges. Groups typically comprise eight people from a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds. Building on and adapting MIS methodology, a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard (MAPS) looks at what groups of members of the public think might constitute a minimum acceptable standard for places.

This exploratory research set out to investigate whether it was possible to reach consensus about the minimum conditions places should meet and whether standards might be different in urban and rural locations. While it suggests that the MIS method can be applied to place, and consensus can be achieved on at least some issues, further work would be needed to explore the extent of consensus in more detail and to develop a standard which could be operationalised in a similar way to MIS and used to say if particular places were acceptable or not.

The report begins by outlining the development of the MAPS methodology and the

process of the research. Chapter 3 briefly explores existing place standards and their underpinning methodologies, and where MAPS sits in relation to these. It also sets out some of the challenges posed both by attempts to establish place standards and by the adaptation of the MIS methodology to focus on place. The report then provides an account of the discussions that took place within groups regarding minimum acceptable standards and examines the broad level consensus that was reached regarding what places need to be acceptable. Chapter 5 explores the critical question of how to define quality and thresholds of acceptability in relation to place and the differences between urban and rural locations. Chapter 6 begins by looking at how this exploratory research compares with previous attempts to establish place standards. It goes on to outline how this research may be developed in order to establish a national measurable MAPS, as well as exploring how MAPS may be used within communities and its potential impact on policy and practice in relation to place.

2. Building consensus about place: developing a MAPS methodology

Introduction

At the core of the Minimum Acceptable Place Standard research was a desire to explore the potential for extending the MIS method and employing this as a means through which to investigate what the public think constitutes a minimum standard for places. The MAPS research fulfilled a dual purpose, exploring the suitability of MIS methodology to place and also whether or not it is possible to reach consensus about what places need to be like in order to provide an acceptable minimum.

From the outset though, it was clear that a focus on place both necessitates and produces a very different discussion from the focus on what items a household requires that is at the heart of the MIS method. Clearly members of the public can and do make judgements about places, draw distinctions in relation to quality, and reach conclusions about what acceptable and unacceptable places may look like. However, conversations about a minimum in relation to place are different from those in relation to households' needs linked to income and within this exploratory research have produced a different kind of conclusion. Unlike MIS, which compiles budgets comprising lists of *items* that a household budget should be sufficient to afford, the MAPS research can be best conceived of as specifying a set of minimum *conditions* that places should meet. These could include the availability of resources such as libraries, shops or social services, the quality of the local environment, the accessibility of a sufficient supply of adequate housing for the local population and the nature of social interactions including levels of antisocial behaviour and the character of social networks. The task of translating the idea of a 'minimum standard' from income to place is thus a challenging one.

There are additional challenges in conducting such an exercise. Firstly, it is harder to combine a set of conditions than a set of items into a single standard. For this to be meaningful it needs to involve more than just a description of the pros and cons of living in various places. It needs to include a consideration of thresholds and quality and to specify whether any one condition constitutes an absolute requirement without which a place cannot be "acceptable", or whether various conditions need to be considered in combination. Secondly, it is uncertain whether a single consensus can define a common minimum across the country. As with MIS, certain differences, for example, between rural and urban areas can be expected. However in addition, there is an issue about whether people's expectations are influenced by existing local conditions. The project needed to be sensitive to the possibility that minimum place standards might command less of a national or even cross-neighbourhood consensus than minimum income standards.

Furthermore, measurement of the ways in which places influence quality of life is likely

to have some less tangible features than measuring the effects of income on material living standards. Standard of living and quality of life are different but overlapping concepts, whose boundaries are imprecise. The Minimum Income Standard focuses on standard of living, which relates principally to the material level that one can reach and the resources needed to do so. It would be hard to constrain minimum place standards in this way, since characteristics of places can influence non-material features of the quality of people's lives, allowing people to flourish and to meet their goals. In this research then 'standard of living' is defined in a wider sense than usually used, to include non-material aspects of the standard that everybody should be able to live at.

This chapter provides an account of the methodology developed and used in this research starting with an overview of the fieldwork process and the development of a MAPS methodology. The discussion then moves to consider each stage of the fieldwork, telling the story of the MAPS groups, providing a description of what the fieldwork entailed and reflecting on the experience of the process.

Starting point: the MIS method

The MAPS methodology builds upon and adapts the template provided by the MIS research developed at the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University¹. Underpinning all of the MIS research is the aim of building consensus from the bottom up with members of the public; that is, starting and finishing with what people think and seeking to reach agreement within and across groups of members of the public through an iterative and deliberative process. The MIS research centres on a staged sequence of discussion groups with members of the public during which detailed negotiations take place about the goods and services a range of different case study individuals *need* to have in order to have an acceptable standard of living. The definition of a minimum acceptable standard of living used in MIS research, formulated by members of the public, states that:

A minimum acceptable standard of living in Britain today includes, but is more than just, food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society.

Through negotiation and deliberation the first stage of groups (task groups) decide which items should be included in order to reach this standard of living, and what quality items should be. The focus in these groups is on defining needs rather than wants as MIS constitutes a minimum rather than an aspirational budget. The aim of groups is to reach consensus about the minimum, for each of the different case study individuals who are combined to produce the MIS households²; for many items, this is reached quickly and straightforwardly, but for other items there is a greater degree of

1 For more detailed information on the MIS methodology see Bradshaw et al (2008).

2 See Bradshaw et al (2008).

disagreement about what constitutes an acceptable minimum. Where it is not possible to reach agreement, disputed items or areas are taken forward to subsequent groups.

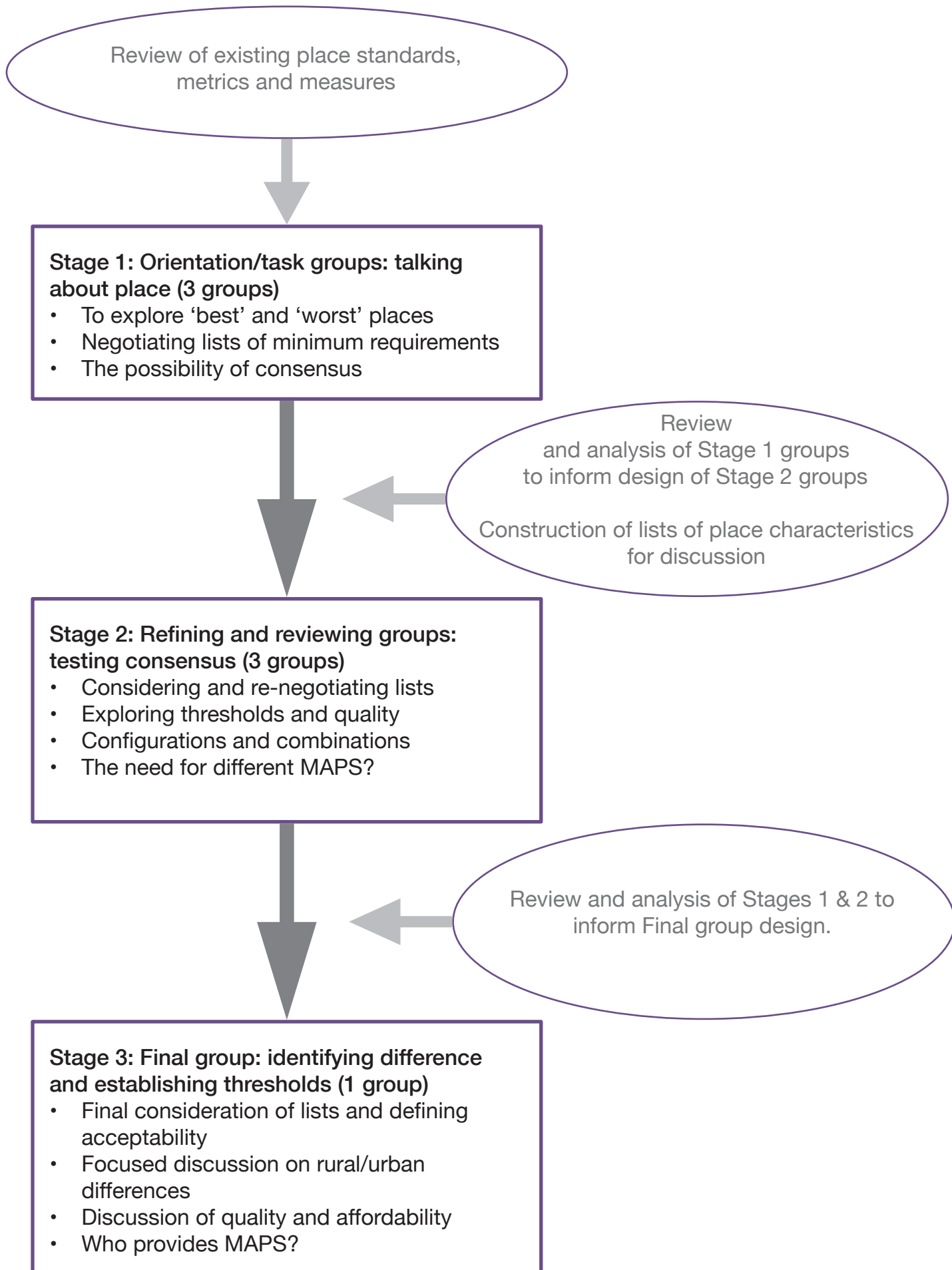
A second stage of MIS groups (checkback groups) has the task of scrutinising costed budgets and these groups are asked to consider if the lists of goods and services, as they stand, provide a minimum acceptable standard of living. The focus again is on reaching consensus about what constitutes a minimum. Following any revisions, the final stage of groups (final groups) offers a last check on the list, exploring how individual budgets combine in households and any consequent economies of scale.

The MIS methodology produces a needs-based threshold of minimum acceptable living standards grounded in what members of the public think and blending social consensus and expert advice. Consequently, both as a method and an output, MIS stands in contrast to other living standard thresholds that are less deliberative and more focused on expert-led and data driven measures of acceptability.

Applying the MIS method to place: the possibility of consensual place standards
Although there are a range of place standards in existence, both within the UK and internationally, as far as we are aware to date there has been no attempt at developing a publically determined, consensual, minimum acceptable place standard. A clear intention of this research then was to develop and test techniques and methods aimed at establishing a minimum acceptable place standard based on social consensus, while also exploring the extent of consensus that such methods can produce in relation to place. In order to do this, and mirroring the approach taken in MIS research, the MAPS research was centred around three stages of discussion groups. Figure 1 provides an outline of the research stages.

In the first stage, **orientation and task groups ('talking about place')** were held in three types of locations. Based on the ONS urban and rural LA classification, we selected one 'major urban area' (Leeds), one area in the 'other urban' category (Redditch) and a 'rural' area (the East Riding of Yorkshire, based in Driffield). The focus of these groups was on exploring the ways in which people talk about place and in particular about what makes places acceptable or unacceptable.

The second stage of **refining and reviewing groups ('testing consensus')** were once again held in a major urban area (Nottingham), an 'other urban' area (Tamworth) and a rural area (South Kesteven, based in Grantham). The basis of these groups were lists of characteristics and qualities of place formulated by members of the public in the three initial groups. Groups were asked if the lists captured the aspects and features that made places either acceptable or not. The group participants also explored questions of thresholds of acceptability and quality in relation to particular aspects of place.

Figure 1 Minimum acceptable place standard research stages

The **final group ('identifying difference and establishing thresholds')** was held in Manchester, with participants recruited from both the city and more rural settlements to the east of Manchester. The purpose of the final group was to review the lists created by the preceding groups, focusing on differences and commonalities between rural and urban area types. Questions concerning thresholds of acceptability and how to define minimum quality in relation to place were also examined in this group.

Groups were held in these three kinds of areas as a way of exploring the extent to which different types of places may have different types of requirements in terms of a minimum acceptable place standard, which may be influenced by current service standards and perceptions of place. Existing national data shows, for example, that in the major urban areas, access to large scale and specialised services was better than in the other two types of areas. Foot, public transport and car travel times to seven key services were lower in major urban areas than in the other two types of areas, but levels of deprivation were higher and levels of satisfaction with the area as a place to live were lower. The other urban areas were in an intermediate position. In the rural areas, service provision were the worst, travel times were the longest, but deprivation was lowest and levels of satisfaction with the area was highest. While there are clearly differences in existing service standards across the three area types used in this research, the small number of groups in each of the area types necessitated a focus on exploring the general degree of consensus or difference regarding the kinds of things places need to have or be like, rather than providing a detailed account of differences in need across different area types.

All of the groups were led by two members of the research team and lasted for three hours. The groups in this and subsequent stages were made up of eight to twelve participants, drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds as in the MIS method. As in MIS research, participants for the MAPS groups were recruited by a professional recruitment agency to ensure that groups contained:

- a mix of gender;
- people living in a range of housing tenures (owner-occupier, private rented, social housing)
- a mix of participants in terms of their primary source of income (employment, pensions, benefits).

Additional recruitment criteria were also used when selecting participants for the MAPS groups. In MIS research, the groups are generally brought together to explore the needs of individuals within particular household types, such as working age parents or primary school-aged children, and consequently comprise individuals from these groups. In this research however, the focus was not on household types but on different area types. For this reason, and in contrast to MIS, the research team concluded that it was important to include additional recruitment criteria. Groups were recruited to ensure that the research accessed views across a broad age-range,

acknowledging that the ways in which people use, understand and interact with place are affected by age. For similar reasons, groups included both adults with dependent children (aged under 16 living with at least one parent, or aged 16 to 18 in full-time education) and adults without dependent children. In the major urban and other urban groups, efforts were also made to ensure that groups included participants from both more and less affluent neighbourhoods, to avoid a concentration of people with a particular current experience of place. Following stage one, the research team took the decision to request that each of the subsequent groups include a minimum of two BME participants. While acknowledging the exploratory nature of this research, the team were concerned that the views of place being captured did not reflect the diversity present within the UK.

Stage one: talking about place

The structure of the first three groups was shaped by the desire to see how possible it was in practice to build a consensual, needs-based threshold of a minimum acceptable place standard in discussion with members of the public. At the most general level the purpose of the groups was to explore if it was even possible to define minimum acceptable standards in relation to place as has been done in relation to income, and if it was possible how a minimum acceptable place standard might start to be defined and operationalised. The groups were explicitly founded upon the principle that there are a range of factors and conditions that can and do shape standards of living and life chances; the characteristics of place and the conditions associated with these characteristics being one of the key factors. Building on the idea of a minimum acceptable standard of living, as defined through the original MIS research, the groups were invited to consider the broad questions: *What do people see as the minimum acceptable standard that places should meet? What makes a place acceptable? What makes a place unacceptable?*

In order to start a conversation about place the groups used concrete experience of places as a starting point. The members of the research team leading the groups asked participants to think about the best and worst places they had lived in, or been to, in the UK. The purpose of this was to get people talking about what is it that makes places 'good' or acceptable and what makes places 'bad' or unacceptable; what kinds of things make places the best kinds of places and what kinds of things make places the worst kinds of places. Rather than beginning from abstracted qualities or conditions associated with either acceptable or unacceptable places, participants were asked to talk about places they know, live in and interact with. Responses were written down on flipcharts to capture the range of things that participants identified as key elements of place and subsequently displayed so that participants were able to make reference to the lists, but also challenge, dispute and amend them.

From the outset there was some uncertainty within the research team about the extent

to which participants would be able to agree about the aspects of place that make places acceptable or unacceptable. While we all have experience and knowledge of place and interact with places on a daily basis, these experiences are shaped by a wide range of factors, such as income, housing, age and mobility, which might impact on how minimum place standards may be defined. The needs and experiences of families with young children, for example, may give rise to a very different minimum place standard than the needs and experiences of a retired couple or a single working age adult with no dependent children. However, discussion across the first three groups about the character of best and worst places demonstrated that rather than place being something eliciting great schisms and disagreements in terms of needs, it may be possible to reach general consensus and agreement about what factors, at a broad level, make places acceptable. For example, at a broad level there was agreement within groups about the need for access to green spaces, although the detail of what green spaces should include or look like in order to provide a minimum standard was not explored in this exercise.

Building on these lists of best and worst characteristics, the discussion moved from this general to a more detailed level. Participants were asked to *'imagine that they or someone they knew was moving into a new area and to think about what the key considerations would be when settling on a place to live; what would rule a place out of consideration? What would make people move out of an area? What is the minimum that the area should offer? What would be unacceptable?'* In considering these questions, groups were exploring what MAPS might look like, what it might include and exclude, and which conditions, services and facilities might constitute a minimum. Although the focus was not on arriving at detailed lists of the sorts of things that would mean places reach a minimum acceptable standard, the three groups quickly moved from talking about general level needs to more specific details including reasonable distances to travel to, for example, schools and how frequent bus services should be. As explored in Chapter 5, there were differing and often strongly contrasting views on, for example, quality and where to draw the lines in terms of thresholds of acceptability in education, health, or in the cleanliness of streets. But outside of this, by the end of the first stage of groups it was clear that the MIS method when applied to discussions about place has the potential to provide a means through which social consensus about some minimum acceptable place standards might be reached.

Stage two: testing consensus

The second stage of groups was centred around a more detailed exploration of the lists compiled from a review and analysis of the initial groups. Crucially the groups allowed for testing of the broad consensus that seemed to be emerging from the first stage of the research. This is an important element of the MIS methodology as it affords groups the opportunity to challenge, refine and amend what is seen as constituting a minimum. In this way the MIS methodology is an iterative and

deliberative process, in which different groups consider the same lists of needs in order to ensure that any consensus reached exists across as well as within groups. The MAPS groups were driven by the same guiding principles, but also a desire to reach a deeper understanding of the extent of consensus about certain characteristics of place.

The groups were presented with the lists of place characteristics divided in to three sections: services and facilities, the condition of places and how they are maintained, and community and quality of life. This was a structure that emerged from the first stage of groups, and is a structure that coincides with existing place standards, such as the Decent Neighbourhood Standard in Newcastle (Newcastle City Council, 2012). The groups were asked to consider the lists and identify any changes, additions and/or amendments. Across the three groups in this stage, participants did make adjustments in relation to, for instance, travel time to specific services and in refining the lists groups provided rationales for the inclusion of particular ‘things’ in a minimum acceptable place standard. As in the first round of groups, a broad level consensus emerged about the kinds of things that would be needed in order for places to meet a minimum acceptable standard.

In order to test the strength of consensus and get a greater understanding of where the lines may be drawn in terms of a MAPS, groups were also asked to consider:

- if all the ‘things’ on the lists were as important as each other, or were some things more important than others;
- what is essential or a must have in MAPS and what is nice to have?
- What would need to be taken away in order for a place to move from being acceptable to unacceptable?
- What could be removed and still leave a place acceptable?

In responding to these questions, groups were far more tentative and cautious than when agreeing on the lists of services & facilities, the conditions of places, and community and quality of life that may make up MAPS. Participants in groups found it a more difficult task to talk about and agree upon where to draw lines of acceptability. Similarly, discussion of how minimum quality may come to be defined and where thresholds should be located prompted a range of responses, but not clear consensus regarding acceptable measurements of quality and whose responsibility it was to ensure and deliver quality. Away from questions of quality, there was also a lack of agreement about who should be responsible for delivering particular services as part of MAPS, such as rubbish collection. Illustrative of these difficulties within groups was the agreement that MAPS should include some reference to the less material aspects of place, such as neighbourliness and respecting difference, but also the recognition that measuring these aspects of place or establishing thresholds was not necessarily a straightforward task. Questions of quality and measurement were further complicated by the explicit acknowledgement within groups of the problems

associated with expecting particular agencies or providers to deliver these aspects of place.

Stage 3: Identifying difference and establishing thresholds

The final group brought together participants from a large urban context and surrounding rural settlements in order to reflect on and explore the commonalities and differences across these area types that had emerged in the preceding six groups. The group further explored the ways in which the elements of place identified in the previous groups might fit together, and looked at how minimum thresholds for quality and acceptability may be defined. The group were presented with the diagrammatic representation of what MAPS might look like presented in Chapter 4 as the basis for discussion and were asked to consider essential characteristics and the extent to which it was important to have choice in relation to the essential elements of place. As in previous groups, there was a broad level consensus in the final group regarding the list of features identified as constituting a minimum. However, with a focus on exploring the differences between urban and rural needs in terms of a minimum acceptable place standard, the group was able to identify some key differences between the two contrasting area types and to reflect on the different needs and expectations in the city compared with the countryside.

As in the preceding groups there was much deliberation and discussion of how a minimum quality may be defined and as a consequence where the lines of acceptability may be drawn. Reflecting on this particular element of the process, however, it becomes clear that without guidance and input, or more broadly, clear frames of reference, groups found the process of defining quality a very difficult one. There were also issues associated with the scale of the task being asked of groups: discussing and agreeing on a suitable threshold and measure of quality for public safety, for example, is a time consuming task in itself without having to undertake the same task for a number of different elements of place, all requiring their own thresholds and 'standards'. It must be remembered that this project is an exploratory one. The implications of this for the MAPS method moving forward are explored in Chapter 6, but it is clear that any future development of the MIS method in this direction needs to address some of the difficulties associated with defining quality, devoting more time to talking about the quality of public goods.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the main stages of the Minimum Acceptable Place Standard research and explored some of the challenges and difficulties encountered in the process, as well as the benefits offered by using and developing the existing MIS methodology. The next chapter briefly outlines the context within which MAPS sits, in terms of existing place standards and measures of acceptability. The subsequent three chapters explore the findings produced by this method, starting

with an examination of the key features of a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard emerging from the discussions across the seven groups.

3. The context of MAPS

Policy background

A place standard can be defined as “a set of minimum conditions that have to be met in order for a place to reach an acceptable threshold”. A key consideration underpinning an exploration of a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard is the extent to which it is possible or even desirable to arrive at a resident-led standard at a national level, or how far such standards can or should vary between localities. This tension between national or local standards for neighbourhoods is reflected in the differing approaches adopted by recent governments. Successive Labour Governments between 1997 and 2010 not only emphasised locally derived standards of public service delivery through a range of initiatives such as Local Area Agreements, but also national place standards through the use of floor targets. Floor targets were first introduced in 2000 and set minimum standards for disadvantaged groups or areas. By 2005, these targets had been grouped into key areas such as education, crime, worklessness, housing and liveability. The notion of liveability is of particular interest for this research as it focused upon the local environment, and *‘the things that people see when they walk out the front door’*³, and have tended to relate to issues identified through surveys that asked people to identify the things that would make their local area a better place to live. Hastings et al (2005) also drew attention to attempts by the Labour administration to narrow the gap between affluent and poor areas in relation to neighbourhood environments.

The current administration’s localism agenda contrasts with the use of national standards and has a much stronger focus upon the idea that each community should be able to determine its own priorities and to deploy resources as it sees fit. A range of Community Rights aim to give members of the public more control, and a greater say, over service provision and planning and development in the areas where they live (such as Community Right to Build; Community Right to Challenge, Community Right to Bid and Community Asset Transfer). A further initiative has seen the development of neighbourhood community budgets, building upon the practice of devolving budgets to a very local level evident in previous initiatives such as Local Integrated Services and Participatory Budgeting. Neighbourhood community budgets (known as Our Place) take forward this concept, and aim to bring together resources from a range of service providers including community assets, devolving decisions about how best to deploy the available resources to these to meet the specific needs of communities.

In addition to these mechanisms, neighbourhood planning is a way of establishing a community-led framework for guiding the future development and growth of an area. A Neighbourhood Plan may contain a vision, aims, planning policies, proposals for improving the area or providing new facilities, or the allocation of key sites for specific

kinds of development. Neighbourhood planning can be taken forward by two types of body - town and parish councils or 'neighbourhood forums'. Neighbourhood forums are community groups that are designated to take forward neighbourhood planning in areas without parishes. Although it appears likely that many neighbourhood plans will focus on planning and development control issues, neighbourhood plans have the potential to focus on any issue facing neighbourhoods and thus reflect local priorities. A key element of neighbourhood plans is that through community referenda, individuals have the final say on whether or not the plans for where they live are put into action, ensuring that, at least in theory, communities are playing a greater role in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods.

An important consideration in the development of a potential Minimum Acceptable Place Standard is the role that this could play as a possible tool for local residents and other stakeholders to assist in discussions about neighbourhoods, including how services and amenities might be configured locally or how existing community resources and assets may be used to meet the place-related priorities of communities. In this respect, MAPS could potentially provide a point of reference to groups working on neighbourhood plans, and function as a tool for generating conversations within communities about local priorities.

Existing place standards

The tension between the use of national and local standards is also reflected in the variety of standards in current public service delivery. On one hand, there are national standards and inspection regimes and responsible bodies for some services such as schools and hospitals, but as MORI (2005, p2) has noted, there is no 'OFSTREET' to oversee street scenes or neighbourhoods, as OFCOM, OFGEM and OFQUAL do in their respective sectors. The quality of neighbourhoods is to a large degree determined by the people who live there. However, local government and other local agencies such as housing organisations can potentially play a role in helping bring aspects of communities up to the standards expected by their residents. Most standards exist at a geographical scale below the nation state level, from region or administrative area (such as local authority) to neighbourhood. These standards have been developed by different organisations for different purposes, and often focus on specific aspects of places, such as environmental standards. Local authorities, housing associations, managing agents and freeholders often set out minimum service standards on services such as grounds maintenance, graffiti removal, vandalism, abandoned vehicles, litter and dumping; what will be done by whom, when and to what level of quality, across all homes, and across neighbourhoods and in some cases across places at a larger scale.

Discussion of the range of features that places should contain have also developed in relation to the characteristics of 'liveable', 'sustainable', 'lifetime' 'age friendly' 'walkable' or otherwise desirable neighbourhoods (Parkinson et al, 2006). These

definitions, in combination with minima, could be seen to define different types of acceptable and unacceptable neighbourhoods, with a strong focus upon on physical design. For example, focusing on the built environment as one element of acceptable places, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) operated to improve standards in new development in England and Wales from 1998-2010. It developed a 'Building for Life' standard for residential developments (CABE 2004, 2005, 2007). This was intended to be applied to new developments and developments in progress, but can be adapted to consider existing areas. The standard was derived from a non-systematic review of literature on cities and urban design, which suggested links between design features and impact on social life, resident satisfaction, manageability, and cost-efficiency.

Such definitions have also been used to assess neighbourhood 'vitality', 'community strength', 'well-being', 'vulnerability', and have focussed on particular groups and issues such as children's situations, older people, and housing. Concepts such as 'lifetime neighbourhoods' and age friendly communities, which focus on particular needs of population sub-groups, offer resident and practitioner perspectives on the range of features that neighbourhoods should contain. A key dimension is that this literature focuses not only upon the features that neighbourhoods should contain *now*, but also considers how neighbourhoods may need to look in the future when the proportion of older people is much higher. Manchester provides a good example of strategic planning at city wide level that has looked at the long term aspiration of developing Manchester in the context of a growing older population, whilst also factoring in how disadvantaged groups will be taken forward as part of this agenda. The Valuing Older People Strategy sets out the council's view on what a Lifetime Neighbourhood should look like and the range of features it should contain. Manchester currently has a project to bring these themes together in a Lifetime Neighbourhoods demonstrator projects, building on priorities established with local residents.

Public involvement in the development of standards

There is a risk that expert led standards drive rather than respond to a public understanding of what matters about local places. A key consideration underpinning the MAPS research was the extent to which members of the public may have been involved in developing various standards. One theme to emerge from the literature - and the United States in particular- is an emphasis upon self-help guidance for residents to undertake audits of their own neighbourhoods. An important aspect of these approaches is how far residents have been involved in framing and developing such guidance. The work by Help the Aged 'Towards Common Ground', for example, brought together expert led perspectives and consultations with older people to identify key elements of neighbourhoods that enable older people to enjoy a good quality of life (Help the Aged, 2008). These studies provided insights into local perspectives on the kind of issues that matter to people, as well as the views of

significant parts of the population such as older people.

Local authorities and other agencies such as housing associations have utilised a variety of consultative mechanisms to engage residents about the development of local standards. One example of this approach is in Newcastle where Newcastle City Council has consulted with residents on the development of Decent Neighbourhood Standards (2011; 2012). This standard covers street and road cleanliness and maintenance, lighting, recycling facilities and green spaces – but also activities for young people and possibly childcare – and allows for some ward-based variation to the city-based standard. Assessments of the extent to which areas are meeting the standard is determined through the collection of data at a ward level.

The use of service standards across a range of public services can be seen to constitute something approaching a minimum place standard at a local level. A number of examples of local level service standards developed out of neighbourhood management projects in the 2000s. One example included the utilisation of community contracts and neighbourhood/community agreements or charters, across the country. These set out not only the service standards and priorities for action that local people expect from service providers, but also any obligations that the residents have taken on themselves. The contracts were developed by the local authority or public service provider in partnership with other service providers and the community, usually through a community level organisation such as a parish council, residents' association, or other neighbourhood group (see Department of Communities and Local Government, 2010). Public engagement throughout the process of developing contracts was primarily through existing community representatives, organisations and volunteers, although a variety of other forms of engagement were also used such as surveys and workshops with members of the public to identify priorities. While public engagement at a local level potentially goes some way to ensuring that contracts and standards reflect the priorities of communities, it is not possible, from a range of service standards at a local level, to develop a national level MAPS over which there is public consensus.

In addition to community consultations, residents' views on social and environmental aspects of the areas where they live have also been examined through surveys (for example, Walker et al, 2001; MORI, 2005). For example, building on qualitative work with members of the public to identify the range of issues that matter to people about the areas where they live, MORI (2005) undertook a survey of the items that people rated as most important in terms of making somewhere a good place to live (MORI, 2005). Such evidence can be used to inform the development of a 'place standard', and provides a comparison with data that has emerged from our project.

However, as outlined in Chapter 2, this project also builds upon the previous attempts to define place standards by exploring how far the Minimum Income Standard methodology can be used to generate a consensually driven minimum standard for

places. Prior to MIS, although there were expert-led exercises and definitions, as well as local consultations, there were no consensual, publicly determined thresholds for what constituted an acceptable standard of living. There are parallels here with place, and the potential to draw upon the MIS method to test how far it might be possible to establish a public consensus about a minimum acceptable place standard, especially with regard to thresholds.

Summary

Current place standards have been developed for a variety of purposes and tend to focus on specific aspects of neighbourhoods such as environmental features or design of the built environment, but often with limited engagement with the public. In some instances the use of service standards across multiple public services approaches a minimum place standard for specific localities across a range of important dimensions, often using participatory approaches in engaging with the public. Other approaches have engaged with the public to develop methods for auditing neighbourhoods, but have tended to focus on the needs of sections of the community such as older people. In contrast, the MAPS research examined how the public might conceptualise minimum standards in relation to place that are not tied to specific localities, and tested how far it might be possible to establish a minimum acceptable place standard based on public consensus.

4. Mapping the terrain: building a consensual framework for minimum acceptable place standards

Introduction

This chapter sets out the key features that could build towards a potential Minimum Acceptable Place Standard derived from the discussions with the seven groups. The first part of the chapter introduces a diagram that summarises the topics that formed the basis for discussion as to the potential components of a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard. These components are discussed in relation to three domains:

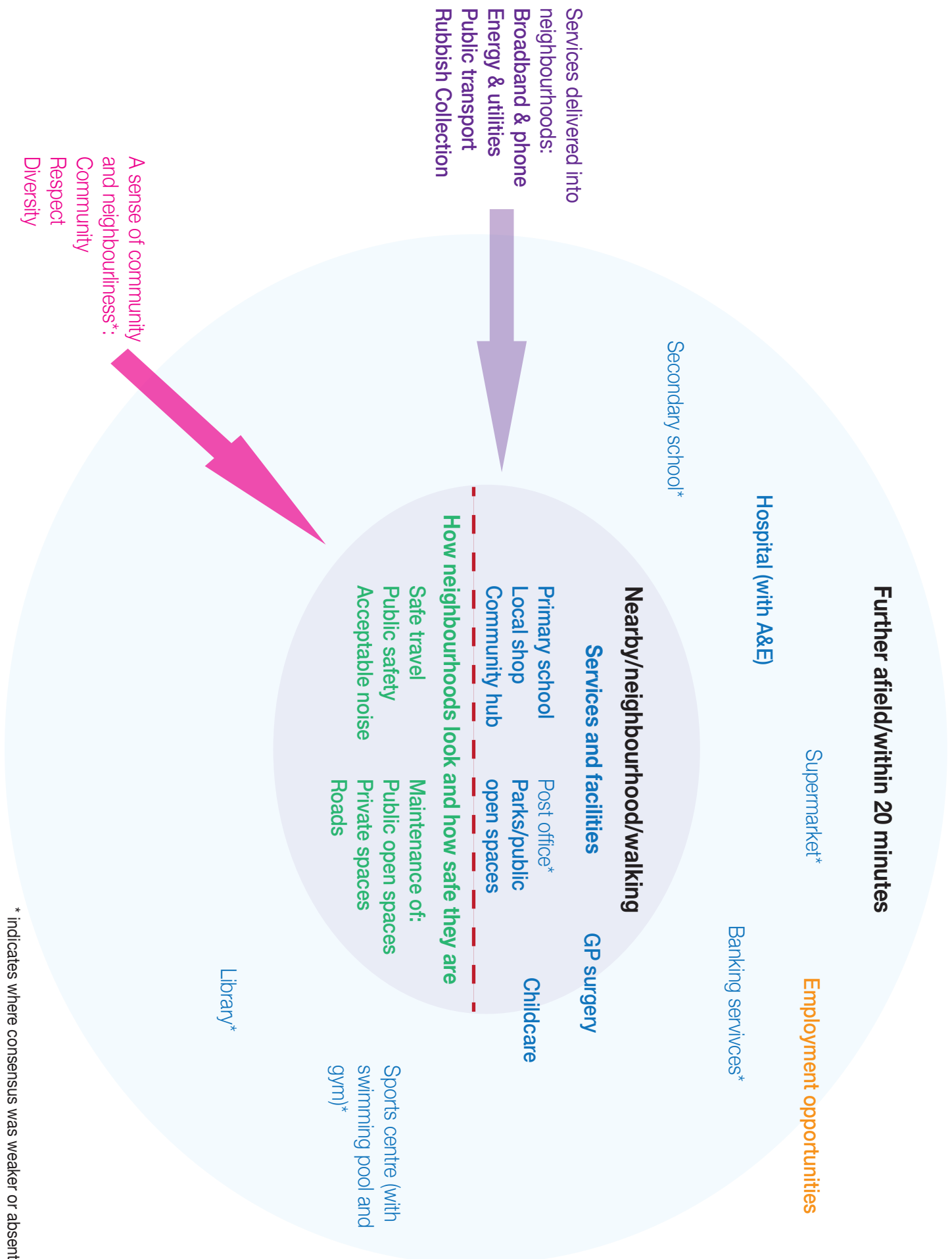
- Services and amenities accessible from places
- The maintenance of places
- Community and neighbourliness within places

The chapter discusses the rationale for the inclusion of each feature or component on the basis of the decisions that were made by the groups. This section explores the balance and range of views across the focus groups, also noting areas of consensus and disagreement within groups.

The key features of a minimum acceptable place standard

Figure 2 summarises the topics that were identified and discussed by the seven groups as potential components of a Minimum Acceptable Place Standard. The groups discussed key services and amenities that should be present in the immediate area where people live (or within walking distance, as well as other services and amenities that could be further afield, within about 20 minutes travel time away (either by car or public transport). Groups also discussed key services that should be delivered into, or otherwise available in, neighbourhoods, such as rubbish collection, landlines and broadband, energy supplies and public transport. Groups also discussed how neighbourhoods should look, including maintenance, as well as perceptions of how safe they are. Finally, groups considered the extent to which notions of community and neighbourliness could or should feature as part of a minimum place standard. It must be noted that the diagram highlights the main topics identified for discussion by the groups, rather than definitive standards. The degree of consensus over these topics is explored in greater detail below.

Figure 2: A minimum acceptable place standard – summarising the discussions



Services and amenities

Groups were able to establish consensus on some services and amenities, but not in relation to all the topics and aspects of place that were discussed in the groups. The findings are divided into sections to show where broad agreement was reached, and also topics where there was less, or no agreement.

Where consensus was strong

Access to primary and acute health services

Unsurprisingly, access to health services featured as a key requirement for a minimum standard across the groups. Access to a GP within walking distance of people's homes was viewed as important, although there was some discussion with groups over an acceptable distance, with fifteen minutes favoured by most, but not all. An issue that generated greater discussion between participants was not the distance to a doctor, but the time it might take to get an appointment, and the type of queuing arrangements in place.

Discussions about hospitals focused a great deal on access. One area of discussion was on response times by ambulances, and the time it would take to reach Accident and Emergency services. In this respect, a minimum requirement was for access to a hospital with Accident and Emergency services within a reasonable timescale. Further discussion took place over how outpatients get to and from hospitals, with some debate over the need for public transport, or hospital transport to access outpatient services as part of a minimum standard.

Access to primary education

Schools featured prominently as a key component of a minimum standard. There was a consensus that primary schools should be within walking distance of people's homes.

Access to secondary education

Participants agreed there should be access to secondary education, but did not reach consensus about quality, choice or the distance or travel arrangements necessary to ensure this. It is worth noting that in 2011, the average (median) travel time distance to a secondary school in England was twenty minutes across all modes of travel (DFT 2012). Several participants noted that secondary school children could often get themselves to school, but that this depended on access to affordable public transport. Discussion in the rural orientation group led to an argument for a minimum standard that should include free travel via main routes into schools (with parents responsible for getting their children to the bus stops along these routes). This discussion was carried over into the task groups and final group. The cost of travel featured among these latter discussions, with a view that free travel over three miles from schools

should be calculated on actual distance children had to travel, not based on a radius around the school; 'as the crow flies'. The main focus for discussion about schools was in relation to quality and choice, which is considered later in this report.

Access to employment

A feature underpinning how places might work as acceptable places and stable communities was access to jobs. There were a variety of views on how far participants felt it was reasonable to expect people to travel to access work. Although it was noted that a lot came down to individual choice, one and half hours away was generally viewed as an upper limit.

Several respondents across the groups highlighted that the viability of work and commuting time depended a great deal on access to affordable childcare, including breakfast and after school clubs:

There should be more preschool and after school clubs, to give parents opportunities. And I think it should be more tied in with education, so you haven't got to have somebody pick them up from school and take them somewhere until you've finished work – they can actually remain at school. It's much more affordable that way than it would be to pay a child-minder to collect them and look after them.

Male, stage two group, town

Access to food and convenience stores

Discussions in the orientation groups focused upon two types of shop in relation to food and basics. One area of discussion was on access to a local convenience store, within walking distance. Another area of discussion was about access to a supermarket (see below). These topics were taken forwards and discussed in greater depth in the groups in the second stage.

Access to a local convenience store, within walking distance, was generally viewed as a desirable aspect of neighbourhoods. The degree to which locally based stores were viewed as part of a necessary minimum reflected discussions about access to shops for different groups within neighbourhoods,

It depends who you are I think. Like this lady said, if you're on your own or an old age pensioner – we get loads coming in that do their weekly shop in the local shop, because, one, it's easy for them – they can't get down to Asda. And two, they don't need to go to a big supermarket. I suppose it depends who you are.

Female, stage two group, town

Public transport

The orientation groups focused largely on local bus services and these discussions were carried into the groups in stage two. There was a consensus that regular bus services would feature as an essential part of a minimum standard, although there was some disagreement over the frequency of buses required. In particular in rural areas there was a sense that the minimum level of service that is acceptable would be somewhat higher than currently experienced in many places.

Rural areas are rubbish. If you've got a lot to do in a day in town, you've got to try and cram everything in. I think you need more in rural areas

Female, stage two group, rural

Telephones and broadband

Consensus coalesced as part of discussions across the groups over the need for landlines. There was some discussion over the use or not of landlines by individual participants, with a number highlighting that they only used mobiles. Nevertheless, there was also a recognition that some groups within communities were likely to make more use of a landline and that access to this service should feature as a minimum. Furthermore, the need for landlines to gain access to broadband also meant that access to a landline was seen as a requirement. Although there was some discussion over people who may not use the internet, there was greater consensus that access to broadband was an increasing necessity for households and should feature as a minimum for all places. The need for broadband of a reasonable speed in rural areas was highlighted by a number of participants. The example was used in two groups of the use of the internet in schools in their area, and a need for children to access the internet at home as part of their education.

Parks and public open spaces

There was near universal agreement across the groups on the need for access to parks or public open spaces within walking distance of people's homes,

I think the walking distance is important as well, because you don't really want to drive to a park to exercise. On a summer's day it's nice to have a walk down the park and back, rather than drive there.

Male, stage two group, rural

Another aspect of place linked with this feature by participants was the degree of safety that people might feel as they spent time in parks or other open space.

Community hubs

One aspect of place standards that evolved during the process of undertaking

the groups was the notion of a need for opportunities to meet socially within neighbourhoods. Initial discussions within the first orientation group landed on a requirement for a pub as somewhere to meet. However, as the subsequent groups progressed, there was a view that people would prefer a much broader range of opportunities to meet socially, other than pubs. Firstly, a number of participants noted that some groups may not feel comfortable going to pubs and looked towards alternative venues as a place to meet. Community centres and village halls were seen as a valuable resource that could capture the needs of a diverse range of groups, although the difficulty of sustaining these types of venue was occasionally noted. Individual comments highlighted social opportunities presented by other features such as allotments, and although this aspect was not disputed by others, there was the view that such features could not appear as a part of a minimum standard. As a result of these discussions, this heading became 'community hubs' to reflect the idea of generic places or opportunities to meet socially.

Access to cash

There was a consensus that locally accessible, free access to cash was a requirement as a minimum, which is an issue that has not featured in many previous discussion about standards. The groups noted that although this could be via ATMs, other local sources could work just as well, as long as they were free. This included cash back at tills in shops.

Rubbish collection

Rubbish collection, like rural bus services, was a topic where participants settled on a minimum standard that was higher than was often experienced. Two of the stage two groups discussed a preference for a collection of general waste for landfill every week, whilst the third settled on a weekly general waste collection over the summer months. This latter view reflected a concern to avoid attracting vermin and bad smells in hot weather in the locations where people stored their waste until collection day. A feature of the discussions about this issue was that participants readily moved into conversations about more qualitative issues rather than just the presence or absence of the feature (as was more apparent in the discussion on telephony for example).

Where consensus was weak or absent

Access to supermarkets

Supermarkets proved more contentious both in relation to the extent to which they were viewed as a necessary minimum feature of places, but also with regard to an agreed standard in terms of an acceptable minimum distance. Supermarkets per se were generally viewed as a valuable resource, although many participants discussed the cost of goods rather than a maximum distance to travel as a key factor; these were prepared to travel some distance in order to pay for cheaper goods. A couple

of participants noted the negative impact of supermarkets on smaller, independent shops, and expressed the view that access to a supermarket did not rate as a priority for them.

If the quality of the local shops are better. Like when I used to live in [village]. I used to go to the Co-op or the butchers in the village. I wouldn't drive to the supermarket because I preferred the quality. You know what I mean? I don't think as a minimum standard of living to be near a supermarket is essential. Personally I don't think you need it.

Male, task group, town

Post Offices

Access to post offices generated considerable discussion, although there was no clear consensus achieved within the groups about whether post offices should be a required feature of a minimum standard. Individual opinions were expressed on whether participants personally made use of post offices or not, and this shaped how far many participants would want to see post offices as part of a minimum standard or not.

Nevertheless, some participants across the groups also noted that although they may not necessarily need to access a post office themselves, they felt that other members of their community may make more regular use of this type of facility and that this need by others should have some impact on the configuration of a minimum standard of place, reflected in the following exchange in one of the stage two groups,

F1: Personally for me I think I could live without a post office

M1: Well, yes you can in this day and age

F2: Yes

F3: There are people that couldn't live without a post office

Stage two group, city

Libraries

Although libraries featured amongst the discussions in the orientation groups, there was not a clear consensus within the stage two groups about their presence as a required minimum. There was some debate over how far individual participants made use, or not, of libraries. These discussions highlighted broader issues about the range of facilities that people in general can use in libraries beyond reading, such as internet facilities, as information points, but also as somewhere to meet up, or just somewhere to go.

Sports facilities

Access to sports facilities featured in the discussions within the orientation groups. These groups talked about the kind of facilities they would expect to see such as a swimming pool, playing fields for team sports and gyms. Although access to sports facilities was viewed as desirable by most respondents, others said that such facilities were not a priority for them, and that this was a feature of places they could 'do without'.

Other potential features

A suggestion put forward for discussion in one of the orientation groups was for the inclusion of public toilets as part of a minimum place standard. This issue was carried forward into the stage two groups, which generated conflicting views. Largely these discussions revolved around the extent to which some people would not want to make use of public toilets because of perceived issues related to safety and cleanliness, and that therefore they would not necessarily feature as part of standard. Instead, there was greater consensus between participants for the provision of publicly accessible toilets in private or public ownership, such as shops, cafes, pubs, or libraries and other public buildings, notwithstanding the difficulties of achieving the support of facilities' owners.

In three of the groups individual participants put forward the topic of faith in neighbourhoods, either in terms of places of worship as part of a minimum standard, or in terms of the role of faith based organisations in delivering social and community facilities and services: part of the 'social glue' within many neighbourhoods. Part of this issue reflected a concern that the needs of minority ethnic groups were reflected in a minimum standard,

As well as age, I think, the other thing is ethnic communities as well, like. One thing that isn't down here is like churches and mosques or temples or whatever, and I think like for me that's not a big issue but I know for my parents, they like to be in a community where they're accepted and also where they can go. Because say a pub festival wouldn't appeal to them, they don't drink, so going to a temple would, and in some areas you don't have that

Female, final group, city

This topic generated quite a bit of discussion, but no sense of consensus. Indeed, the topic of achieving a minimum place standard that included the needs of minority ethnic groups revealed strong fractures within a couple of the groups. Although there was a general sense that neighbourhoods should be tolerant and respectful of diversity, there was no consensus over how this might translate into a standard, or be reflected in the specific provision of services or amenities. Clearly the subject of meeting the needs of minority ethnic groups as part of a minimum is deeper and more complex than a discussion of faith alone, and would require much closer attention

than was possible in this project.

There were individual suggestions for the inclusion of other features or services within the groups, such as dentists. However, these were not included as these were dismissed by the majority of participants. Other potential topic areas such as social care were not raised by the groups, and were not prompted for discussion by the researchers. Some basic features such as water supply were taken as given within the research, whilst housing was introduced by the researchers as falling within an individual's domain as opposed to an aspect of neighbourhood. Nevertheless, access to housing came up as an issue for some participants (see Chapter 5).

How neighbourhoods look and how safe they are

Where consensus was strong

Public safety

Feeling safe within neighbourhoods and further afield featured significantly as an important baseline condition that people should expect, although how a standard for safety may operate in practice proved more contentious (see below).

Safe travel

Discussions about safe travel focused largely on safe access for pedestrians. A starting point for this line of debate was an observation by a participant in the suburban orientation group that there were no footpaths provided by the side of roads in some of the new housing developments in their area. This discussion was carried forward into the task groups and there was a consensus within these groups and the suburban orientation group that an absence of safe means of travel for pedestrians was unacceptable as a minimum standard. This issue raises questions about public expectations not just about the design of existing neighbourhoods, but also planning for new housing developments. A participant in a rural area noted that this expectation had implications for safe travel in rural areas. This person noted that since many rural roads did not, and could not, have a footpath by their side, then safe alternatives for non-car owners in rural areas should also feature as a minimum standard.

A further topic of discussion was a view across the groups that safe access should also include the provision of safe road crossings - pelican crossings - at key points. This view was not universal, and one participant noted that safe crossings were a nuisance for drivers.

Maintenance of public and private spaces

Participants across the groups felt that a minimum standard should include adequate

maintenance of public open spaces, roads and footways. This included tackling potholes in roads and adequate gritting during adverse weather.

Discussion of private spaces revolved around people's gardens and how far it was acceptable for gardens to appear messy or unkempt. There was a general view that it was preferable for gardens to be kept tidy, and that this individual responsibility helped promote the look and feel of an area or a street. However, not all respondents agreed, with one participant noting that how a garden looked was up to the individual concerned. Furthermore, enforcement of minimum standards of private gardens and spaces was viewed as problematic. In this regard, a number of respondents highlighted that social rented tenants were often expected to maintain their gardens to an adequate standard by their landlords.

Where consensus was weak or absent

Public safety in detail

While feeling safe within neighbourhoods and further afield featured significantly as an important baseline condition that people should expect, it proved more intractable to pin down as a minimum standard.

Discussions revolved around expectations in relation to police presence on the street, as well as police response times to specific incidents. There was a perception that there should be a greater police presence on streets, as well as staffed stations that were open beyond office hours within a reasonable distance. Part of the debates within groups focused on the role of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) as part of an acceptable minimum to make neighbourhoods feel safe. A couple of participants noted that PCSOs had a useful role acting as an interface between police and communities, especially with regard to sharing and collecting information and also local knowledge. The majority view across groups seemed to be that PCSOs had a valid role to play in having a useful presence within communities, especially by having a visible presence on streets. Nevertheless, some people queried the respect that some members of the public had for PCSOs, and a perception that PCSOs lacked the authority or means to adequately address crime and anti-social behaviour. These discussions raised an issue for minimum place standards in that on occasion participants settled on a required standard that was perceived as higher than was currently felt to be experienced in practice.

Community

The initial exercises in the orientation groups for people to describe the features of 'best and worst' places led to considerable discussion about notions of community within the groups. Often couched in a historical context that neighbourliness and behaviour between neighbours was getting worse, there was still a sense within the groups that ideas of community were nevertheless an important aspect of how well a

minimum acceptable place standard might work.

This section reports how the groups tackled the extent to which the way that people interact with each other could be included in a minimum place standard. Perhaps the only consensus that was achieved in this respect was that although behaviour within neighbourhoods was viewed as a crucial aspect of how people feel and experience the areas in which they live, it was felt to be too difficult a facet of daily life to pin down to a minimum standard. The following two quotes reflect this issue, and a sense that whilst it might be easier to arrive at a standard for key services and amenities, aspects of community are harder to define,

Years ago that would have happened, but I think people are isolated. You isolate yourself. You could be living in a specific area. Know it's a bad area that isn't neighbourly and don't look out for each other, so you isolate yourself away from it. I don't know, but you still got your minimum, your doctors and your shops, whatever.

Female, Stage two group, town

Different persons want different things as well don't they? I'd like to be somewhere where there's neighbours, whereas other people are quite happy not to speak to anybody on their street.

Male, Stage two group, city

Instead, the groups focused greater attention on factors that could assist and enable social interaction to flourish. In part, this issue has already been addressed in the consideration of social hubs, and the key here was for opportunities for social interaction. There was also discussion about facilitating activities within neighbourhoods and providing opportunities for events and activities to take place. This facilitation might include running community centres and social clubs, or organising events. However, part of the discussion, especially in the final group, was that funding to enable such activity to happen should perhaps be part of a minimum standard for places. The next chapter looks at the question of who might take responsibility for this. As illustrated in the above quote, participants also discussed enabling access to services and amenities, including social opportunities, for isolated individuals as part of a minimum standard.

The groups also felt strongly that crime and anti-social behaviour should not have to be tolerated as part of a minimum. However, there was a general view that translating this aspiration into a standard would prove challenging. There was some debate over how far negative individual behaviour could realistically be circumscribed by using charters or agreements. A couple of participants noted conditions contained within tenancy agreements or sale conditions on some housing developments.

Comparing discussions of acceptable levels of accessibility to current realities

A key aspect of a minimum standard relates to the time it takes for people to reach services and amenities. It is possible to compare the results of the discussions with the groups over accessibility with data produced by the Department for Transport (2012) that records national average travel times to a range of services (based on median travel times).

Table 1: Comparing discussions about acceptable distances to services with national travel data

	Results of group discussions	Department for Transport thresholds	
		Lower threshold (National average travel time)	Upper threshold (Higher end of journey times based on 80-90 per cent of all national trips)
Access to GP	Up to 15 minutes walk	15 minutes	30
Hospital	Access to Accident and Emergency within 30 minutes	Hospital – 30 minutes	60
Primary school	Within 10-15 minutes walk	15	30
Secondary School	No consensus	20	40
Local convenience store	Within 15 minute walk	‘food shop’, 15 minutes	30
Employment	No consensus, but 90 minutes seen as a maximum	20	40

Source: Department for Transport, 2012.

Respondents tended to be quite pragmatic in their views on the minimum standards they would hope to see. For some of the services the views of the groups tended to coincide with the national averages recorded by the Department for Transport, such as access to a GP, primary schools, and local convenience stores. These thresholds can also be compared with characterisations of desirable neighbourhoods that focus on accessibility of services within the neighbourhood, particularly by sustainable transport, and includes ‘walkable neighbourhoods’ and ‘twenty minute neighbourhoods’. The ‘twenty minute neighbourhood’ is a concept credited to the firm Gerdling Edlen, Portland, Oregon, and is also being explored in the UK in places such as Newcastle. The concept defines a place where people can meet all of their daily needs within a 20-minute journey, preferably on foot, but 20 minutes by public

transport, bike or even by car is noted as a reasonable goal⁴.

Prioritising the components of a minimum acceptable place standard

The orientation groups identified a range of services and features that they felt should feature as components of a minimum place standard. The subsequent discussions within the stage two groups and final group provided an opportunity to explore these views in greater depth and at a more detailed level of specification. In this regard, participants were asked to reflect on whether the components and features that made up an overall minimum standard of places could be differentiated in terms of priority, or whether all the aspects of place were as important as each other. Were there features that were considered essential, compared with other aspects of places that were initially identified in the orientation groups that the subsequent groups felt that people could live without?

These discussions focused most readily on specific services and amenities. Greater consensus was achieved on the presence of key services such as health, education and access to parks and public open space, although not necessarily more detailed, qualitative aspects including accessibility, choice, or quality. In many instances – such as the availability of GPs and schools – this consensus largely described normal conditions in places throughout the UK, articulating aspects of places that we often take for granted. In some instances, on the other hand, participants advocated a minimum standard that was higher than was currently experienced, such as levels of policing, rubbish collection, and public transport, especially in rural areas.

Although a range of other amenities were explored, less agreement was apparent over components such as the inclusion of post offices and libraries. Whilst there was a sense within the groups that the presence of some services as stand-alone features may be unrealistic as a minimum standard, one topic of discussion carried forward from the orientation groups was about co-location. For example, there was some discussion of ATMs and cash-back facilities in shops, as well as post office services. Further, an issue to explore in the future might be the extent to which a consensus might be reached over a need within communities for certain features such as post offices or libraries, where there is a recognition that some, but not all, individuals may need or want access to a facility or service.

Capturing the perspectives and priorities of different age groups

One theme that underpinned some of the discussions was the extent to which stage in life-course shaped and influenced expectations about minimum requirements for places. Respondents with children articulated the need for features within neighbourhoods for children and there tended to be a general acceptance by respondents who did not have children of the value of key facilities for children as part of a minimum.

4

See: <http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/index.cfm?a=288098&c=52256>).

Nevertheless, the perspectives of different age groups may not have been captured directly by the discussions, since no participants were under the age of 20. Participants did speak about their *perceptions* of the needs of such groups. Such discussions seemed to reflect concerns that minimum standards for places included features that would mitigate against the perceived problems such as anti-social behaviour that young people may cause for others. Across the groups there was often reference to the provision of activities and facilities for young people in urban and rural areas alike, reflected in the comment,

....it would keep young people out of trouble

Female, stage two group, city

Quite what young people themselves think about these views, or how the perspectives of children and young people might fit or not within any notions of a consensus about minimum place standards was beyond the scope of the research. Nevertheless, there is a large literature that has addressed the incorporation of the views of children and young people into neighbourhood design (For example, see Open City's Youth participation programme in London 'My City Too!': <http://www.mycitytoo.org.uk/index.html>, or examples from Canada looking at how neighbourhoods work for children www.scyofbc.org/).

Similarly, other research has reported the range of features that older people have highlighted as requirements in the design of neighbourhoods and outdoor spaces (see Help the Aged (2008), discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). Several participants across the groups commented on the perceived needs of older people, and how this might shape a consensus with regard to minimum place standards. Often it was noted that although individual participants may not need access to services themselves, there was a broader need for services and features within neighbourhoods that others - especially older people - may require. It was this wider sense of need within communities which shaped a sense of consensus about minimum acceptable place standards.

If you don't have a car. I don't have a car so I rely on public transport and I guess that's a massive thing for me because what if people get older and they can't get about, like going to the local shop, do you know what I mean? I guess for older people, which we're all going to become, and there's a lot more older people now than what there has been. It's all those things that are going to be more important because if we can't drive or get about easily, we need things to be in our place, don't we?
Female, final group, city

The quote above also raises an issue about acceptable place standards in terms of accessibility for car owners and non-car owners and the extent to which this might constitute another important social divide as with age groups.

Summary

This chapter has described the main features that participants felt that places would need in relation to the presence or absence of services and amenities in an area, including their accessibility, as well as other components of place such as maintenance and aspects of behaviour (and is summarised in the diagram at the start of this chapter). To be acceptable, a place would need to meet all or many of the criteria simultaneously. Indeed, many places are probably meeting the criteria discussed by participants in this project, and it is worth emphasising that respondents were quite pragmatic in their views and expectations of the minimums they would expect to see of places. In a couple of instances participants advocated a minimum standard that was higher than was currently experienced, such as levels of policing, and public transport, especially in rural areas. However, in order to operationalise the idea of standards, we need to understand in greater depth public views about thresholds of acceptability and how quality can be judged. These issues are explored in the next chapter.

5. The contours of MAPS: obstacles to reaching consensus

Introduction

Having explored the aspects of place around which groups of members of the public were able to reach a broad level of consensus, the focus of this chapter is on the challenge posed to groups by the issues of quality, choice and rural and urban differences. The seven groups have provided a consensually-established framework upon which a measurable Minimum Acceptable Place Standard may be built. Groups did begin to propose where thresholds may be established, for example in relation to how far away particular key facilities should be, but in general it proved to be a more difficult task to begin to draw clear lines of acceptability and to define and agree on the thresholds below which places become unacceptable. The key issues explored in this section go some way toward explaining why groups found it difficult to reach consensus about this. The challenge is to overcome these obstacles, so that a framework of features of place can become a measurable standard. This section therefore centres on the aspects of quality and the thresholds which would need defining.

The discussion below starts by exploring the way in which groups talked about quality and thresholds in relation to the emerging features of MAPS. Within this, the difficulties associated with defining and enforcing standards relating to community are explored as is the issue of who should be responsible for providing MAPS and ensuring the quality of public goods and commons. Second, the discussion explores the views emerging from groups on how choice interacts with minimum acceptable place standards and peoples' willingness to make trade-offs; for example, if access to a supermarket is included as part of MAPS, is it acceptable as a minimum to have access to only one supermarket or should MAPS build in choice as a necessary component of acceptability? Thirdly, the differences between rural and urban settings emerging from the groups are outlined, looking at how these impacted on the possibility of reaching consensus about where to draw lines of acceptability.

The challenge of quality and thresholds

Across the MAPS groups, conversations about where lines of acceptability should be drawn, how thresholds should be delineated and how minimum quality should be defined figured prominently. For example, it was discussed in groups whether it is possible to say at what point the number of boarded up windows on a street make this an unacceptable place? How far away would employment opportunities need to be in order to be too far? Is access to a GP surgery within walking distance the acceptable minimum or does it have to offer a certain quality of care and, if so, how is this quality of care defined and measured? Is it possible to define a minimum threshold for neighbourliness or to clearly outline minimum acceptable expectations of neighbours?

At a general level, discussion within groups focused on how, as part of MAPS, a minimum quality of services may be defined and whose definitions of quality were the most critical in informing this. Although participants understandably found defining quality ‘from scratch’ to be a difficult task, there was a feeling across groups that defining thresholds of quality should probably include both official and more community-centred measures. In relation to education, for example, participants were clear that it was not sufficient to rely solely on Ofsted as the judge of quality. This is not to suggest that participants were critical of the idea of some form of national assessment of standards, particularly in relation to services that have traditionally been centrally administered. Rather, assessments of minimum acceptable quality in relation to, for example, education, should include more than just the judgements of Ofsted inspectors. So when asked how they currently made judgements about quality in schools, participants typically responded:

M1: You’d check up yourself.

M2: Talk to parents outside the school.

F1: I’d ask in the community.

Stage two group, rural

It was clear across groups that communities have an important role to play in defining what counts as acceptable quality, even with regard to services where many of us may feel we lack the ability to make judgements about professional standards. Assessments of quality which could feed into the setting of minimum service standards should be informed both by professional judgements and user experiences.

I must admit if I had to look at the quality of hospitals it would be probably through word of mouth what other people’s experience was. I don’t know how else you would do it.

Female, stage two group, city

Outside of community-centred measures of acceptability and quality, there was a recognition that communities and individuals may lack the requisite knowledge to decide where lines marking minimum levels of acceptability may be drawn. For example, in relation to quality in health services, participants noted that there is a limit to the reach of public judgements or measures:

F1: We’re not doctors, we wouldn’t really know how things should run.

We should have a say in transport, safety in hospitals.

F2: You do need some sort of official government sort of measure in there so that you know that it’s clean.

F1: Yes.

F2: You know sort of basic, really basic stuff.

Stage two group, city

Across the groups exchanges like this were typical and reveal the complexity of drawing lines of acceptability and blending 'official' and community-centred definitions of quality.

In the discussions of quality groups also found it difficult across many of the identified key features of MAPS to define where the lines of acceptability were or at what point services dipped below the minimum. There were suggestions of what would make places unacceptable in terms of the amount of litter and the appearance of places, but far more prominent were more generalised assumptions or expectations of what *all* places should be like:

But all schools should be good, shouldn't they? They should all be like, they should all have a decent standard

Female, final group, city

I expect them all [GPs] to be the same standard anyway. I wouldn't expect to have to choose between a good one and a bad one

Female, final group, city

None of the services should fall below a minimum quality

Male, final group, city

Moving from the general to the particular regarding assumptions about minimum quality within groups however proved more difficult than stating that there should be a threshold below which services became unacceptable.

Further difficulties were associated with the features of MAPS where standards were seen by groups as being closely related to the characteristics of individuals and communities *rather* than to places in themselves. While the burgeoning literature on neighbourhood effects suggests a link between, for example, levels of social organisation or community cohesion and levels of deprivation, there is a good deal of uncertainty regarding the direction and measurement of these effects: do neighbourhoods shape their residents or vice versa and how can we tell (see Cheshire 2006; Galster 2010). The discussions in groups reflected the complexity of disentangling and distinguishing the impact of residents on places and vice versa; throughout the groups there were participants who drew a link between what places were like and what the people within them were like, but more common was the view that people make places. In many instances, participants were appealing to notions of 'the good citizen', to beliefs about individual and shared responsibility and images of community marked by strong social networks and reciprocity, where both bonding and bridging social capital is strong (see Aldridge et al 2002; Putnam 2000). In discussion about the role of neighbourliness and community in MAPS one participant commented:

I just don't know how you would measure something like that, it's such a personal thing and it's certainly you couldn't enforce it with a certain standard. It's everyone's individual responsibility to ensure that they're kind of acting reasonably towards the people around them and you would hope that most people are reasonable and most people are respectful

Female, stage two group, city

Linked to debate and discussion regarding the definition of quality in relation to place, groups also explored who should be responsible for ensuring and delivering a minimum acceptable place standard. There was a clear sense across many of the groups that local authorities should be responsible for ensuring minimum standards with regard to certain elements of place such as levels of litter and road maintenance, as in the Newcastle Decent Neighbourhood Standard (Newcastle City Council, 2012). For some participants, the provision of such services was an expected return for financial contributions made through council and income tax. For other participants though there was less clarity over who was responsible for delivering MAPS and a feeling that there was a role for individuals working in tandem with community organisations, local authorities and central government to ensure that, for example, places were maintained to a particular standard or that individuals were not isolated within communities. Striking the balance between the state, local structures of governance, the community and the market in terms of who provides MAPS is clearly of importance at a policy level, but it was striking within groups that the principle concern was often with the outcome of services rather than necessarily who was delivering them. Such a view raises questions regarding the definition of quality within MAPS – should the focus be on the provision of minimum service levels or should the focus be on delivering particular outcomes? That is, should MAPS be primarily concerned with defining what is delivered, such as primary and secondary education that is free at the point of need, or should MAPS focus on ensuring that services deliver particular outcomes, for example ensuring all children are reading and writing at agreed levels at the end of each Key Stage?

Choice, trade-offs and minimum place standards

Questions relating to choice and the willingness of participants to make trade-offs were explored across the groups. Groups were clear that any attempt at articulating MAPS should include a recognition of the importance of choice. The significance given to choice is one that very closely accords with the understanding of a minimum at the heart of MIS research. Explicit within the definition of a minimum acceptable standard of living used in MIS is that a minimum income standard should provide people not just with what they need to survive, but with what they need in order to be able to participate fully in society. A minimum income standard needs to enable people to have opportunities and choices, rather than prescribing or dictating behaviours and activities representing a minimum level of participation. To put this

another way, people should not be forced to choose between food and buying Christmas presents for their families. Rather a minimum income should allow for both of these as key elements of participation in society.

Within MAPS a similar view emerged from the groups, evidenced by the difficulty groups experienced in beginning to prioritise particular features of place over others; people should not be made to choose between, for example, a good hospital and a good school, but rather a minimum acceptable place standard should be a means of ensuring that all are able to access both of these services and that each provides a certain quality of service. Similarly, people should not be made to choose between feeling safe and being within a certain distance of employment opportunities; MAPS should ensure that people are able to access work *and* feel safe walking the streets.

The MIS groups interpret this criterion of choice in terms of having sufficient financial resources to be able to purchase items in accordance with their tastes and personal needs. Translating this to MAPS is not easy, because the choices that people have within a community are influenced both by characteristics of that community and by characteristics of particular households within it. For example, having a choice of schools may be influenced both by the pattern of schools in your area and whether you have a car. Housing choices in particular are influenced both by what is available locally and by household resources. Housing choices also interact with the way in which people relate choices to places:

M: I think it comes down to a lot of choice really where you want to live and you make those choices yourselves.

F: I would disagree because I don't have a choice in where I live. I couldn't change where I live if I wanted to, not that I want to but I couldn't move because financially I couldn't move.

Final group, city

The cost of housing was seen, then, as a key factor limiting choice and the extent to which individuals were able to access the full range of features that may make up a minimum acceptable place standard. The key point was that MAPS should be available to all, regardless of the cost of housing and any minimum acceptable place standard needs to be built on an understanding that choices with regard to where people live are constrained. As one participant in the stage two group in a town observed:

Sometimes people aren't where they are because they want to be there, they're there because they have to be, so I think all of those things [features of place] need, are equally important in terms of quality of life for anyone

Male, stage two group, town

Another participant reinforced this point of view, stating:

Choice is an illusion, an aspirational illusion, so surely perhaps we could concentrate on what we're stuck with, they should have the very best quality possible.

Male, final group, city

MAPS in rural and urban settings

One of the aims of this research was to determine if there were significant differences in the sorts of things different kinds of places need to have in order to reach a minimum and, if so, whether this would necessitate a different standard in urban and rural areas. While differences were evident, there was also wide-ranging agreement across the different place types (large urban, other urban and rural) regarding the key features of a minimum acceptable place standard. Groups in rural settings agreed on a very similar list of features necessary to ensure that places met a minimum acceptable standard to those groups in large urban settings. The need to access schools, primary and acute health services and employment opportunities, and the importance of feeling safe within neighbourhoods, for instance, were as prominent in rural settings as in the urban groups. The evidence from the groups suggests that there is no compelling reason to assume there is a need for a different MAPS in rural and urban settings, certainly in terms of the broad framework of place characteristics necessary to reach a minimum acceptable place standard.

While the central principles of a minimum acceptable place standard were broadly similar in rural and urban settings, there were differences between the two place types in terms of where the lines of acceptability may be drawn and in the relationship between quality, access and choice. The key source of difference emerging from rural and urban groups concerned the differing levels of access and the impact of this on choice in rural and urban settings. In general there was an acceptance of the need to travel further in terms of travel times to access the range of choices in rural settings that was assumed and expected within urban contexts. When groups in urban and rural settings discussed the need for supermarkets, for example, it was clear that there were divergent views as to what level of access and choice constituted the line below which places become unacceptable. In large urban centres, access to a range of supermarkets facilitated choice in terms of where to buy food and this was seen as important as it allowed individuals to make the best use of their income:

People like choices. Choices give you more options how to spend your money. That's what I try to do to make ends meet, so really I couldn't just specialise in just one supermarket which is 10 miles away or something like that. I go to ones that would save me a bit of money.

Male, stage two group, city

In rural settings, groups acknowledged that access to one supermarket would represent a minimum acceptable standard. The view that emerged clearly from groups was that the city afforded more choice than more rural settings and that this had an impact on where lines of acceptability may be drawn. While many of the same amenities are seen as necessities in rural and urban areas, there were differing expectations, impacting upon MAPS, regarding access to a range of providers in these different contexts. In an urban context acceptability may be defined as being able to access more than one supermarket whereas in a rural setting acceptability may be defined as having access to one supermarket.

In rural settings, groups were clear that access to the range of services and facilities included in the broad framework in Chapter 4 was more important than choice. This was particularly seen to be the case with reference to access to technology. Access to reliable broadband, for example, was viewed as a crucial means of ensuring places reached a minimum acceptable place standard as it enabled people in rural contexts to meet needs met in other ways in urban settings. As one participant in the final group noted:

I'd be actually happy if I had access to all the facilities, even more than choices. As somebody over there was saying about the broadband, I mean if you had constant supply of broadband and a good connection all the time, I don't think you'd be quite concerned if it was by Sky or BT or whatever as long as it was there, the facility, so I think in that sense it could apply to you, a lot of the things on here.

Male, final group, city

Acknowledging the greater access to choice in urban settings, groups were clear that less choice in rural settings did not result in places that were further from a minimum acceptable standard. Indeed having less choice in more rural areas was viewed as a positive by some participants and within the rural and final groups there was discussion of how access to a reduced range of choices may be off-set by gains in other areas. For example, rural areas were seen as having closer-knit communities, which in some instances was believed to have contributed to higher levels or a better quality of service:

I think more in the rural thing again, you go to the doctors and they know your first name and they'll be talking to you like we are now, whereas in a big place you're just a number, you go in, what's wrong with you, OK, fine, done, you know, but then you get into the village and it's more personal. So it's probably a better service that way.

Male, stage two group, rural

I see more community spirit in villages than I do in towns.

Female, stage two group, rural

In terms of a minimum acceptable place standard the message coming from groups was that the constituent elements of MAPS were the same in rural and urban settings, but that issues relating to accessibility have an impact on where lines of acceptability may be drawn.

Summary

This chapter has explored three of the key themes cutting across the MAPS framework which raise questions that have not been answered through this research. Principally these centre on how quality and acceptability are defined in relation to place, and how ideas regarding minimum place standards may be operationalised and translated in to a measure or set of measures of place. The conclusion of this chapter is that while groups of members of the public are able to reach broad consensus regarding the features or elements that make places reach an acceptable minimum, the next step – defining thresholds – is a far more difficult task. The next chapter suggests two ways in which the findings of this research may inform further work in order to produce a consensual, measurable minimum acceptable place standard and to enable communities to undertake assessments of what is currently provided in places.

6. Drawing new MAPS: taking minimum acceptable place standards forward

Introduction

The preceding chapters have outlined the ways in which this exploratory research has provided insight in to what a minimum acceptable place standard might look like. The discussions across the seven groups have produced a ‘map of the terrain’ with broad consensus of what places need to have and be like in order to reach an acceptable minimum standard. The MAPS framework presented in Chapter 4 captures this broad consensus and provides a contrast with previous and existing attempts at defining the minimum conditions that have to be met in order for a place to reach an acceptable threshold. As explored in Chapter 3, previous attempts at setting minima for local places at a national government level have tended to focus on setting standards in relation to particular elements of place such as the cleanliness of public spaces, the built environment or the accessibility of key services. Standards such as these have been developed more in consultation with experts than with members of the public and have tended to be more driven by data. Other place standards have done more to involve members of the public and have been confined to specific areas below the national level: for example, community charters developed by housing associations setting out the obligations of service providers and expectations of tenants or the Decent Neighbourhood Standards developed by Newcastle City Council. While the development of place standards at a more local level has involved consultation with local communities and residents, these processes have often not been driven by members of the public or engaged significant numbers of people: the Decent Neighbourhood Standards, for instance, asked residents to respond to council proposals to create decent neighbourhoods rather than asking residents which aspects of place were most important.

Approaching place standards from the point of view of members of the public this research has produced a set of place characteristics that correspond with many of the existing measures of place adequacy or acceptability. For example, research undertaken by MORI in 2005 identified a range of characteristics of what makes somewhere a good place to live that included many of the elements captured in this research: for example, community activities, low levels of crime, open spaces, access to public transport. But in contrast to many existing standards MAPS has arrived at this point through a method that has focused on what members of the public think places need to be like in order to meet a minimum acceptable standard. Furthermore, the MAPS framework in Chapter 4 potentially offers a more comprehensive standard than existing efforts as its focus is not upon one particular characteristic of place, but on a fuller range of the kinds of things that make places acceptable or not.

Given its exploratory nature, it was not intended for this research to produce a measurable standard that could function as a specific benchmark for places in the

future. It does however provide a solid basis from which to develop more a robust consensual need-based threshold of acceptability, both nationally and locally. It suggests that it may be possible to establish such standards in some areas if not all. It has also demonstrated the value of the MIS methodology as a means of exploring bottom-up, consensual minimum standards in other areas. This chapter explores two ways in which MAPS may be taken forward, outlining its potential use both as a method for facilitating discussions about place at a local level and as a means of developing a measurable consensually defined MAPS. As part of this process, it would be necessary to examine how far alternative methods using participatory approaches may usefully shed further light on some of the issues raised. For example, whilst participants in the groups highlighted the importance of a sense of neighbourliness and social engagement, it was thought to be a difficult challenge to operationalise this aspect of place. Other methods or approaches may provide alternative insights that can be taken forwards within the MAPS work, whilst maintaining a central focus on arriving at consensually driven standards.

From principles to standards: developing a national MAPS

In order to develop a minimum acceptable place standard that provides a measure, it is necessary to move from consensus concerning what kinds of things places need and how near they should be to be acceptable to a more detailed examination of how acceptability should be defined. This requires the specification of thresholds of quality and of levels of services and amenities in ways that are useful and make sense to the residents of the communities that they refer to. This involves moving from the principles underlying any MAPS to the standards that would make MAPS a measure of place adequacy, a benchmark for assessing existing provision and a tool enabling comparison across neighbourhoods, local authorities and regions.

Participants in the MAPS groups demonstrated that it is possible to reach a broad level consensus about what places need without any input or guidance from ‘experts’. However, groups also showed that reaching conclusions about quality was a far more difficult task. The first possible way forward for MAPS, which would produce a set of standards through which to assess place is to adopt an approach that involves iteration between groups of members of the public and experts. An example of such an approach in MIS research is the production of household food menus. The approach in MIS centres on reaching consensus in groups over what the key elements or principles are when putting together menus. For example, how many meals a day are needed, how important is variety in a weekly food menu, what level of quality of food is acceptable, and is it important to be able to provide food for visitors? The responses and discussions in groups are then used to inform experts who put together menus ensuring that the principles agreed on by groups are met, but that food menus also meet nutritional guidelines for vitamins, minerals, salt, sugar and so on. The compiled menus are then taken back to MIS groups and checked by participants who are able to make adjustments and fine-tune the menus. The product

of this process is a standard that is consensual and based on needs, but informed by expert input.

Iteration between ordinary people and experts in MAPS may not follow an identical pattern, but would maintain the MIS principle of giving the public the final say while allowing for considerable guidance from experts. It would entail convening groups across a range of locations with a range of participants to make explicit, and reach consensus on, the principles underpinning the MAPS framework discussed in this report and what it is that needs to be measured. Using the MAPS framework as a basis for discussion, groups would be invited to explore what it is that is fundamental about the need for primary schools within walking distance, for example: is the principle underpinning this about the provision of a certain quality of educational experience and environment within communities or is the focus on the outcomes of primary education, that every child should be able to read or write to a certain level? Or to take another example, in relation to public safety what is fundamental here and what should be measured? Is the principle of public safety fundamentally about crime or is the definition broader than this, perhaps acknowledging fear of crime? Should the focus of MAPS be on measuring crime levels, is it about the visibility of police within communities, is it about community-centred measures of public safety or should it be a combination of these measures? The product of this stage of the research would be a more definitive, detailed framework of what is included and excluded from MAPS and why, and what it is that needs to be measured.

This expanded framework would be used as a basis for reviewing the utility and validity of existing measures of, for instance, services, facilities, and behaviour. The detailed framework would be used to identify measures that accorded with the principles of MAPS. So, for example, if the key concern in relation to public transport is with access and service provision, measures would be identified that would enable groups of members of the public to make decisions about where to draw lines of acceptability. While it may be the case that there are measures currently in use that allow for an assessment of the principles of place that are part of the MAPS framework, it is also possible that this stage of any future research would need to *consider* the development of new measures and the role of proxy measures. A proxy measure in this context is a criterion set by the public that endorses performance on specific measures as a threshold of acceptability, rather than judging it directly – for example by saying that a given grade on an inspection would constitute an acceptable standard. It is anticipated that at this point, groups of experts in, for example, accessibility or health care would be convened to review the principles identified, which of the existing measures could be incorporated into MAPS and/or if there is a need for the development of new measures.

Having reviewed and identified measures, the research would return to groups of members of the public, in different place types, presenting the detailed framework with suggested measures and thresholds and seeking to reach consensus on these.

At this point participants would be encouraged to challenge and make adjustments to ensure that the final outcome is one that is rooted in social consensus and that the process of determining a MAPS meta-measurement would start and finish with members of the public rather than experts. This further work would produce a set of agreed minimum acceptable place standards applicable across the UK based on what members of the public think places need to have and be like in order to provide a minimum standard. This MAPS would include detailed rationales supporting the inclusion of items in the standard, and would provide a national measure of place adequacy.

Putting MAPS to work: engaging communities in conversations about place

Part of the appeal of developing a measurable national MAPS lies in its potential use within local communities as a basis for community-centred assessment of place adequacy. There would be real value in communities being able to undertake assessments of neighbourhoods, based on consensual national measures and standards, pinpointing the strengths of, for example, current service provision or community activities, and where there may be shortfalls that need to be addressed by local authorities, the market, central government or communities themselves. In this way a community-centred MAPS has the potential to become a tool, rooted in social consensus, for assessing fairness and justice in relation to place. This way of utilising MAPS would depend on the development of the detailed national MAPS set out above in order to provide a national point of comparison against which local areas would be able to assess their performance and identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. MAPS at this level could also be used as a means of comparing the relative strengths and weaknesses of areas in relation to other areas within town and cities, as well as to a national benchmark, providing a basis for discussion and negotiation about the local allocation of resources. In practical terms, the national MAPS could form the foundation of participatory action research within communities, particularly those communities least likely to be engaged in local consultative processes or research and likely to be in areas furthest from meeting minimum place standards (cf. Bergold and Thomas, 2012).

In order to engage people in a series of groups where the starting point for conversations is the national MAPS there would be a need for the research team to work closely and jointly with communities to assist with and support this work. Preparatory work could be undertaken by the research team to explore how the areas being worked with measure up to the national standard. Groups of participants from local communities could then use the national MAPS, information about their areas, and their own lived experiences of place to make assessments about what needs to change in their locale, where services are not delivering minimum outcomes, where local authority resources could usefully be directed and where communities may be able to improve certain identified features of place.

It would be crucial in such a programme to ensure the broadest level of participation possible, acknowledging that within place-based communities certain voices are louder than others and that differences of power and divisions caused by, for example, economic inequality, ethnicity or educational background can act to exclude particular groups and individuals (Cornwall, 2000). In order to combat this, it would be necessary to develop strong partnerships across local communities, emphasising the shared experiences of place as a starting point for establishing a shared and common cause. Making effective use of all channels to publicise the purpose of the programme so as to reach as broad a constituency as possible, and actively seeking out those parts of communities least likely to be involved in research and most likely to be 'hidden' (Bennett and Roberts, 2004) would be key. This may mean helping people to overcome barriers to participation, for example, by running groups at a range of times or providing financial support to cover expenses such as additional childcare costs. It may also mean spending time convincing people who may feel on the margins of communities of place of the value of participation, clearly communicating the purpose of the programme, what it hopes to achieve for the community and the limits of its influence. In this way participation is based on a full understanding of what the programme within any particular community of place may achieve and what it cannot resolve.

While there would be value in developing and utilising a national MAPS as a tool for generating local discussions about place, this research has also highlighted the potential utility of the research process itself, with its focus on building consensus, as a method for facilitating discussion about place at a local level. That is, the MAPS method could stand alone as a tool for initiating conversations about place in and with local communities. The MAPS research proved to be a constructive means through which to involve people in dialogue about where they live and what it should look like and there is clear potential to develop MAPS as a tool for use by community groups and organisations, local authorities and perhaps even central government.

Centred around the framework of MAPS that has been established through this research, the methods developed and employed here could be utilised in conjunction with local community groups or more broadly across communities of place as a way of identifying key priorities in relation to, for example, planning, or pinpointing key areas of need. The MAPS framework as it currently stands would also allow for some basic comparisons to be drawn between what is seen as a minimum acceptable place standard at a national level and levels of service provision within neighbourhoods and communities. That is, using MAPS in this way would enable communities to make some evidence-based judgements about how their neighbourhoods fare in comparison.

Further, it is possible that the framework of MAPS may also offer a tool through which local authorities can engage communities in conversations about places, assisting in identifying spending priorities at a very local level. For local authorities the MAPS framework could function as an audit and accountability tool, particularly important in the

current policy context with a focus on openness and accountability mechanisms within local government and while the power of local authorities to address key issues and concerns may be limited. In both of these instances, with the involvement of the research team it would be possible to equip community leaders and local authority officers with the skills and understanding, principally centred on consensus building, needed to use the MAPS methodology as the basis for conversations about place.

Given the elevated role in much current government policy given to community involvement in shaping the areas in which they live, through mechanisms such as neighbourhood planning, it is critical that communities and local authorities have the most appropriate tools, knowledge and capacity needed to undertake meaningful conversations about place with the people living in these places. MAPS has the potential to offer such a tool both ‘informally’ to community groups and as part of more formal listening and consultative exercises run by parish councils, neighbourhood forums and local authorities.

MAPS: policy and practice

The framework of MAPS developed through this research has demonstrated at the broadest level that when brought together people do have at least some shared conception of what is most important about place, the kinds of things places need to have in order to provide a minimum acceptable standard and the ways in which it may be possible to arrive at thresholds of acceptability. In contrast to the more data-driven measures of place, this research has taken the first significant steps towards establishing a measurable, minimum acceptable place standard rooted in social consensus and built on the basis of what people need rather than what experts think is best or most appropriate. Furthermore, unlike many current standards it takes a comprehensive look at places, rather than focusing on just one element such as environmental standards. When developed further, MAPS offers the possibility of establishing a consensual national measure of adequacy for place which could function as a benchmark against which to assess the performance of local authorities, the market, and central government in ensuring places do not fall below a minimum acceptable standard. For communities, a national MAPS could function as a means through which to identify areas of need within particular locales. For individuals, MAPS could provide valuable information regarding the quality of local services and facilities.

There are also obvious links between the MAPS framework developed here and the current emphasis on localism, particularly the focus on increasing the engagement of people in the places they live and enabling people to be more involved in shaping what their neighbourhoods look like. As a tool, MAPS potentially provides a means through which communities can come together to talk about and agree on the kinds of things that are needed in the places they live. As it currently stands the MAPS framework also provides a tentative checklist against which communities can assess current resources and identify areas of need, informing the production of

neighbourhood plans, highlighting service areas where current provision is deficient, or identifying where community assets may be most effectively deployed.

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