

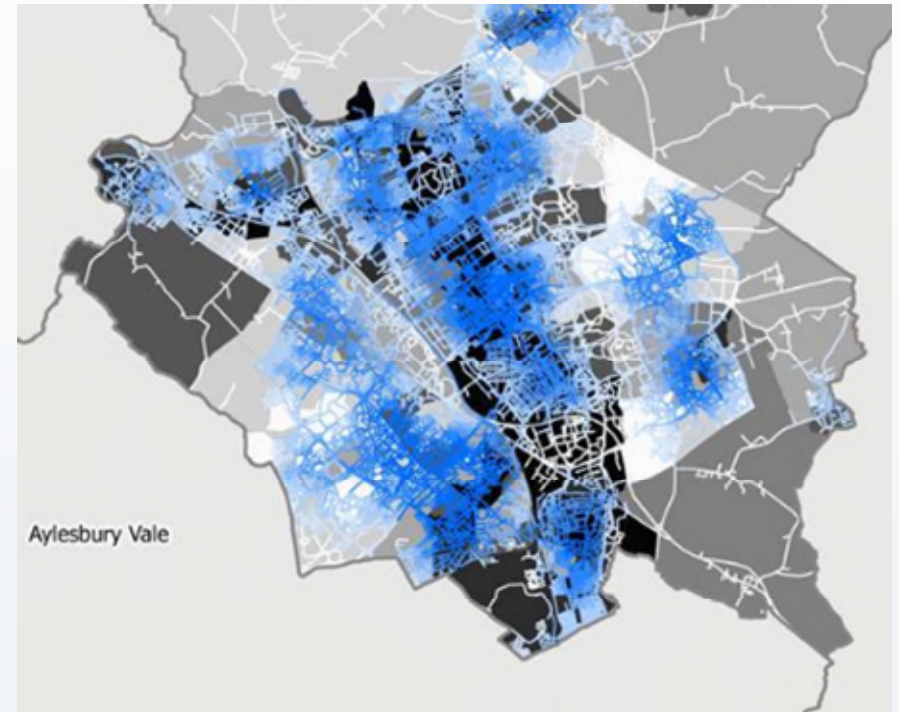


The role of spatial configuration in social isolation

[Professor Laura Vaughan](#)

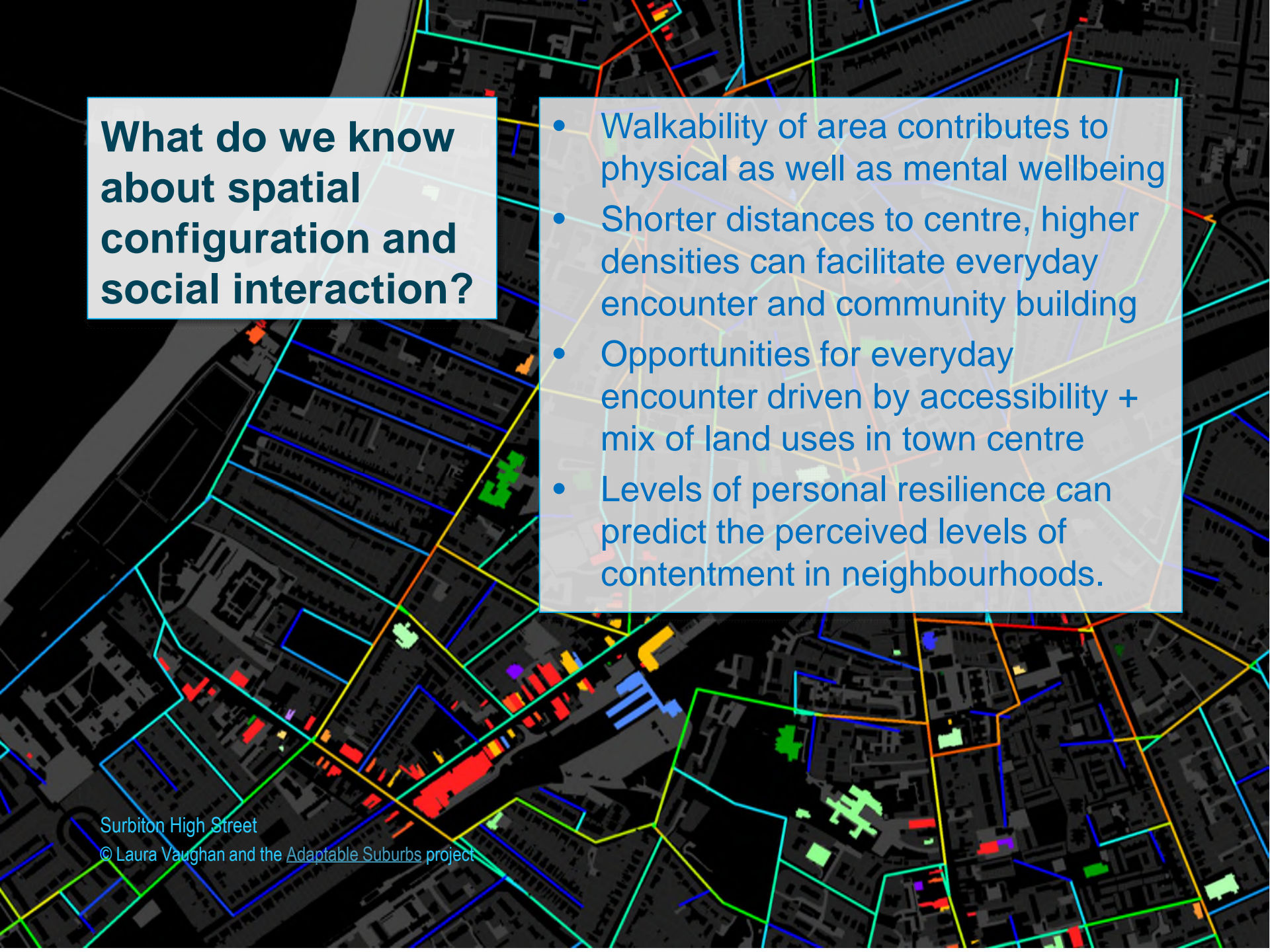
What do we know about loneliness (and sociability) and the built environment?

- Public spaces provide social arenas for residents, workers, shoppers, visitors, children at play & etc.
- Additionally social infrastructure: schools, libraries, places of worship, as well as broader social connectivity enrich this
- This social potential is shaped (at least in part) by the configuration of the built environment
- Spatial analysis can identify and empirically measure physically isolated locations and neighbourhoods, highlighting community structures



Research into how street networks affect the risk of social isolation

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An aerial photograph of a city street grid, likely in London, with various streets highlighted in different colors (red, blue, green, yellow, orange) to represent different urban metrics or data points. The map is dark, and the street lines are bright and colorful.

What do we know about spatial configuration and social interaction?

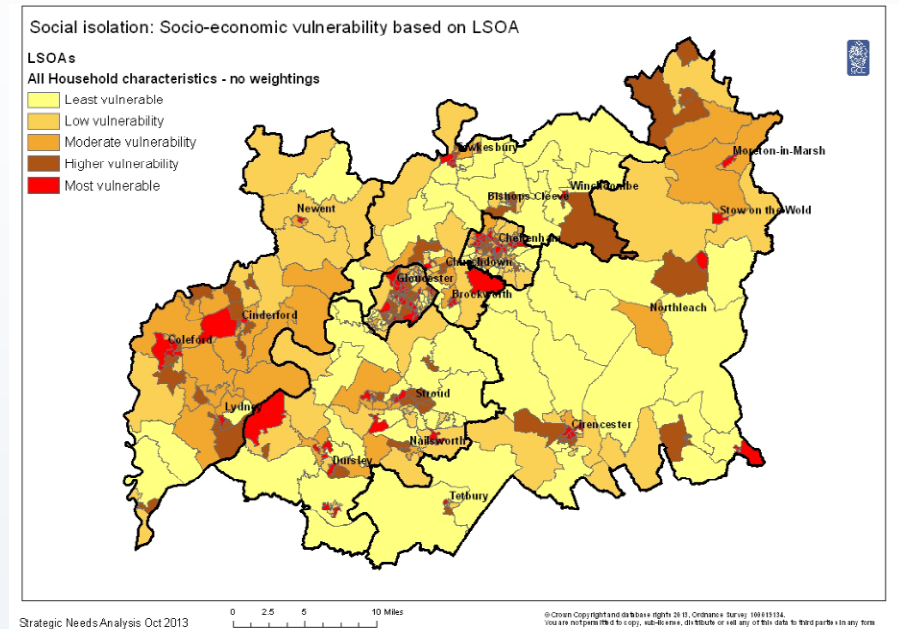
- Walkability of area contributes to physical as well as mental wellbeing
- Shorter distances to centre, higher densities can facilitate everyday encounter and community building
- Opportunities for everyday encounter driven by accessibility + mix of land uses in town centre
- Levels of personal resilience can predict the perceived levels of contentment in neighbourhoods.

Surbiton High Street

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How do we research loneliness (and sociability) and the built environment?

- We can predict these spatial patterns: accessibility, land use diversity, and population density
- We can seek to ameliorate this unevenness by increasing connectivity + other interventions
- Poor air quality, stressful, unsafe, noisy and littered environments contribute to poor wellbeing
- Urban design can improve physical activity, walkability, access to healthy food, contact with nature and positive social contact



Map of social isolation in Cotswolds: The 'aggregated isolation indices' were divided into quintiles and mapped to identify hot spots. Red indicates the most vulnerable LSOAs and yellow the least vulnerable.

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(<https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/777436/Appendix-1-Social-Isolation-in-Gloucestershire.PDF>)

What questions remain unanswered? What can we do as a network?

- How do we create the sociability and intimacy in public space that welcomes others?
- Latest loneliness research emphasises social connection and social support: What interventions work?
- Confounding factors:
 - Lack of contact more likely in certain circumstances e.g., depression, poor health, physical immobility, older age
 - Impact of deprivation on social isolation and mental poor health



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Summary

- What works? Review of reviews states community building, supported socialisation, alongside cognitive therapies, advice and signposting activities
- What might we be overlooking?
 - The role of place-based design in shaping community interaction
 - The role of urban design in limiting spatial isolation and in shaping opportunities for walkability (access to public transport & town centre activities via safe, walkable routes)



Image from What Works Wellbeing - <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/product/tackling-loneliness-slide-deck/> © Licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

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