Social capital

Headlines

Strong social capital leads to a wide range of benefits across education, employment, crime and health. Social capital developed through civic engagement, social support, neighbourliness and social networks. People with strong social networks are healthier and happier.

Those people most likely to be isolated are those with a disability, poor health (especially due to mental ill health and pain) and those not working due to ill health. Peoples sense of belonging varies with age, only 1 in 3 young adults felt they belonged to their local area compared with 3 in 4 of those aged 65 years and over, and geography, only half in the north of Huddersfield compared with 3 in 4 in Denby Dale & Kirkburton.

Dewsbury people were least likely to report feeling engaged locally in their local community and adults in Huddersfield were least likely to vote – a commonly used measure of engagement.

Overall, 1 in 4 adults in Kirklees volunteered at least monthly but this was substantially higher in Batley, Birstall & Birkenshaw (32%).

Why is this issue important?

People with strong social networks are healthier and happier[1 (p137)]. Social capital is the resources available through the strength of relationships with family and friends as well as through participation in wider social groups (with shared values), work and activities in the community[2(p14), 3.4]. Strong social capital in communities is linked to higher educational achievement, better employment outcomes, lower crime rates and reduced disease and death. Social capital provides a source of resilience and a buffer against particular risks of poor health, through social support and connections that, for example, help people find work or get through economic and other difficulties. Strong social networks and social participation reduce the risk of stress and depression and act as a protective factor against dementia or cognitive decline over the age of 65 years[1 (p125)].

Different types of social capital

Social capital is created by the following factors in different communities[1(p135)]:

Providing social support

Providing social support, or simply giving something back to society, is perhaps the main factor of social capital. For instance in Kirklees, 1 in 4 (26%) of all adults participated in volunteering at least monthly. The groups least likely to volunteer are women, younger adults and people from non-black and minority ethnic communities. Young adults reported little awareness of both volunteering opportunities and the benefits of volunteering; often volunteering is seen as 'slave labour'[6].

More 14 year olds helped an elderly or disabled person (28%) than reported helping to care for a relative who is disabled or sick (22%). However young people aged 18-24 were less likely to volunteer regularly (22%) compared to 26% in all other age groups.

Neighbourliness

Social capital has, by its very nature, a local focus, building on the resources that individuals, social groups and communities have to offer each other and those around them. It can be an effective way to address a number of issues, such as building active communities and promoting citizenship.

Locally, only 6% of adults felt lonely or isolated all or most of the time, slightly less in those over 65, but much higher rates[in5]:

- People with chronic pain and/or dependency needs due to disabilities (41%) and in poor health (21%).

- People not working due to illness, disability or unemployment (21%).

- People living in low income households, in other words under £10,000 (16%).

- People living in rented accommodation (16%) and people living alone (11%).

- People from ethnic minority communities (11%), twice the rate of the white population.

- Young people, i.e. those aged 18-24, where 14% of people reported feeling lonely or isolated all or most of the time compared with 5% of those aged 75 years or over.

Civic engagement

Civic engagement is voting and taking action on local and national issues. In Kirklees, there was a 10% difference in voter turnout for the May 2010 local and general elections across the six Town and Valley localities. Mirfield, Denby Dale & Kirkburton had the highest turnout at 72%, with Huddersfield the lowest at 62%. This was similar in earlier elections.

Which groups are affected most by this issue?

Age

More people aged over 65 felt they belonged to their neighbourhood, 75% compared to 1 in 3 (38%) of 18–24 year olds. Similarly, young adults are more likely to feel isolated most or all of the time.

People with poor health (all ages), were most likely to feel lonely or isolated, especially those with mental ill health or pain, and people not working due to ill health or disability.[5]

Feeling isolated or lonely is also linked to smoking and being sedentary, which do not help people feel well in themselves.

Where is this causing greatest concern?

Nearly 2 in 3 (59%) adults felt that they belonged to their neighbourhood, with those living in Denby Dale & Kirkburton (74%) and The Valleys (63%) more likely to feel they belong, while people in Dewsbury and Mirfield (57%), Spen (55%) and Huddersfield north (51%) were less likely to feel this way[5].

Those most likely to volunteer were adults in Batley, Birstall & Birkenshaw (32%), while those least likely to participate were adults in Spen (24%), Dewsbury and Mirfield (24%) and Huddersfield (22%)[5].

People in Dewsbury were least likely to be regularly involved in any community organisation and 9 in 10 people did not take part in local community activities.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

- How to support individuals and communities to develop and maintain stronger social networks, particularly amongst those most likely to be isolated, i.e. those with a disability, poor health and those who are not working.

- Increasing the levels of volunteering by creating opportunities for people to engage in voluntary activity that is appropriate and meaningful to them where they can see the benefits to both themselves and others.

- Develop a clearer and more consistent message about what community activity is available to specific groups and the benefits of participating in community activity.

- How to enable people, particularly in our more disadvantaged communities, to actively participate in decisions about their own lives and their own community.

- For people in some localities, particularly many young people, there is a lack of a sense of belonging, feeling that people do not get on together, and anti-social behaviour is a real problem. There is a need to build into programmes the development of mutual understanding and respect for different sections of society to increase cohesion and build more cohesive communities.

- New approaches to the planning and design of the built environment to promote a sense of belonging and trust between and within communities.

References

1. Marmot, M. Fair Society, Healthy Lives: Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post 2010. 2010.

   http://www.marmot-review.org.uk/

2. Department of Health. Our Health and Wellbeing Today. 2010.

3. Stansfeld SA (1999). Social support and social cohesion. Marmot M, Wilkinson RG (eds). Social Determinants of Health. Oxford University Press.

4. Social capital – a discussion paper (2002) Performance and Innovation Unit, Cabinet Office, London.

5. NHS Kirklees and Kirklees Council. Current Living in Kirklees (CLIK) survey. 2008.

6. NHS Kirklees and Kirklees Council. Current Living in Kirklees 18-24 Qualitative Research. 2011