

# RSA

21st century enlightenment

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news release

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## Social networks key to breaking link between isolation and unemployment

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Unemployment makes women four times as likely to become isolated within their communities, according to a new report published today by the RSA.

**Power Lines**, the second report from the RSA's Connected Communities project, found that unemployment doubles the likelihood of men becoming isolated but more than quadruples it with women.

Power Lines argues that the Big Society is currently dominated by the so called 'usual suspects' – an existing civic core of well educated, middle aged professionals – and that more should be done to improve the social networks of isolated people such as the retired and unemployed

**Commenting on the report, Chief Executive of the RSA, Matthew Taylor said:**

"Our research shows that developing and encouraging neighbour to neighbour relationships remains key to breaking the link between social isolation and unemployment. Setting a goal of improving community's social networks is one way in which the Big Society could take a big step forward towards not only becoming better defined but also delivering on the ground."

The report concludes that the government's efforts to build the big society risk exacerbating existing inequalities unless more is done to support those who are isolated within their communities.

It says that the government is currently too focused on

engaging members of the public with the delivery of public services and that its efforts would be better spent trying to promote the strength of neighbour-to-neighbour relationships and a community's ability to self-organise.

The report argues that by fostering support and exchange through informal connections the Government can in fact 'achieve' outcomes that many public services aim for - such as increasing employment and providing social care.

It is only through encouraging denser and more varied connections that people will have better access to information, opportunities and assets, and become more likely to get things done, the report says.

**The report sets out a series of recommendations for government and local authorities including:**

- The government's 5000 new community organisers should be trained and encouraged to build the social networks of those who suffer from few local connections.
- The Cabinet Office should use the Communities First Fund to provide grants to support community groups that specifically aim to build and diversify users' social connections.
- Local authorities should explore innovative new ways of supporting activities that foster community spirit, both through removing red tape and through funding devices such as social impact bonds, or simply by giving the necessary tools and guidance to communities.
- Local authorities should assess their funding of community groups on the contribution they make to building stronger, more diverse social networks.
- Local businesses should both promote and benefit from local networks through the funding of hyper-local websites. Research examining local websites in London found that over 4 out of 10 respondents had made new contacts in their neighbourhoods as a result of using the website.
- At an individual – to – individual level, a more networked approach can be used to both promote micro-business and relieve isolation. For example, one woman who, on finding out that isolated older people in her estate received meals on wheels now cooks their meals in her own kitchen.

The report highlights that central government is ideally placed to establish the frameworks for collecting and analysing

measures of the strength of networks in different areas. The Government's Big Society advisor has talked about the need for a single Big Society Measure and the Cabinet Office briefing stated that 'measurement and evaluation is key to understanding what sorts of activity are more successful than others'.

The report follows extensive research that pieced together a community network of over a thousand residents and organisations across New Cross Gate (London). The Connected Communities project discovered that twenty-five per cent of respondents did not know anyone who had local influence, or could introduce them to someone who did. Unemployed respondents half as likely as average to know anyone in a position of influence. Two thirds of people don't know anyone who works at the local council, a third don't know any employers and 40% don't know anyone who knows someone at a local newspaper, website, TV or radio station.

### **Notes to editors**

1. For more information contact RSA Head of Media Luke Robinson on 020 7451 6893 or 07799 737 970 or [luke.robinson@rsa.org.uk](mailto:luke.robinson@rsa.org.uk)
2. Powerful Lines follows Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society and a report by economist Paul Ormerod N Squared in which he argues that failure to understand 'network effects' partly explains the financial crisis and the failure of many policies to deliver the scale of change desired.
3. The RSA has a new strapline: 21st Century Enlightenment. This pays tribute to the eighteenth century founders of the Society and to the pioneering spirit which inspired them. It makes a statement about the role the RSA can play today, as an organisation established over 250 years ago but which believes its best days may yet be to come.
4. At the heart of the RSA's contemporary mission and public debates about the future prospects for the human race is the question 'can we go on like this?' Will the ideas and values which transformed our world in the last two centuries be sufficient to find solutions to the challenges we now face or do we need new ways of thinking?
5. The society is committed to stimulating thinking, social innovation and – among its 27,000 fellows – a powerful ethos of collaboration.