

POWER LINES

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SUMMARY

In 2010, the RSA published *Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society*, which explored a new approach to community regeneration based on an understanding of the importance of social networks.¹ It argued that such an approach has the potential to bring about significant improvements in efforts to combat isolation and to support the development of resilient and empowered communities. This paper follows on from that report, deepening the analysis to look at networks of power and influence, and in particular those who are isolated in the community. The paper argues that the government's efforts to build the Big Society are too focused on citizen-led service delivery. An approach based on utilising and building people's social networks, which largely determine our ability to create change and influence decisions that affect us, may prove more effective.

¹ Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010. *Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society*. London: RSA. [http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/333483/ConnectedCommunities_report_150910.pdf]

1. INTRODUCTION

More often than not, participation is defined too narrowly.² Consequently, there is a focus on so-called ‘active’ citizens (typically labelled the ‘usual suspects’), identified through their contacts with local councillors, voting behaviour in elections, vocal membership of local groups, or written responses to local consultations. Such citizens represent our vision of what it is to be empowered and to have influence. This paper argues that to increase access to local power — understood as the ability to get things done and change one’s circumstances and local community — the focus must first be on fostering overall social connections and neighbourliness.

The Coalition government has declared that:

“We need to create communities with oomph — neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.”³

With the publication of the Localism Bill we now have some idea of how they intend to go about creating these communities. Sadly, the vision of how to empower communities is far too focused on engaging members of the public in the delivery of public services.⁴

A better — and possibly complementary⁵ — strategy for fostering neighbourhoods that are in charge of their own destiny would be to focus on building denser and more varied connections within these neighbourhoods. This is difficult, unpredictable work, but the potential returns are enormous.⁶ There are structural reasons why certain people currently have fewer or more uniform connections than others. As this paper will show, those who are unemployed, retired, or who live in areas that have thinner social networks overall, all tend to have fewer local connections. These groups, who are at risk of isolation, need to be a particular focus in efforts to build more empowered communities.

The prospect of running a school or a library or even a community pub can leave most people nonplussed. Ipsos MORI’s polling has found that only about 5% of people express even a nominal interest in becoming actively involved in the delivery of public services.⁷ On the other hand our research has found that even those who are currently poorly connected show an interest in being able to shape their networks and connect more when given the appropriate tools and forum.

Attempting to get more people and community groups involved in the provision of public services will not, by itself, create neighbourhoods where people feel that they can shape the world around them. Fostering support and exchange through informal connections may be an important way to ‘achieve’ outcomes that many public services aim for. We have found that the more connected someone is, the more likely they are to believe in neighbourliness.⁸ The less connected someone is, the less likely they are to perceive their connections as being of use to them in effecting the change they would like to see.

Further complicating matters, those who do participate in this way — the so-called ‘civic core’ of predominantly well educated, middle-aged professionals⁹ — do not feel in charge of their own destiny: the majority of community activists say that they cannot influence decisions in their local area.¹⁰ This is compounded by our research that has shown that these so-called ‘usual suspects’ often feel used by local services as ‘free labour’ or to legitimise a particular policy or action.

2 Secker, E., 2009. Expanding the concept of participatory rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Routledge.

3 Cameron, D., 2010. Big Society Speech. [<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572>]

4 Communities and local Government, 2010. A plain English guide to the localism bill. [<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1818597.pdf>]

5 Neumark, T., 2011. Consultation. [<http://projects.rsablogs.org.uk/2011/02/consultation/>]

6 Ormerod, P., 2010. N squared: public policy and the power of networks. London, RSA. [http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/330258/RSA_Pamphlet-publicpolicy.pdf]

7 Ipsos MORI, 2010. Public Policy poll for the economist. [<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/poll-public-policy-poll-for-the-economist-may2010-charts.pdf>]

8 Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010, op. cit.

9 Mohan, J., 24 August 2010. Big society threatened by lack of volunteers. [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2010/aug/24/big-society-lack-of-volunteers>]

10 Urban Forum, 2010. Citizens and local decision making: What drives feelings of influence? [http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/citizens_and_local_decision_making_full_report_2010_03.pdf]

...those agencies which seek to develop empowered communities should assess their work by measuring the extent to which they have contributed to the creation of richer, stronger, more interconnected social networks...

Our work suggests that people feel a greater sense of empowerment if they have a larger and more varied number of local connections and relationships. This is because denser and more varied connections give people better access to information, opportunities and assets, and therefore make it possible for them to club together effectively on the issues that matter most to them.

As the construction and use of social support networks is found to predict their more robust development, a virtuous circle of connection and empowerment forms.¹¹ This approach is key if the Big Society is to be inclusive, and not fashioned solely in the image of a small civic core, creating a vicious circle of isolation and in which strong networks reflect the needs and interests of their members, perpetuating existing isolation and inequalities.

The implications of this approach are wide ranging. For example, it means that those agencies which seek to develop empowered communities should assess their work by measuring the extent to which they have contributed to the creation of richer, stronger, more interconnected social networks rather than, for example, the number of people that attend public meetings.

It also means that local and national initiatives aimed at empowering communities should give extra attention and support to those who are most at risk of being isolated. This includes those who are older, unemployed, or live in neighbourhoods that have relatively weak social networks.

Public policy has much to gain in helping to foster broad sociability and connections, whilst leaving specific details to the people and communities involved. Building a cohesive society with 'oomph' — Big or otherwise — depends on this.

¹¹ McKenzie, K., 2006. Social risk, mental health and social capital, in K. McKenzie and T. Harpham (Eds) *Social Capital and Mental Health*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

...efforts to build better connected communities should include strategies to increase social connections and support networks...

2. NETWORKS IN NEW CROSS GATE

This paper is based on research carried out by the RSA in New Cross Gate, South East London, in 2010. We used an approach known as social network analysis, and carried out in-depth survey interviews with 280 people to explore how various aspects of their social networks supported and empowered them.

A glossary of terms used in this paper and more technical and methodological detail can be found in the Appendix to this paper.

Findings

Below are some of the key findings from the research:

- Twenty five percent of our respondents did not know anyone who either had local influence, or who could introduce them to someone who did. We refer to this set of respondents as the 'isolates' group.
- Those with fewer local connections in general were more likely to be isolated from local influence.
- Being retired, unemployed, and living in certain areas, all made it more likely that people would be disconnected from local influence.
- Unemployed respondents are twice as likely as average to not know anyone in a position of influence, whereas employed respondents were half as likely.
- Even within the relatively small area we studied we found considerable variation. Some areas had much denser social networks than others.
- Poorly connected areas are characterised by a few very well connected individuals, and many poorly connected people. Well-connected neighbourhoods are composed of individuals who have similar amounts of connections as each other.
- Some people had a high number of connections despite having risk factors that made them more likely to be disconnected from local influence. However, these connections were often with generic institutions (e.g. 'the council') rather than to named individuals.
- Community networks are resilient when they have numerous connections both internally and externally. The networks in New Cross Gate, by contrast, appear very fragmented.

Risk factors

As the key findings indicate, there are a number of factors which are correlated with being disconnected from local influence. These include being unemployed, being retired, living in an area with low overall levels of connection, or having fewer local connections in general. While efforts to build better connected communities should include strategies to increase social connections and support networks, we also, of course, need to recognise and address the structural reasons why certain individuals are more likely to be disconnected.

Below we explore the risk factors to isolation and disempowerment to have emerged from the research, before considering what policy and practice responses this suggests.

...those who are unemployed and retired are disproportionately disconnected from power. Weak ties — such as the friend of a friend, or the acquaintance you bump into at the pub — are crucial in helping people access job opportunities.

Those least connected to power are least connected overall

As well as asking people whether they knew anyone who either had local influence, or who could introduce them to someone with influence, we asked people a range of other questions about their local connections. For example, we asked people who they enjoyed socialising with and who they would go to in an emergency. These questions gave us a rich picture of each respondent's local connections.

Analysis of this data shows that those respondents who had no links to power or influence (for example, they did not know anyone who either had local influence, or who could introduce them to someone with influence), also tended to be less connected overall. In fact, those respondents who had no connection to local influence had around half the average number of total connections.

Figure 1 below shows the clear correlation between the number of connections respondents have overall, and whether they have a connection with someone with local influence. In this diagram each square or circle represents a respondent. The size of the shape is proportional to the respondent's number of local connections – the larger the shape, the more connections the respondent has. Circles represent respondents that do not know anyone who can introduce them to someone with local influence ('isolates'). Squares represent respondents that do have a connection with local influence ('non-isolates'). Thus, those with more local connections are more likely to have connections with local people with influence: by increasing overall connections, it is possible to increase the flow of influence and power.

Figure 1: Social Connections in the 'isolates' and 'non-isolates' groups

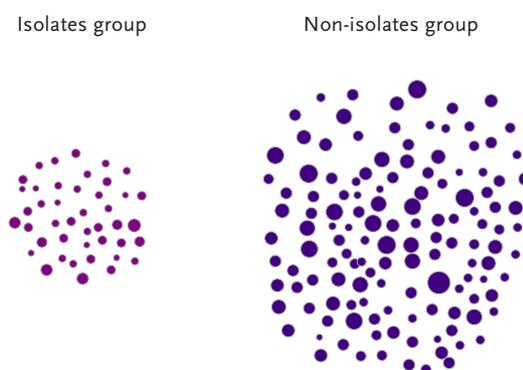


Figure 1 In this picture, it is important to focus on the relative sizes of the nodes: the sizing represents the size of the respondent's overall social, support, influence and local resource networks. The nodes are all those respondents in our survey who answered questions pertaining to links to influence. The circles (the isolates group) are on the whole far smaller than the squares (non-isolates). This illustrates how those isolated from power have far fewer ties in general. The nodes have been clustered into isolate and non-isolate groupings, and all ties have been removed. (The distance between nodes does not mean anything in this diagram.)

'Weak' ties get you working, but the unemployed have the least ties

Our survey data shows that those who are unemployed and retired are disproportionately disconnected from power. As our previous report explained, weak ties — such as the friend of a friend, or the acquaintance you bump into at the pub — are crucial in helping people access job opportunities.¹² This data suggests the inverse might also be true: being in work helps people gain and keep useful connections.

¹² Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010, op. cit.

Unemployed respondents are twice as likely as average to be in the isolates group, while employed respondents are half as likely. On average, 25% of our sample were in the isolates group, compared to 50% of the unemployed and 38% of retired people, and 20% and 16% for the employed and students respectively.

Figure 2 below illustrates the relationship between being unemployed or retired, and being disconnected from local influence. Circles represent either respondents or people that were named by the respondent. The circles are coloured according to the work status of each respondent: those in work are coloured dark blue, students are coloured light blue, the 'other category' (including, for example, volunteers and home keepers) is aqua blue. Retired people are coloured pink and unemployed people are coloured red. This reflects the division of socio-economic roles into those that foster more connections (bluer), and those that do not (redder). Whereas studying, working, and volunteering tend to give one a peer group, unemployment and retirement do not.

The line of circles down the left hand side of the diagram represents those who do not have any connections, even indirect, with local influence. The linked circles are those people who do have a connection with someone with local influence. The diagram shows that those respondents who are disconnected from local influence are far 'redder' than those with local connections, who are far 'bluer'.

Figure 2: Being unemployed or retired makes it less likely that you will have a connection to local influence

Figure 2 key:

- Employed
- Student
- 'Other' occupation
- Retired
- Unemployed
- No status given
- Named 'Other'

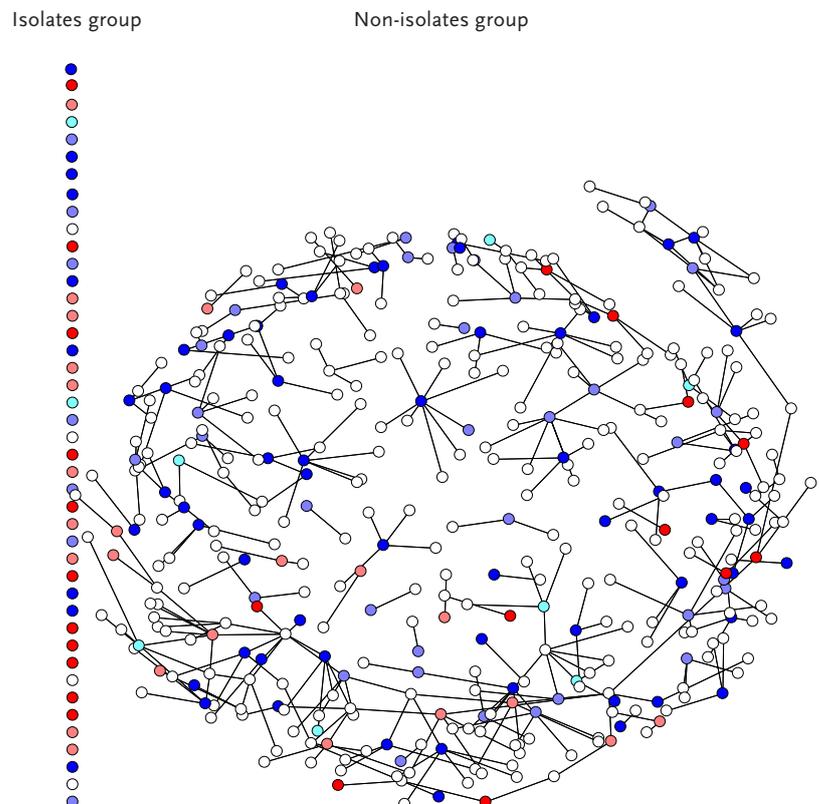


Figure 2 In this picture it is important to focus on how the colour is spread between isolates (the left-hand vertical column with no ties) and non-isolates. The left-hand column is predominantly pink or red — composed of unemployed or retired respondents — even though the overall sample is predominantly blue (employed or student nodes). This illustrates how being retired or unemployed is a risk factor in being isolated from access to local power or influence. Black rimmed circles are respondents (n=173) and grey rimmed nodes are individuals/organisations named by respondents (n=267).

Being unemployed or retired on the one hand, and having fewer social connections on the other, makes it more likely that a respondent is disconnected from power. These two factors (work status and number of social connections) are themselves related. Being unemployed or retired is correlated with having fewer social connections. Respondents who had a connection with someone with local influence despite being unemployed or retired were more likely to have a larger number of social connections.

Figure 3 below represents the relationship between work status, overall level of social connection and connection with power. This diagram is the same as **Figure 2** but the size of each circle is now proportional to the respondent's overall level of social connections: the larger the circle the more connections that person has.

We can see that those unemployed or retired people who have a larger number of local connections (larger redder circles) are less likely to be disconnected from power (isolated circles on the right).

Figure 3: People who have a connection to local influence despite being unemployed or retired have more local connections in general

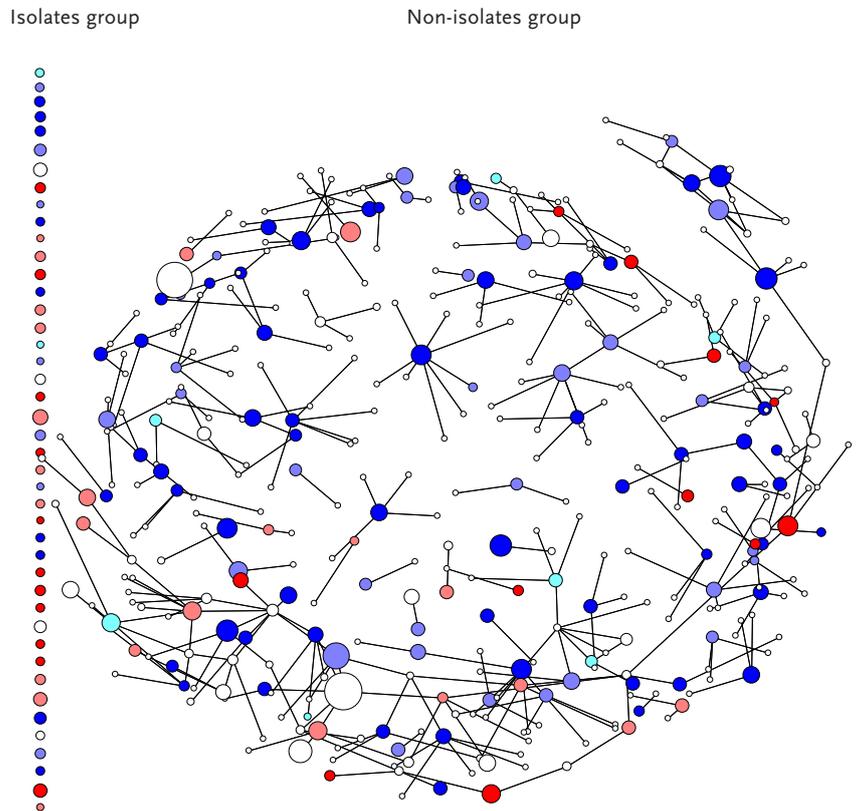


Figure 3 This figure is the same as **Figure 2**, only the nodes have been sized according to their overall social, support, influence and resource connections, as in **Figure 1**.

In this figure it is important to focus on: **i)** how the nodes in the isolates columns are smaller, as in **Figure 1**; **ii)** where the majority of red-er and blue-er nodes are, as in **Figure 2**; **iii)** how the largest nodes are predominantly blue-er nodes who are not in the isolates group; **iv)** how the larger nodes also tend to be those on the dense chain of nodes that runs in a crescent shape from top right to bottom left (this 'core' group of nodes will be further examined in **Figure 4** and **Figure 5**).

Figure 4 shows the core of the network: those respondents and named others who were linked up to each other through their connections (the crescent shape referred to in **Figure 3**). The nodes have been sized according to their overall social, support, influence and resource connections, as in **Figure 1** and **Figure 3**, and coloured according to their occupational status. The visible labels are those denoting an institution, organisation or recognised local person. All personal names of private citizens have been removed. Notice how the pink (retired) and red (unemployed) nodes tend to be closer to more institutional named others.

It is important to look firstly at the 'path' between nodes. This tells us how far information can spread between people: in theory it could go from either the blue employed or pink unemployed node on the leftmost point of the crescent all the way through to the top most right-hand point of the crescent if the local MP, local councillor and local clergyman are well known enough by respondents to pass on information in this way. Secondly, look at the types of connections: the retired nodes in the bottom are all far more connected to institutional nodes than to other people. There is also some evidence of clustering effects: for example the mix of employed, student and homekeeper nodes around Building Healthier Communities, a key local community organisation.

At-risk individuals are more likely to have less solid relationships with power

Those individuals who, despite being unemployed or retired, do know someone who can introduce them to someone with local influence, are more likely to cite *institutions* rather than *people* as their connections. Whereas people who are employed often had a connection with a named individual who represented or could connect them to power, unemployed or retired people would often mentioned institutions such as the local authority or generic people such as the 'local councillor'. They know the right places and institutions to go for power, but do not have a personal relationship with those places or institutions.

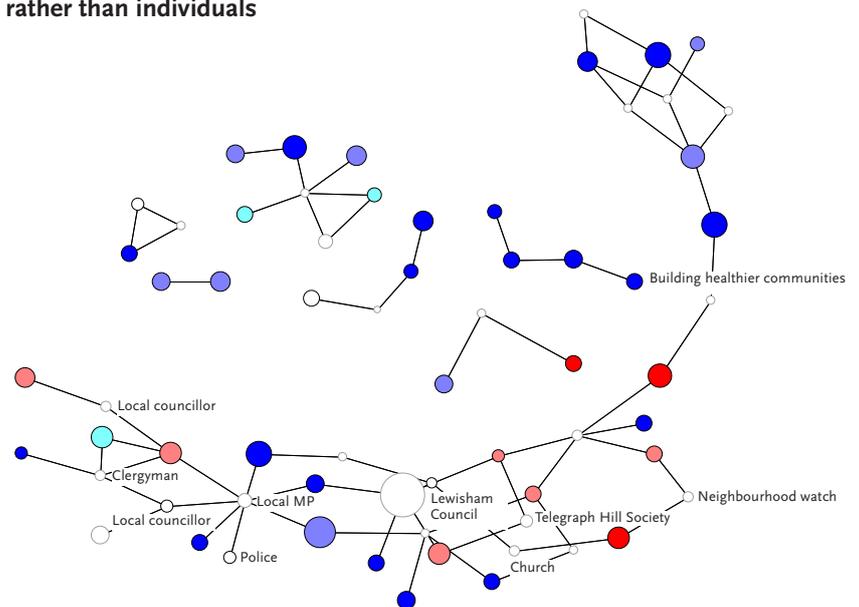
Figure 4 below illustrates the connections across a chain of highly connected nodes (as identified in **Figure 3** above). It shows how connected unemployed or retired people (red or pink circles) tend to cite institutions (squares) or generic roles, such as 'MP' (circles in squares), as the way they would get in contact with local decision makers. In contrast, employed people (dark blue circles) or students (light blue circles) are more likely to cite other people as their route in to local power. Perhaps a retired person whose social network has been reduced by time might still know to go to the council for problems with their housing, but they will no longer know their old friend who used to work there. Someone with a more interconnected network, who through work or play gets to know more people, is more likely to happen to be at the same table or dance class as the new person who acts as gatekeeper in the council, be that receptionist or councillor.

Figure 4 also illustrates a 'path' connecting the majority of these individuals. Information might in theory spread from the employed (blue) node in the bottom left corner of the diagram, through to the clergyman, through the local MP and out to the employed nodes in the top right hand corner of the diagram. Understanding the network structure in this way makes it possible to think about how information and opportunity might be cascaded more effectively, and to reach people without direct personal contacts to influence and power.

Figure 4: People who have a connection to local influence despite being unemployed or retired are more likely to have a connection with institutions rather than individuals

Figure 4 key:

- Employed
- Student
- 'Other' occupation
- Retired
- Unemployed
- No status given
- Named individual, institution or organisation



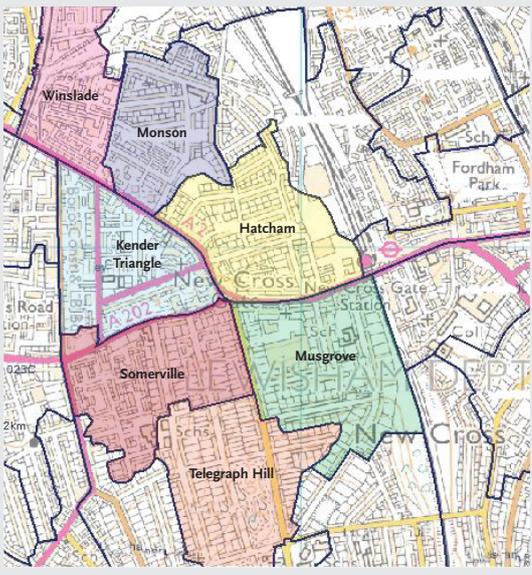
New Cross Gate pen portrait

New Cross Gate is located in the north of the London Borough of Lewisham. It neighbours Peckham to the west (so borders the London Borough of Southwark), the affluent Telegraph Hill to the south and the section of the Old Kent Road around Millwall Football Club to the north. Deptford, Lewisham College and Goldsmiths, University of London are found to the east.

It hosts significant transport interchanges, including New Cross Gate rail and Tube station and bus garage, and has the A2, one of the major roads out of London to the southeast, running through it. It is made up of five super output areas (SOAs) (see diagram below for topography) and has a resident population of around 9,000 people.

The Somerville SOA has mainly social housing and holds key community resources such as an adventure playground, community centre and primary school. Winslade SOA is a relatively isolated and self-contained area geographically with mainly social housing, including sheltered housing. It is hemmed in by a railway line to the east and by an industrial area. Kender Triangle SOA contains another primary school and relatively newly developed social housing. It is something of an island within New Cross Gate, surrounded by the A2 and a gyratory system. Hatcham SOA contains a designated conservation area (originally owned by the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers) with a mix of social housing and owner occupied/privately rented accommodation acquired under the right to buy. Monson SOA contains a third primary school (now a feeder school to nearby Haberdashers' Aske's).

Overall, over half of New Cross Gate residents live in social rented accommodation (compared to 19% nationally) and 29% are owner occupiers (compared to 69% nationally). The area is ethnically diverse: 48% are of White ethnic origin (compared to 91% nationally); 13% are Black/Black British Caribbean; and 20% are Black/Black British African.



Women are more connected

In general, female respondents are less isolated, as shown in **Figure 5** below where women are coloured red and men are coloured blue.

Figure 5 again concentrates on the most well connected people in our survey: those most likely to know someone who can help them effect change, or to know who to speak to if there are local problems. Generally, there are more female than male nodes that are well-connected. All respondents who named Building Healthier Communities (a key local community organisation) were female, and were a mix of students, employed women and women in the 'other category'. However, while women are well-connected in general, unemployed women were markedly more likely to be isolated. While just 10% of women who are not unemployed are isolated, 43% of unemployed women were isolated.

Figure 5: Women are less likely to be isolated than men

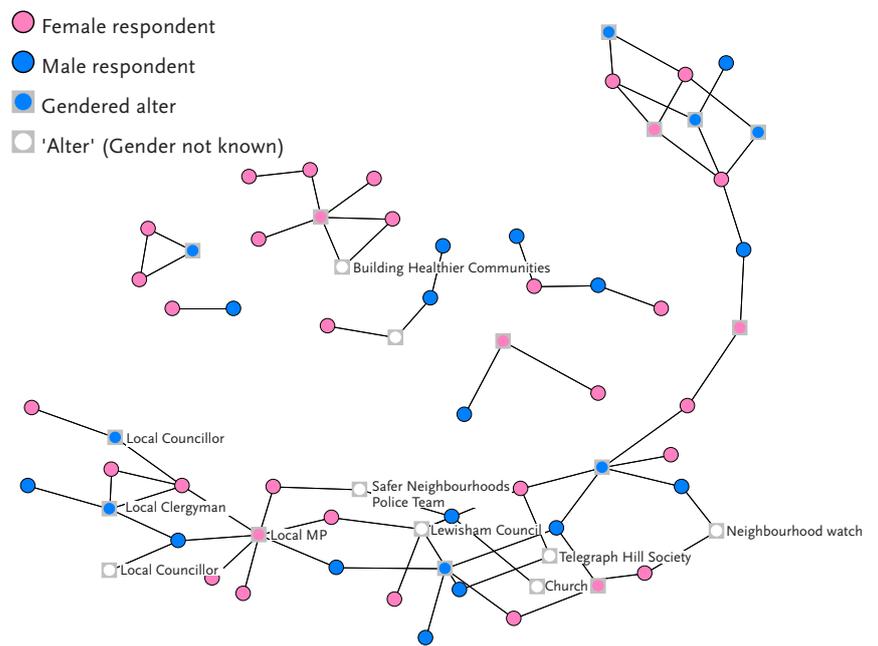


Figure 5 shows the core of the network, as in **Figure 4**. Nodes have been coloured according to gender: red for female, blue for male. Nodes with the squared grey rims are named others. The core of the network is predominantly female, in a sample that had an approximately equal gender split amongst the respondents.

Neighbourhood effects

Certain areas have thinner social networks than others. Residents in the super-output area known as 'the Kender Triangle' and to a lesser extent the area known as 'Winslade' both have far fewer connections than we might expect, given the demographics of these areas.

Whilst Kender Triangle residents represent only 14% of overall respondents, they represent 46% of the isolate group. Conversely, while residents from Telegraph Hill represent 31% of respondents, it is home to just 19% of the isolated group. Kender Triangle does have higher levels of unemployment and retired people than the average for our sample, yet all but one of its unemployed and all but one of its retired respondents are in the isolates group, not half, as would be suggested by overall trends. Something is exacerbating existing risks, as is shown by its low levels of connectedness overall: is it its 'island' status given the A2 and gyratory system, or the cumulative effect of poor connections breeding poorer connections?

In **Figure 6** below each shape represents a respondent. Different shapes are used for different housing tenure (owner-occupier, renter, and so on) and different colours are used for different work statuses (such as unemployed, student). The size of the shape is proportional to the number of connections that each respondent has. The larger the shape, the more connections that person has. Shapes are grouped according to the area people live in.

Connectivity tends to plateau: we only have time and social structures (and the biological inheritance¹³) for so many connections. The diagram shows that in Telegraph Hill, a quite well connected area, the difference between the number of connections each respondent has is much less marked than in the other areas. In Telegraph Hill there are a number of quite well connected individuals, whereas in Kender Triangle there are either people who are moderately connected or people who have very few connections.

This connectivity ‘balancing’ is especially marked in Somerville, which acts as a ‘bridging’ area between Telegraph Hill and its less affluent neighbours. People living in Somerville tend to either be very well connected or middling-ly connected, with a small scattering of poorly connected people. Somerville’s high levels of connections and its bridge status are not surprising given that Somerville holds key community resources which act as hubs for a healthy local network (such as Building Healthier Communities referred to previously, and the Somerville Adventure Playground, a key local resource for children, young people and families in the area). Further research is needed into how to mitigate the negative network effects of certain areas, and best use the resources in other areas for the good of the network as a whole.

Figure 6: Some areas have stronger social networks than others

Figure 6 key:

Housing shapes

- No status/ 'Other'
- Council
- △ Home owner
- ▣ Private renter

Occupational colours

- Employed
- Student
- 'Other' occupation
- Retired
- Unemployed
- No status given

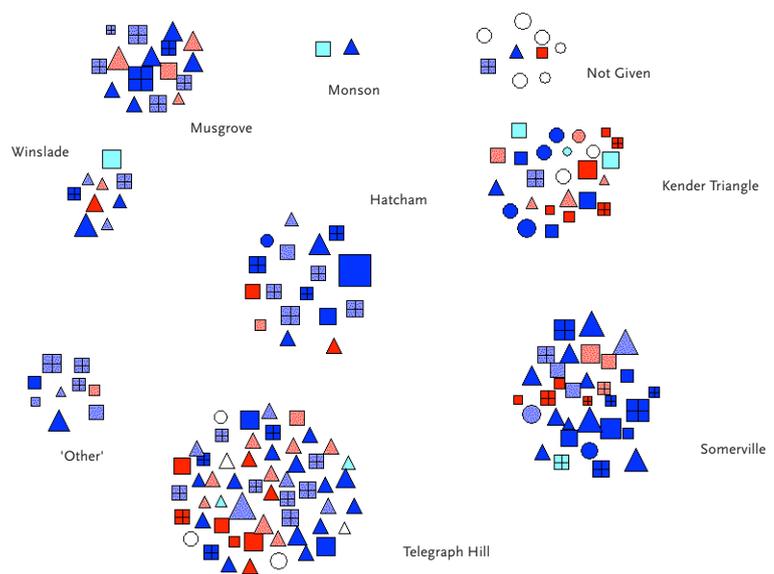


Figure 6 In this figure, all ties between respondents and all non-respondents have been removed. It is the network without the ‘net’, and all respondents have been sorted into their residential areas. Respondents have been coloured according to their occupational status and sized according to their overall social, support, influence and resource connections, as per previous diagrams. The symbols represent the type of housing each respondent lives in.

Here it is important to look at **i)** the different size of nodes in the different areas, and **ii)** the different sizes of nodes that have different occupational (colour) or housing (shapes) statuses. Note how size in Telegraph Hill is quite constant, whereas it is subject to greater variation in Somerville.

¹³ Dunbar, R., 2010. How Many Friends Does One Person Need? London: RSA [<http://www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2010/rsa-thursday-how-many-friends-does-one-person-need>]

Those over the age of 65 emerged as a particular at-risk group: contacts can move away or pass away, and without activities that foster connectivity (such as work and having children in a local school) it can become difficult to replace those ties.

In this section we have highlighted how both the personal characteristics and position of people can influence how connected they are. This could be their employment status or gender; or it could be linked to their network or geographical position: are they in the highly connected centre, or the sparsely connected periphery of the network; and do they live or work near to many network resources, or in an area where people do not have the spaces or possibilities to mingle and connect?

All of these factors interconnect. Life course, population churn, unemployment or family changes can reduce networks that used to exist. Those over the age of 65 emerged as a particular at-risk group: contacts can move away or pass away, and without activities that foster connectivity (such as work and having children in a local school) it can become difficult to replace those ties. An area that contains many people with few ties — an area with higher levels of unemployed people or retired people — will then reinforce few connectivity levels because there will be less chance meetings between people and their friends of friends. Less chance meetings, or ‘friend interaction’, will in turn reinforce the lower likelihood of these people getting jobs or joining clubs that might increase connections.

In the next section, *Networked Solutions*, we discuss our ideas for what we might do about these challenges. Communities with ‘oomph’, or resilient, empowering networks, have dense interconnected cores, with strong ‘feelers’ going out into other networks, and are composed of individuals who are all connected to greater or lesser extent, with network ‘weavers’ as catalysts. The networks in New Cross Gate, by contrast, are fragmented with areas in which large numbers of people are poorly connected. This can both hasten burnout of community organisers, and mean that information, norms and other social goods find it harder to travel the network.

3. NETWORKED SOLUTIONS

Network approaches are not the answer to all public policy problems, but we must take account of network findings and principles as a part of our tool-kit, otherwise attempts to build the Big Society risk exacerbating existing inequalities.

Our findings so far suggest the power of interactions with others. In the words of one participant in a workshop in New Cross Gate, having connections in the local area

“Help[s] people to share ideas ...to elevate themselves in certain situations like trying to get a job, knowing what you are supposed to do at the right time... knowing how to manage the environment where [you] live”.

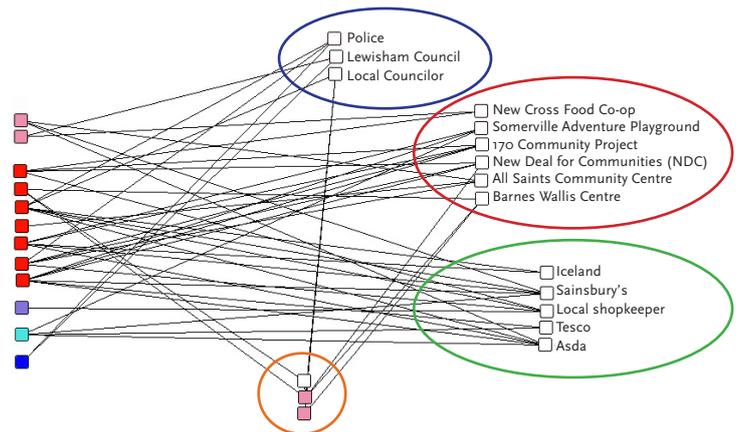
Those organisations which seek to empower individuals and communities need a more nuanced ways of creating and assessing value. They need to have a greater focus on building and sustaining new and diverse social connections.

Our big good society

Figure 7: Potential bridges

Figure 7 key:

- Employed
- Student
- 'Other' occupation
- Retired
- Unemployed
- Named individual, institution or organisation
- Named retired individual



In **Figure 7**, the column on the left is comprised of some of the most socially isolated individuals. In this figure, connections that are only particular to each respondent have been removed, and only those connections that indirectly link them to the rest of the network are shown. The links they make are to: local council/public services (blue circle), community groups/ activities/centres (red circle), shops (green circle), and private individuals (orange circle).

Here it is important to: **i)** look at the groups of ties in the coloured circles. These are the types of organisations/individuals that could act as a bridge, linking these isolated individuals to the core of the network; **ii)** note the organisations/individuals in each coloured circle that link to the most isolated individuals. They are evidently doing something right in connecting isolated people, and it may be beneficial to share knowledge between these organisations; **iii)** note the potential role of supermarkets and other food-related shops/ organisations that is highlighted by this diagram. Everyone has to eat, and the 'common language' of food has potential to be used to connect up different types of people.

The government hopes to stimulate “a huge cultural shift where people, in their everyday lives... don't always turn to answers from officialdom... but that they feel both free and empowered to help themselves and help their own communities”¹⁴ in order to build the Big Society. This will be achieved by giving ‘new and existing social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups the long-term incentives they need to develop and deliver innovative and high quality public services’.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cameron, D, 2010. Speech at Big Society launch [<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/05/pm-and-deputy-pms-speeches-at-big-society-launch-50283>]

¹⁵ The Conservative Party, 2009. Building a Big Society. [<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx?dl=true>]

...we should not be afraid to place demands on people's time as part of efforts to build and sustain social networks.

What this looks like in practice is far from clear. Our analysis supports the idea that public services should be reformed so that their delivery builds more diverse, resilient social networks among the users of public services and their wider connections. Often a service is the only link in the chain potentially connecting one poorly connected individual with another. In **Figure 7**, we see that the nodes connecting our most socially isolated individuals are mainly businesses and community groups.

Our argument echoes those made in a recent article by ResPublica which called for Big Society 'policy principles' to underpin public sector reform. These include the idea that 'Government interventions should look to build social capital and community confidence and capacity from the outset' and that 'particular value should be placed on activity that promotes the quality and strength of neighbour to neighbour relationships and a community's ability to self-organise'.¹⁶

A networking service?

There are a number of examples of public services that have already embraced this approach. A recent report cites the way that the Paxton Green Group Practice use Timebanking to connect patients with each other. As well as reducing GP appointments this approach builds and sustains new connections in the surrounding area.¹⁷ The Southwark Circle scheme is another example of this kind of social network inspired approach to public services. The scheme's main purpose is to help people get support for everyday tasks in their home. However, integral to the design of the scheme is the ability for people who benefit from these services to connect with each other. This has led to a whole array of social events for people who would otherwise be quite isolated.¹⁸

As well as facilitating connections between users of public services, we should not be afraid to place demands on people's time as part of efforts to build and sustain social networks. Research into kindergartens in New York found that some centres vastly improved the social networks of their users, whilst others had no impact. The centres that expected parents to either pay an annual fee or to raise this amount over the course of the year through, for example, selling baked goods or holding raffles, were the ones where parents made the most new friendships. As the author of the research puts it 'Paradoxically enough, the centres negotiated busy mothers' time by asking more, not less, of them — not for the sake of making friendships, but for the sake of pooling resources for the survival of the centre and their children's education.'¹⁹

While these are commendable examples of how public services can grow and sustain people's social networks, there are sadly a number of instances when public services reinforce isolation. A recent documentary on 'Britain's fattest man' clearly showed that his isolation, especially his estrangement from his family, was one of the main causes of his obesity.²⁰ The response of the public sector was to provide him, at not inconsiderable cost, with a professional carer for 8 hours a day but not to offer him any support to rebuild his relationship with his sisters.²¹ Once his condition had improved slightly, he no longer qualified for the same level of support, leaving him once again socially isolated and vulnerable, without a sustainable social support network around him.

16 Leach, M., 2010. 8 new policy principles for a Big Society. [<http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2010/12/8-new-policy-principles-big-society>]

17 Boyle, D., Slay, J., Stephen, L., 2010. Public services inside out. [http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Public_Services_Inside_Out.pdf p.23]

18 See <http://www.southwarkcircle.org.uk>

19 Small, M.L., 2010. Human Resources. [<http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/journal/archive/autumn-2010/features/human-resources>]

20 See <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/britains-fattest-man>

21 Neumark, T. 2011. Does my node look big in this? [<http://projects.rsablogs.org.uk/2011/01/node-big/#>]

Mapping the gaps

Rather than indirectly reinforcing isolation by merely working around its consequences, public services should be delivered in a way that builds and sustains the social networks of the users of these services. This is what the 2020 Public Service Trust has called ‘social productivity’, an approach in which state resources are used to enhance citizen autonomy, capability and resilience, to unlock citizens’ resources, to support existing social networks and to build collective community capacity.²² Central government should provide support for those groups who are most at risk of isolation or exclusion from social networks, for example the unemployed, retired, those who live in areas with thin social networks and those who are isolated. However, this support should be provided in such a way that it enhances the recipient’s social networks.

In order to provide additional support to those areas that have thinner social networks we need to have some way of identifying those areas. Central government is ideally placed to establish the frameworks for collecting and analysing measures of the strength of networks in different areas. Such frameworks could be delivered as part of a future Institute of Community Organising to be set up under the national Community Organising initiative. The government’s Big Society advisor has talked about the need for a single Big Society measure and as a recent Cabinet Office briefing stated “measurement and evaluation [is] key to understanding what sorts of activity are more successful than others.”²³ Making this data publicly available could be an important tool for the new ‘armchair auditors’²⁴ to assess and challenge the performance of local public bodies in fostering more empowered communities.

Will society be better, bigger?

The government has unveiled a number of ideas on how to reform public services. One of the risks with many of the current proposals to build the Big Society is that public services will rely on existing social networks rather than build or sustain these networks. For example, proposals to reform the planning system rely on communities having the capacity to create ‘neighbourhood plans’ and have little to say on how to build and sustain the local connections necessary for a sense of community to flourish.

As well as arguing that public services should as much as possible incorporate a network inspired approach to delivery our work has implications for the design of two new government programmes: the training of community organisers, and the new Communities First Fund.

Community Organisers

The government has committed to training 5,000 community organisers.²⁵ We believe that these organisers should take a leading role in network weaving and should be encouraged and trained to do so.²⁶ Understanding, utilising and galvanising existing social networks should be an important part of the work of a community organiser. In addition, community organisers should ensure that specific efforts are made to build the networks of those who are currently isolated or who suffer from having few local connections. Community organisers would not do this work themselves; rather they should have a strategic approach to supporting and encouraging activities that build the networks of those who are isolated or disempowered.

22 2020 Public Services Trust, 2010. From social security to social productivity: a vision for 2020 Public Services. [http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/2020/documents/PST_final_rep.pdf]

23 Wei, N., 2010. Building the Big Society. [http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/pdfs/Building_the_big_society_lord_wei.pdf]

24 See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/05/pms-podcast-on-transparency-51171>

25 The Coalition, 2010. Building the Big Society. [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-big-society_o.pdf]

26 Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010, op. cit.

The pressures of the ‘age of austerity’ are such that public bodies will find it harder to justify expenditure on activities that foster community spirit such as the Big Lunch.²⁸ Our analysis suggests that the failure to support these activities could result in less empowered communities with thinner social networks.

Connections are not unlimited: we all have finite time and emotional capacity. Investing time in growing the networks of those currently isolated will not only benefit them, but also the current network weavers who will avoid burnout and becoming socially overloaded, and the network itself which will become more resilient: one person dropping out will not suddenly disconnect everyone who relied on them. While those who are more able and/or willing to organise should be supported to do so, the best situation is one in which everyone is to some extent similarly connected.

Communities First Fund

To complement the work of the community organisers the government has pledged to establish a Communities First Fund, a grant giving programme where funds are directed to small community groups in areas with low social capital. This follows on from the Grassroots Grants programme which gave grants to small community groups. One of the most striking findings of the evaluation of this programme was that 65% of those who used the community groups that benefited from the programme felt that they could affect decisions which affected them locally, compared to a national average of under 40%.²⁷

Our research supports the idea that community groups can be important institutions for growing and sustaining people’s social networks. It follows that one of the ways that the Cabinet Office should decide how the Communities First Fund is allocated is by targeting the grants to support community groups to undertake activities which build and diversify users’ social connections.

Local public bodies

Local public bodies, like local authorities or GP consortia, have a role to play in building and sustaining people’s social networks. The pressures of the ‘age of austerity’ are such that public bodies will find it harder to justify expenditure on activities that foster community spirit such as the Big Lunch.²⁸ Our analysis suggests that the failure to support these activities could result in less empowered communities with thinner social networks.

Local public bodies should explore innovative ways of supporting these activities, both through removing red tape and through funding devices such as social impact bonds, or simply by giving the necessary tools and guidance for communities to undertake such activities themselves without the need for a sponsor’s coordination or input. What funding they are able to offer to community groups should be assessed on the contribution they make to building stronger, more diverse social networks. In particular, initiatives should seek to connect those who are currently isolated or at risk, with others. This will be particularly pressing given, for example, cuts to funding for programmes such as Supporting People that aimed to support vulnerable adults to live more independent lives.

The private sector

As with service provision, our approach suggests ways in which better business and a better networked society need not be mutually exclusive, and indeed can bolster each other. This is interesting as, for example, the local Sainsbury’s emerged as a connector in our analysis, proving a clear potential bridge between those in work and those out of work. Further, as in **Figure 7**, we found that other food retailers, the local food co-op and ‘the local shopkeeper’ emerged as 6 of the 17 nodes that could potentially link the most socially isolated respondents to each other.²⁹

²⁷ Curtis, A., Carlisle, B., and Hatamian, A., 2010. Grassroots grants evaluation: interim report. [http://cdf.org.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=604ac12a-ccd8-4f51-b044-67c9681784b2&groupId=228499]

²⁸ See <http://www.thebiglunch.com/>

²⁹ Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010, op. cit. p.45 and p.62

Reflexivity workshops

Social network analysis gives the individual and community a bird's eye view of their social sphere. Being able to unlock your own network allows you to both see it as something you can change, and as something you partially create. The RSA will be running a series of reflexivity workshops where participants' networks will be played back to them, allowing them to reflect on their own position, and whether they would like to change it in any way, how, if so, and give them a visual testimony to how this changes over time.

These workshops and subsequent testing of the network will allow us to test the effect of self-aware autonomy, a key principle of the RSA's account of 21st Century enlightenment, as it relates to networks.³⁴ Preliminary findings suggest that reflexivity allows the individual to manipulate their own network position through a mixture of understanding both how networks tend to operate, and by perceiving and recognising themselves within the network. For example, in a case-study of a very isolated individual who is in some of the risk groups identified above, the subject of the research was able to change their own networks and feelings of control through this approach.

This indicates a new way of changing how people perceive power and their access to it. Viewing connections and understanding influence through networks may create a greater sense of agency and a broader account of what access to power is. Is it knowing how to call your council, or is it knowing Phil Nice who organises a local pub quiz and is, to his own surprise, very well connected in his local community?³⁵ This links to ideas of the Big Society in action — citizens feeling empowered to make changes themselves — and should help build neighbourhoods and societies with 'oomph'.

A recent case-study in Brixton, a similarly deprived part of South London, provides a vignette of how business and more diverse and resilient networks can facilitate each other. The shopping arcade Brixton Village had seen better days, with a third of its shop units lying empty. In November 2009 in an initiative paid for by the landlords and run by the Space Makers Agency, twenty shops were offered rent-free for three months. By the end of this three month period it had become a hub for a diverse range of local networks and communities: from re-use and recycle groups to the Al Amal Society's Olive Tree café, which acts as a hub for non-extremist dialogue. Nine months later, all the shops were being let out and the market remains a focal point of activity for local communities.³⁰

The above is an example of flourishing of networks that can occur around a hub. This does not need to only apply to physical hubs or meeting spaces: a way in which local business can both promote and benefit from local networks is through the funding of hyper-local websites. They are cheap to run (although they rely heavily on key individuals to get going), and research by Networked Neighbourhoods³¹ has shown the positive effect they can have on a local area. In their evaluation of the effects of three hyper-local websites in London they found that just over 4 out of 10 respondents had made new contacts in their neighbourhoods as a result of using the website, and that while only 13% of respondents claimed to be involved in formal local organisations or groups in their area, 95% felt that they had become more informed about the neighbourhood due to their use of the website.³²

At an individual-to-individual level, a more networked approach can be used to both promote micro-business and relieve isolation. This approach is used, for example by NAAPS (originally the National Association of Adult Placement Schemes) in its Small Community Services scheme. This offers membership to micro social enterprises who offer services to older people in local communities to enable them to continue living there. One illustration is the case of a woman who, on finding out that isolated older people in her estate received meals on wheels, now cooks their meals in her own kitchen. Not only are the meals now freshly cooked, but they come with local social interaction.³³

What is the RSA doing?

The RSA is carrying out a series of network interventions in New Cross Gate in partnership with local residents and organisations to examine how to strengthen networks through light-touch means, and what might be achieved as a result. One example of these interventions is given in the side box.

We are working with multiple sites across the country to address mental wellbeing by developing social networks; and are working with private sector companies to better understand how businesses can act as community hubs through which diverse connections can be encouraged. More instrumentally, we are also exploring how social networks can be fostered and utilised to address worklessness, by generating the valuable weak ties and bridging social capital that can provide information and opportunity in the labour market.³⁶

³⁰ See <http://spacemakers.org.uk/projects/brixton/>

³¹ See <http://networkedneighbourhoods.com>

³² Networked Neighbourhoods, 2010. The online networks neighbourhood survey 2010: Summary. [<http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Online-Nhood-Networks-4-page-summary-web.pdf>]

³³ See <http://naaps.co.uk/en/small-community-services/>

³⁴ Taylor, M., 2010. Twenty-first century enlightenment. London: RSA [http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/315002/RSA_21centuryenlightenment_essay1_matthewtaylor.pdf]

³⁵ Williams, R., 15 September 2010. 'Big society' facilitators are found within communities [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/sep/15/big-society-community-networks>]

³⁶ More information about this work can be found at <http://www.thersa.org/projects/connected-communities>

What can I do?

A networks approach emphasises the power of the individual, especially when connected. Our findings highlight that although there are network risks, it is the individual's particular mix of attributes that determine whether they are negatively affected. Our focus group and case-study work highlighted that once individuals are given network tools, this extra confidence helps them change their own network position.

This is a call to think about what society means to you: would your actions, multiplied, contribute to creating the society you would like to see? Individuals with more diverse networks tend to be healthier and happier, and more likely to have useful contacts: how often do you step out of your usual circles, and meet someone new or 'different'? Network theory shows the power of network weavers: if there is change you want to see, are you, directly or indirectly, helping to make it happen?

To coin a (re)phrase:

'Never doubt that a ... group of [connected] committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'.³⁷

³⁷ Margaret Mead, cited in [http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/315002/RSA_21centuryenlightenment_essay1_matthewtaylor.pdf p.35]

APPENDIX

Methodology

Social network analysis is a way of understanding the human experience as defined by relational data: who you know, who you are related to, and from whom you get anything, from information and opportunity to diseases. By creating visual representations of these networks, it allows us to uncover the webs that tie our day-to-day together. The RSA research in New Cross Gate, South East London, examined people's social, support, information and influence structures: who they socialise with, who they go to for help, where they get information and support from; and how who they know shapes the effect they can have on their local community.

This briefing paper concentrates on the answers given by 173 respondents to questions around access to influence or power: the people that seem good at bringing others together, and those people who might connect respondents to others in positions of power or influence.³⁸ The RSA's report found that access to power was fragmented and unevenly clustered: instead of being composed of cohesive clusters, or communities, ties to power in New Cross Gate are disjointed, and centred around a few key individuals (such as the local MP) and community organisations. This means that the network is weak and not resilient: it cannot “withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary”.³⁹ Removing a few key nodes — people — can affect the overall information and influence flows of the network.

Glossary and inventory of images

● **A node** is a person or organisation or even an idea that something — information, disease or matter — flows from.

● — ● **A tie** (or edge, to use the technical term) is the link between two nodes: the flow. It can have direction and weight (how valuable a tie is to the people concerned, for example).

Ego-network: the visualisation of all the links pertaining to one node, (pictured right).

Degree: the number of links (or ties or edges) that a node has.

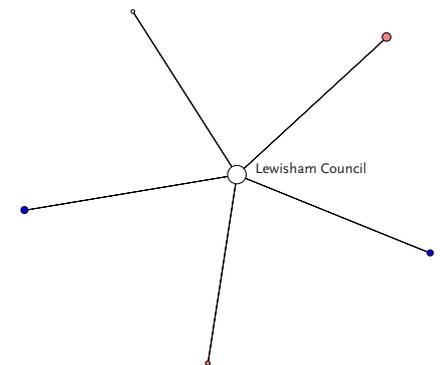
Alters: people not in the survey that respondents cite as their contacts/ties.

Homophily: the idea that ‘birds of a feather flock together’: we are, in network terms, more likely to befriend those we perceive as similar to us.

Proximity: the idea that network and actual location are important: the closer we live, work, or find ourselves to others, the more likely we are to interact with them.

Transitivity: our friends' friends are likely to become our friends.

Connectivity: how linked you are to other nodes/alters. This has many measures. When dealing with incomplete and/or ego networks, degree is the most reliable measure. We use it here.



³⁸ Rowson, J., Broome, S., & Jones, A., 2010, op. cit. p.72

³⁹ Holling, C. S., 1973, Vol 4. cited in Ibid. p. 47, n.131.

The survey

In describing their connections to power and influence, over 80% of the answers named individuals, with the remainder naming organisations. (This reflected the focus of the questions on individual, personal relationships.) In the general survey, answers cited private individuals (36%), public-figure individuals such as councillors (17%), public sector organisations (such as Council, school, hospital, 13%), third sector or community organisations (charity, voluntary organisations, 10%) and private organisations (9%). The remaining answers covered, in order of decreasing frequency, an activity (for example, dance classes), the media, faith based organisations, an idea or disposition (for example helping or being helped by neighbours, or word of mouth), and groups of people/friends.

Respondents in the general sample had an average of 12 connections to influence and power, ranging across individuals, groups, organisations and/or dispositions. There were, however, considerable differences between respondents, with a range of between one and forty-four ties per respondent, and from 1 to 110 nominations per named tie: the most named being the postman overall. In the influence/power questions the local MP, Joan Ruddock, emerged as the perceived key link to power/influence.

Of the respondents overall:

- 50% are female, 50% male;
- 15% live in Kender Triangle, 19% live in Somerville, 31% live in Telegraph Hill, 10% live in Hatcham, 9% in Musgrove, 5% in Winslade;
- 6% self-identified as Asian, 15% as Black, 2% as Mixed, 1% as 'Other' and 68% as White;
- 23% live in council/RSL housing; 40% are home owners; 25% private renters;
- 24% are married or living with partner, no dependent children; 24% married or living with partner with dependent children; 7% single parent families; 13% single person household, 25% other multi-person household; and
- 22% are students; 39% are employed; 14% are retired; 13% are unemployed and the remainder either did not give their status, or are in the 'other' category.

The isolates group

Twenty five percent of our respondents could not name anyone in their social network who they thought was **a)** good at bringing people together or **b)** could help them contact someone with influence, power or responsibility to change things locally. For the purposes of this paper they have been referred to as the 'isolates group'. Further analysis of this 25% 'isolates group' has shown that:

- Unemployed and retired people are disproportionately isolated: 50% of unemployed respondents were isolated from influence.
- Men are disproportionately represented, accounting for 63% of the isolates group.
- Whereas women are less isolated overall, unemployed women are disproportionately isolated: 43% of unemployed women were isolated, compared to just 10% of non-unemployed women.
- Those over the age of 65 and those who chose not to disclose their age were disproportionately represented in the isolates group.
- Those who had lived in New Cross Gate the longest were disproportionately represented in the isolates group, highlighting the effects of networks disappearing/changing over time.
- In the age, employment status, and housing status responses, the 'not given' category tended to be disproportionately represented in the isolated group, highlighting a potential link between lower trust levels and lower connections to power.