



Social networks key to community regeneration

For immediate release

Social networks are the infrastructure of the Big Society. Their shape and the way they operate are powerful and surprising. They are crucial to achieving better outcomes with limited budgets.

That's the conclusion of a new report from the RSA, ***Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society*** which says social isolation, unemployment and anti-social behaviour can all be more effectively tackled through the use of social network analysis.

The report concludes that the success of government plans to train 5000 community organisers and increase the membership of community groups, depends on identifying the most influential people within any given community.

Social network analysis can reveal opportunities to connect those who are disconnected, and 'spread' constructive social norms through highly connected individuals whose behaviour is more likely to be imitated by those in their network, the report says.

Following extensive research that pieced together a community network of over a thousand residents and organisations across New Cross Gate, London, the RSA found that 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.

But surprisingly, the research also shows that the 'most networked individual' within a community is not always the 'usual suspect' such as the local MP, councillor or community activist. Within New Cross Gate, for example, one of the most networked individuals is the local pub quiz master – Phil Nice.

The survey responses also showed that 'familiar strangers' such as postman and dustmen appear to be under-utilised community resources; in the RSA's case studies more people recognise and find value in their postman than their local councillor.

Connected Communities argues that policy makers should have a better understanding of social network analysis if they are to make informed practical decisions that might reduce inequalities, combat isolation and support the development of more resilient and empowered communities. This builds on recent research which has hit the headlines in recent months on how social networks can explain everything from divorce rates to life expectancy to obesity.

Commenting on the report, chief executive of the RSA Matthew Taylor said:

"From community safety to getting a job, social networks are the infrastructure of the Big Society. If we understand and exploit those networks then we can meet the challenge posed to us by austerity- achieving better social outcomes with static or falling budgets. And because people themselves understand the idea of networks, because information about them can be presented in compelling ways network analysis can be used by communities themselves to make places and lives better."

Commenting on the report, author Steve Broome said:

"Visualising communities as networks helps us to see the assets they contain and how best to make use of them. We can make connections where there are none, and make better use of them where they exist. We can work through key hubs, influencers and high-connected people as a way of targeting behaviour change interventions more efficiently. And in replaying networks to people in communities, we are better able to see our inter-dependencies, opportunities to collaborate, and realise that we influence a surprisingly high number of people directly and indirectly through our attitudes and behaviours. Over the next six months, we will test how well small-scale projects and activities, designed to take account of networks, are able to tackle local problems."

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
2. Connected Communities follows an RSA commissioned 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.
6. The RSA is launching a new longitudinal study on how social networks can improve mental wellbeing. This work will be undertaken across seven different communities in different regions of England.