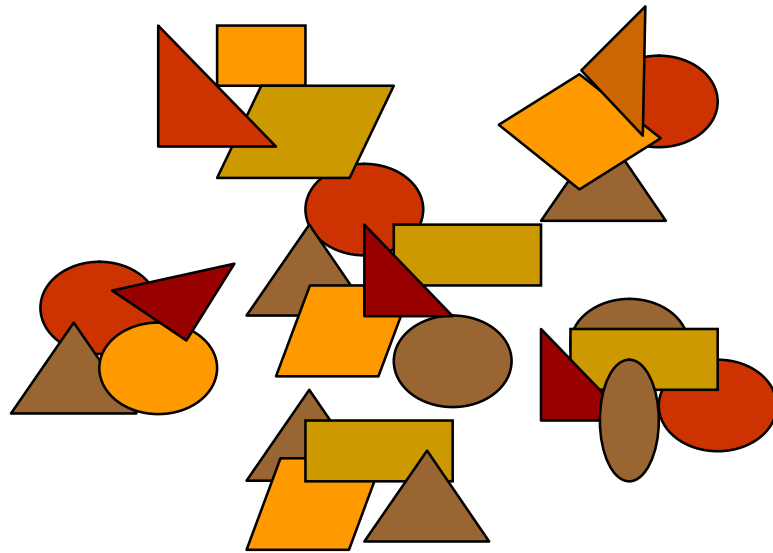


Social Capital and Stronger Communities in Leicestershire



Executive Summary

Centre for Social Action, De Montfort University

Commissioned by the Stronger Communities Board
of Leicestershire Together

First Edition, May 2007

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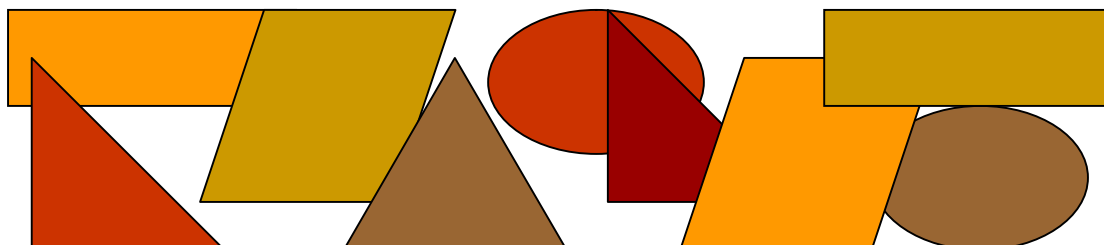
The work on which this report is based was commissioned by **The Stronger Communities Board of Leicestershire Together.**

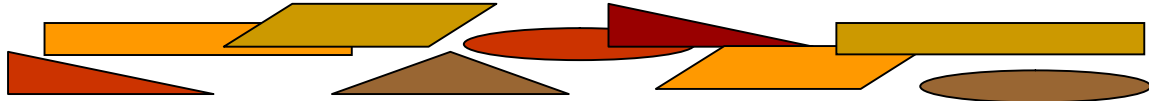
Martin Gage, as lead officer for Stronger Communities coordinated the work with **Thilo Boeck** from the Centre for Social Action (De Montfort University). **Jon Adamson, Sharon Pye** (Leicestershire County Council) and **Jo Cheney**, (CVS Community Partnership) contributed to the analysis

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Executive Summary

Background

As part of the Leicestershire Local Area Agreement, the Voluntary and Community Sector took the lead on the 'Stronger Communities' block. As there was no existing government funding or projects for this area, a new project had to be developed. This led to the development of a project aimed at "Measuring and Enhancing Social Capital" in 20 communities across the County.

The Stronger Block has a total of 4 outcomes addressing empowering local people to have a greater voice and influence over local decision making, an increased sense of community spirit, equality of access to services and thriving market town and village centres, which act as "hubs" for surrounding communities.

Social Capital

'Social Capital is a resource that stems from the bulk of social interactions, networks and network opportunities that either people or communities have within a specific environment. This environment is characterised by a commonality of mutual trust and reciprocity and informed by specific norms and values.'

There are different types of social capital which are important in different situations, or moments in our life. These types are shaped through:

- The types of networks (similar or diverse, outward or inward looking)
- Specific and shared norms and values
- The type of community (location, interest, identity, faith, etc.)
- Power and economic resources

Social capital can be described as the "glue" that holds communities together and the "resources" to help them move on. Thus the enhancement of social capital is key to developing stronger communities.

Methodology

The project work was based on a participative methodology which involved local volunteers, representatives from the local Council for Voluntary Services (CVSs), Leicestershire County Council and academia. The Social Capital Survey and discussion groups were modelled on work carried out by the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University.

The first stage was to engage the seven District Local Strategic Partnerships to identify three communities at a Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level in each district. In each LSOA it was hoped to recruit 20 volunteers to undertake a door-to-door survey interviewing 10% of the adult population. Local CVSs requested volunteers to carry out a survey in their local area. In eight of the twenty areas volunteers could not be recruited so MORI was engaged to undertake the surveys. However in the other 12 areas volunteers from a variety of organisations have been trained and carried out the house-to-house surveys. By the end, with a voluntary organisation receiving £100 for each volunteer provided, around £20,000 went into the funds of these organisations.

Led by the respective Council of Voluntary Service, Local Development Groups, made up of voluntary and community groups, faith groups, parish councils and school governors, are being formed to receive and interpret the results from the survey and suggest a range of ideas about how they as Community Groups can strengthen their community. These ideas will form the delivery plan for each of the identified communities.

Findings and Conclusions

Overall, there are strong feelings of neighbourliness in Leicestershire however generally people in the 'rural areas' feel more positive about their neighbourhood and people from the 'deprived areas' feel less positive about it. For trust and for reciprocity there was a difference between deprived, rural and average areas which reflects these findings.

The qualitative findings give us some insight into why these differences exist. It is crucial to understand that the built environment and the turnover of population has an effect on how people interact with their neighbours.

Different factors contribute to building stronger, or less strong, communities. The responsibility does not lie only with the residents. There is a responsibility of those organisations providing public services to consider how their policies impact directly on communities and also how they impact on other factors – such as poverty and crime – which can impede the development of social capital and stronger communities.

Formal volunteering was low across the whole sample but informal volunteering was quite high in all areas. Proactivity and participation in community affairs was fairly low and there was no significant difference between deprived and average areas. This is an important finding because it suggests that feeling positive about your neighbourhood and trusting your neighbours will not necessarily lead people to take an active part in the shaping of their neighbourhood.

In the deprived areas there is a higher representation of a group of people who despite holding low levels of trust in the neighbourhood and having a more negative view of the neighbourhood they tend to get involved in more voluntary work and like to mix with people from different backgrounds. Whilst in the rural areas, the opposite pattern is evident whereby despite higher levels of trust and

neighbourliness they tended to make slightly less voluntary contributions to the community and were far less likely to be happy to live with people from different backgrounds. As such strong cohesion and a sense of belonging might sometimes be quite inward looking and exclusive with less active engagement in community affairs.

Social capital is not evenly distributed in Leicestershire and this has a direct influence on tackling social exclusion and building stronger communities. It is important to move away from stereotypical views that people from average or rural areas invest more in their neighbourhood because they have a positive perception of their local area. Policy to encourage volunteering and proactivity should be targeted to all types of neighbourhoods not only the 'deprived' neighbourhoods.

Implications for Policy

Our findings and the process by which the work is being taken forward in the neighbourhoods have some direct bearing on policy making.

1. Rather than imposing a framework for building stronger communities, there has been an innovative partnership which enabled communities to define, explore and develop the meaning of stronger communities. As a result of the LAA and the voluntary sector taking a lead on 'stronger communities' there have already been a number of tangible benefits in local communities:
 - local volunteers have been trained to become trainers on how to conduct surveys and on what social capital is,
 - local people were involved in developing the Leicestershire Social Capital Survey and then conducted it in their own communities,
 - around £20,000 was invested in local voluntary clubs, groups and organisations communities,
 - local communities were involved in analysing the results of their area and interpreting the findings, adding their stories to the overall picture,
 - using the social capital framework and the findings communities are now developing their own plans on how to strengthen their community.
2. It should be recognised that no single organisation or group can enhance social capital on its own but that the partnership between a range of groups, organisations and individuals can make an important contribution. Our research highlights the following:
 - **The role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS)**
As demonstrated by this piece of work the bottom-up nature of VCS working is a vital contribution the sector can make to enhancing and building stronger communities. In some ways the enhancement of social capital is a constituent element of their work. Whilst developing its trusted role within the local community the VCS should also bridge

gaps within the community by working with a more diverse group of people.

- **The role of local government**

Local government can help to facilitate an environment in which social capital is enhanced and thus local people feel that they have an active role within a strong community. Some of the examples from our study included the important role of decisions relating to housing, transport, migration and especially the feeling that decisions are being made without real consultation or listening. Local authorities can provide opportunities for people to formally come together to tackle specific problems, they can also contribute to 'banal encounters', which are also important for social capital, though their design, planning, leisure and culture functions. (For further details see the IPPR report *Locality Matters*.)

- **The role of local people**

The people in a community should have the opportunity to write their own stories. This project and report is only the beginning. This report has begun the process of publishing the statistics and the stories. The stories of the activities of people living in the 20 areas will continue to be recorded and the survey will be repeated in February 2009. Within this process, external interventions will be kept to a minimum and as such the outsiders role will be one of support and facilitation. The people in the communities must be allowed to write their own stories and encourage others to participate within this process.

3. Encouraging more volunteering. The survey has given us a picture of the typical volunteer and also the specific areas for building stronger communities. By building on the process started through this project the Voluntary and Community Sector can work with those 'agents of change' in all the different areas to promote stronger communities. This will hopefully lead to further active participation and volunteering through the discovery that by 'working together people can change things in the community'.

