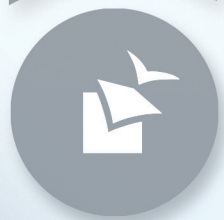


social capital in the North East

how do we measure up?

Katie Schmuecker
April 2008



ippnorth

summary report

North East Social Capital Forum

About Northern Rock Foundation

The aims of Northern Rock Foundation are to tackle disadvantage and improve quality of life in North East England and Cumbria. The Foundation does this by investing in charitable activities through grants, loans, training, research and demonstration work. The Foundation is a charity and company limited by guarantee with an independent Board of Trustees that make all decisions on governance, finance and policy. *Think* is the Foundation's research series, launched in 2007 as part of its work to inform and influence the wider policy environment.

More information www.nr-foundation.org.uk

About the North East Social Capital Forum

The North East Social Capital Forum was established in 2006 to:

- raise awareness of social capital as a practical tool for social and economic regeneration;
- identify good practice in building social capital in the North East;
- find ways of measuring and monitoring social capital;
- provide training and dissemination about social capital;
- link into other work on social capital in the UK.

The Forum was set up as a two-year project run by the Community Foundation and Regeneration Exchange, with funding from the regional development agency, One NorthEast.

More information

www.communityfoundation.org.uk/specialprojects/social_capital

About the author and ippr north

Katie Schmuecker is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research North, the Newcastle office of the UK's leading progressive think tank. She specialises in regional development, governance, devolution and decentralisation. Before joining ippr north she worked for the campaign for regional government in the North East of England.

ippr north produces far-reaching policy ideas, stimulating solutions that work nationally as well as locally. These are shaped from our research, which spans the northern economic agenda, public services, devolution, food policy and rural issues, as well as a strong democratic engagement strand which involves a wide range of audiences in political debates.

More information www.ippr.org/ipprnorth

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Foreword

Measurement of social capital in the United Kingdom is still in its infancy. When compared to the analysis that is possible in the United States, there is much more to be done in improving our understanding of how social capital varies at a local level.

This report is an impressive first attempt to break down national statistics to a regional level. It tests some commonly held hypotheses about the friendliness of people in the North East and the strength of our communities, and makes some interesting comparisons between the North East and our friends in the South.

It is particularly helpful in informing the ongoing debates amongst members of the North East Social Capital Forum about how the concept of social capital can help build stronger communities and promote both social and economic regeneration. The report will be valuable to local authorities and other planning bodies as we embark on “place surveys” and get to grips with the ways that different neighbourhoods and communities work, even within a single local authority area. It would be good to standardise the way we collect data which would make further comparisons about social capital in individual communities easier in future.

If reading this report whets your appetite to find out more about social capital and engage in the debate in the North East, do contact George Hepburn at the Community Foundation, who co-ordinates North East Social Capital Forum, and who would be keen to hear from you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AKerr', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Andrew Kerr
Chair, North East Social Capital Forum
Chief Executive, North Tyneside Council

Executive summary

This research was initiated by the North East Social Capital Forum and commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation in order to provide, for the first time, a robust analysis of levels of social capital in the North East region. The research was conducted by ippr north.

Social capital and regional development: why the interest in the North East?

Social capital essentially refers to people's personal relationships and networks, and is considered the 'social glue' that makes society work. There are three main types of social capital: bonding (strong relationships of care, for example within a family), bridging (looser networks, often with people from different backgrounds, for example acquaintances) and linking (connections with people in positions of power). Research has shown that bonding social capital, while good for personal support, can have negative implications, fostering exclusivity or encouraging negative behaviours through social pressure.

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is seen as a more straightforwardly good thing, and research suggests it could contribute to meeting some of the region's priorities. It is positively associated with shorter spells in unemployment, which could assist with the regional economic strategy's (RES's) objective of economic inclusion. Another priority for the North East, and a theme that runs throughout the RES, is raising people's aspirations, and research suggests that contact with people from different backgrounds, through more extensive and diverse networks, can raise expectations and aspirations.

Furthermore, regional development policy is increasingly about shaping a place and 'selling' an area. Being able to market the North East as a distinctive place with a vibrant and welcoming culture, where there are strong and cohesive communities and people know their neighbours, may have an important contribution to make. For this to be meaningful, it is helpful to get behind these stereotypes and assess the type and level of social capital in the North East region. This research takes the first steps in doing this. There are three common hypotheses we seek to test:

1. the North East is a place of particularly strong communities;
2. the North East is exceptional in terms of being a sociable place;
3. the region has a culture of informal volunteering and social support, so using formal volunteering as a measure of social capital and active communities disadvantages the region.

Fertile ground? The policy context at national and local level

Social capital has featured on the national policy agenda in recent years, although national thinking has shifted a little, with concepts of active citizenship, empowerment and social cohesion coming to the fore. Social capital is intimately intertwined with these aspirations.

As part of the new local area agreements (LAAs), local authorities can choose to include 'stronger communities' as part of their agreement, and they have the option of devising their own additional targets. Alongside this development, the new local authority *Place Survey* will include a number of questions relevant to social capital, and it is expected that individual local authorities will be able to add questions to the survey to collect data on issues of interest. Should they choose to, local authorities can make enhancing social capital central to their activities.

Data and methodology

Social surveys can be used to measure respondents' social networks, participation in organisations and social activities. But care has to be taken with interpreting the data as social capital is not always a good thing, and direction of causality is difficult to establish. These limitations make context vital to understanding social capital, and the ideal would be to supplement quantitative data with qualitative research.

This paper provides a regional analysis of social capital, drawing on the General Household Survey (GHS) 2004/05. This was the first, and so far only, major social survey to carry the Office of National Statistics' set of

questions specifically designed to measure social capital (known as the harmonised question set – HQS), giving robust and comparable data.

The HQS does not currently include questions on bridging social capital, so to supplement the analysis we include data on bridging social capital from the Citizenship Survey 2005. Both the GHS and Citizenship Survey have a large enough regional sample to make generalisations about the wider North East population, but once broken down into different groups – such as age group – we can be less confident of generalisations. Neither survey provides geographical data below the level of the standard region. Furthermore, as the two surveys draw on different samples, despite being from a similar period, they are not directly comparable. While the data are not ideal, analysis of it will provide a broad brush picture of social capital in the region, enabling us to draw some conclusions and highlight areas for further research.

Conclusions

The primary conclusion is that the North East has similar levels of social capital to the rest of the country. In terms of people's views of their local area and their level of trust in neighbours, Parliament, local authorities and people in general, the North East is similar to the British average and most other regions and nations. And while a low proportion of respondents thought they could influence decisions in their local area, either alone (22 per cent), or when working with others (46 per cent), this was not significantly different to the British average or most other regions.

The region that emerges as most exceptional from our analysis is London, where people are more negative about their neighbourhood, have lower levels of trust and are the least likely to speak to their neighbours. This may suggest more fractured neighbourhoods in London, a finding that should give pause for thought about the type of regional development model that the North East wants to follow, and highlight the need for the goal of economic growth to be complemented by social goals, such as enhancing social capital.

The North East also emerges from this analysis as exceptional in some respects, and to return to our three hypotheses:

1 Strong communities: Sixty two per cent of North Easterners report meeting with relatives at least once a week, significantly more than the national average (49 per cent) and each of the Southern English regions. North Easterners are also significantly more likely to speak to their neighbours at least once a week (80 per cent) compared to a national average of 74 per cent, and a London region average of 63 per cent.

These family and neighbourly contacts provide evidence of ‘strong communities’, and strong social support networks. But they could also signify exclusive and inward looking communities, and a low level of geographic mobility. The challenge for policy makers is to preserve the positive aspects of strong communities while increasing the opportunities open to people.

2 A sociable place: North Easterners are more likely to enjoy a social relationship with their neighbours and family members, but are no more likely to meet up with friends than the British average and most other regions. Levels of social cohesion and bridging social capital may also indicate how outward looking and ‘friendly’ the North East is – although we appreciate this is an imperfect measure. The region is at the national average for thinking people from different backgrounds get along well in their local area (69 per cent), suggesting average levels of social cohesion. The data from the Citizenship Survey on bridging social capital tells a less positive story. People in the North East are significantly less likely to have friends from different ethnic backgrounds (32 per cent) than the England and Wales average (50 per cent) and London (78 per cent). This could suggest the region is less open and friendly, but the very small proportion of people from different ethnic groups living in the region (less than five per cent in 2001) seems a far more likely explanation. There is also less mixing of income groups in the North East, with significantly fewer people report having friends from different income groups compared to the London region. This could again suggest less openness, although the wider income distribution in London may make meeting people with different incomes more likely. Together these findings might suggest weaker bridging social capital in the region.

3 A culture of informal volunteering: the proportion of people volunteering both formally (28 per cent) and informally (47 per cent) in the North East is largely the same as other regions. While this analysis does not uphold the theory that there is a different, more informal, culture of volunteering in the North East, the scale of informal unpaid help suggests a significant contribution in terms of helping society function, yet government targets are focused only on formal volunteering.

Overall, the analysis reveals an interesting generational divide within the North East, finding respondents in the 16–44 years age group (the youngest age group in the survey) were substantially less likely than their older peers to speak to their neighbours regularly or to meet up with family members frequently. They were also less likely to be satisfied with their area, or trust their neighbours. This would warrant further investigation into whether people’s views change as they get older, or if it is evidence of a generational change in attitudes and views in the North East. With regard to 16–44 year olds having less contact with their neighbours and family, it may be that the North East is becoming more like the rest of the country.

The analysis enables us to make a number of recommendations in relation to what regional institutions and local authorities in the North East can do if they wish to harness social capital as part of their policy agenda, and regarding data quality.

Recommendations

1. Next steps for local and regional institutions

- **Local authorities could make enhancing social capital a central plank of their local area agreement** through a combination of the ‘stronger communities’ targets and additional, locally set targets that relate to social capital using questions from the HQS as the basis for measurement.
- **Institutions wanting to enhance social capital must be clear about how it interacts with goals such as well-being, quality of life and social cohesion.** While there is much overlap between these concepts there are also differences, and there is a need for greater conceptual clarity.
- **The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), One NorthEast and local authorities should work with their partners to understand the potential tension between ‘strong communities’ – or bonding social capital – and economic development.**
- **Local authorities wanting to enhance social capital should opt to add key social capital questions to the new *Place Survey*, in order to improve social capital data at a smaller geographic scale. Those doing so should coordinate their additional questions to ensure the same questions are asked, aiding comparisons and helping to identify policy outcomes and good practice. The Association of North East Councils could play this coordinating role.**
- **One NorthEast should be more precise about what types of social capital it wants to encourage through its regional economic strategy.**
- **The Social Capital Forum and other interested partners should regard the move to a single integrated regional strategy as an opportunity to embed social capital in regional strategies** as the single strategy will cover economic, social and environmental objectives.
- **Local authorities should work with the DCLG to include informal unpaid help as a measure of active citizenship** as a greater proportion of people already engage in this type of activity, which also offers a valuable support mechanism in the community.

2. Data and data quality

- **More data should be produced at the sub-regional level** to provide a more fine-grained picture of the region, and where challenges and opportunities lie.
- **Make data from the new *Place Survey* publicly available** to enable researchers to analyse data on social capital (and other issues), maximising the value of what will be a rich and significant new source of data.
- **Local organisations (whether local authorities, their partners or a combination of the two) could re-run the whole module of social capital questions** at a local authority level to provide a full data set that is comparable to the regional and national data across all the indicators of social capital. If multiple local authorities wanted to do this economies of scale could be gained by coordinating commissioning the field work. **The Association of North East Councils could play this role.**
- **Regional institutions or local authorities and their partners should commission qualitative research to follow up questions that cannot be answered by quantitative research**, such as why the views and attitudes of younger generations in the North East differ to those of the older age groups.
- **The Office of National Statistics (ONS) should continue to improve the measures for bridging social capital** as this will enable regional institutions (such as One NorthEast) and local authorities to better understand the relationship between bridging social capital and regional priorities such as economic inclusion and raising aspirations.
- **ONS and the DCLG should resolve the relationship between the set of social capital questions (the Harmonised Question Set – HQS) and the Citizenship Survey.** The process of drawing up the HQS was considered good practice, but despite aspirations to integrate the HQS with the Citizenship Survey 2007 it has not happened. Greater clarity over the reason for this is required, particularly as questions from the Citizenship Survey are being used to measure progress on building cohesive, empowered and active communities.



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