

## **Social capital – what we mean by it and why it matters**

We live in a world in which we are increasingly coming to recognise the importance of ‘social capital’. By ‘social capital’ we mean, broadly speaking, the value of relationships and structures through which we connect with others, build trust and work together.

When neighbours help out with the shopping when we’re ill, or friends forward us a job opportunity that they know we need, that’s social capital. When a group of residents form a community gardening club to help keep their local area beautiful, that’s social capital. When different community groups lobby and raise funds to refurbish the local youth centre, that’s social capital. When different faith groups, local government and businesses work together to provide shelter and ad hoc services to those who have been flooded out of their homes, that response rests heavily on social capital.

Such social capital was central to our ability to survive the pandemic and it will be vital to the ability of communities to withstand the cost-of-living crisis we now face. Those with less social capital will likely fare worse than others. A recognition of the importance of social capital was at the heart of the Levelling Up White Paper, which set out a plan to spread prosperity and opportunity more evenly across the country. Yet, its importance extends still further than this. Whether it is about our resilience to future crises, our concerns over the extent of division, isolation and dislocation in modern societies, or the battle against prejudice and hate, we know that relationships and social ties (including those relationships which bridge divides) have a central role to play in securing a better future.

These social ties are things that most people can agree are extremely valuable, but they have not tended to figure very much in the thinking of policymakers or political leaders. Where they have figured in policymaking, it has tended to be as part of siloed conversations about ‘loneliness’ or ‘integration’ that mask the existence of a larger, shared agenda regarding the importance of social capital. And where terms such as ‘social connection’ or ‘social integration’ do get discussed, we typically fail to be clear enough about what we mean by them, or how policymakers can support these forms of social capital in concrete and practical terms. This statement aims to begin to address these weaknesses.

This is a pivotal moment. We face a long cost-of-living crisis, one which could place untold strain on our social fabric and test the resilience of our communities like never before. At the same time, we welcome a new Prime Minister who will have immensely difficult decisions to make, but who will want to bring a fresh approach to policy. We believe it is vital that this Government recognises the importance of building up our social capital and acting to strengthen the social fabric of all areas of our country. This is one of the challenges of our time.

### **Who we are**

We are a group of organisations, all of whom have a strong focus on the importance of social ties and relationships between people. We have differing approaches to this issue; some of us are practitioners, some think tanks, some researchers. And we have tended to use different terms to describe the issue; anything from ‘social connectedness’ to ‘social cohesion’. However, we all believe that these social ties that we describe play an extraordinarily important, yet typically under-recognised, role in our collective and individual well-being.

### **What constitutes social capital?**

We believe we need to be clearer about what we mean by social capital. In doing so, we don't want to impose a narrow definition, or exclude other important elements of social capital which we may be less focused on. However, we do want to highlight three vital elements of social capital which we believe are fundamental, and without which we believe any understanding of social capital is incomplete.

These vital elements can be described in the following way:

- **Bonding capital** – the value of social ties with people who are similar to ourselves, whether that similarity is in terms of demographic characteristics, attitudes, resources or status.
- **Bridging capital** – the value of social ties with people who are different to us, whether in terms of demographic characteristics, attitudes, resources or status. In academic literature these are often described as 'in-group/out-group' relationships.
- **Linking capital** – the value of ties between people and institutions; for example between MPs and constituents, between councils and their residents, or between people and civil society associations.

In addition, it is important to bear in mind that different types of social ties have different qualities and characteristics. For instance, some ties are more personal than others, some are more formal than others, some are more fleeting and casual than others. These different characteristics may be more or less important in supporting different elements of social capital and different social outcomes. There is good reason to think that a healthy balance and mix of various types of social ties (e.g. formal and informal, close friendship and passing acquaintance) will be of value to both the individual and the community.

### **Why does it matter?**

As we build social ties and nurture relationships across difference, we build bonding, bridging and linking capital. Where these elements of social capital are all strong, there is good reason to believe that our communities will be stronger and healthier in some of the ways we value most.

These include:

- Community resilience - communities being able to quickly mobilise and support each other in times of crisis and change. There is strong evidence to suggest that more connected communities are better able to provide mutual support and survive systemic shocks.
- Social support networks - informal links and connections in neighbourhoods which support individuals and groups to access help.
- Pride in place - a feeling of connection and satisfaction with a particular geographical place that encourages people to put down roots and become more socially engaged.
- Spreading economic opportunity - strong and diverse social networks helping to spread economic opportunity; places with high social capital being more conducive to investment and growth.
- Reduction of prejudice and hate - development of trust and empathy prevents the emergence of prejudice and hate, and acts as a bulwark against extremisms that seek to divide along ethnic or national lines.
- Stronger democratic norms and participation - being actively engaged in national and local institutions and community action.
- Inclusive sense of belonging - a sense of safety, security and identification with a place which at the same time is welcoming to others.

Where those key elements of social capital are weak, there will be **social distance**. Weak social ties and social distance have been linked to rising division, dislocation and isolation, resulting in feelings of insecurity, anxiety and fear. The impacts of this include lower levels of

health and well-being, reduced resilience to crisis and economic turbulence, and declining trust in democratic and public institutions.

### How do we know if we're getting it right?

When we are getting it right, we should be able to find evidence of this in a range of key indicators, such as:

- Higher levels of social engagement and volunteering
- Higher levels of trust (in institutions and in other people)
- Higher levels of neighbourliness
- Lower levels of loneliness and isolation
- More positive attitudes towards others and particularly those from other groups
- Higher levels of identification with local area

However, we need to improve our ability to test the strength of different types of social capital and their impacts at both national and local level. Adequate local level data is particularly scarce and difficult to come by.

### Our shared challenge: what do we need to do now?

We believe we must do more to proactively cultivate the networks of relationships and community ties which prevent people from slipping into division, dislocation and isolation, and which build resilient, connected communities with an inclusive sense of pride in place. Below are five key things we need to do to support this.

Given a chance, civil society will play its part. We are asking this Government, and this Opposition, to take up this challenge, to show where this fits within their vision for the country, and how they will work with us to help us achieve this shared vision.

1. **Give policy priority to relationships and social connection.** Given the importance of the social outcomes (described above), we need policymakers to place a much greater weight on the relationships and connections that constitute the social capital that generates these outcomes. We also need to recognise that decisions across a wide range of different policy areas can positively or negatively shape our ability to connect with others. We need greater attention paid to relationships and social connection across all spheres of policymaking.
2. **Invest in coordinating capacity at a local level.** The types of social capital we have described here are all place-based and founded on relationships. Investing in these requires individuals and organisations at a local level with the resource and responsibility to invest in and nurture these relationships. This investment should be targeted at local government *and* VCSE organisations, and should aim to support the working relationships between them.
3. **Invest in shared spaces.** Opportunities for social connection require shared spaces such as parks, community centres, libraries and sports clubs in which people come together, as well as natural hubs like high streets and town centres. These spaces often provide necessary infrastructure for those local groups and associations that foster lasting connections, and which often play a leading role in times of crisis. Many of these spaces have been lost or have decayed in recent decades, and we urgently need to invest in expanding and improving them. Relatively small levels of funding sustained over time could have considerable impact here.
4. **Support initiatives and practices that develop bridging capital.** We know that high quality interactions between people from different backgrounds can have a powerful direct impact on reducing prejudice and isolation, developing empathy and trust, and building inclusive senses of identity and belonging. These practices can be nurtured through community groups and associations, or through programmes and

initiatives at both local and national level. We believe that the latter should have a particular focus on young people and how we can effectively embed bridging experiences in education and extracurricular activity.

- 5. Invest in the evidence base.** We need to invest in developing sources of data that will allow us to better understand and measure different elements of social capital and their impacts. We particularly need to invest in the development of local level data, given the largely place-based nature of the relationships and social connection that constitute that social capital. We also need to invest in expanding our understanding of 'what works' in building bonding, bridging and linking capital in areas as diverse as housing and planning, high streets and town centres, sports and leisure, volunteering and arts and culture.

Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network  
British Future  
The Cares Family  
The Good Faith Partnership  
The Jo Cox Foundation  
The Linking Network  
Neighbourly Lab  
The Relationships Project  
/Together

