

BLOG

Making social housing social – posted by Steve Broome

Community capital

Over the last few years the Centre for Citizenship and Community has been working with social housing provider Orbit on how to build not just houses, but communities. I've been privileged to have worked with Orbit and Centre colleagues on this project, and ahead of a seminar on Active Citizenship, Belonging, and the Role of Housing Providers, this blog gives a summary of some aspects of the work.

The work has been rooted in the idea of 'community capital': the sum of assets, including relationships, in a community and the value that accrues. A well-functioning system of community capital realises four key mutually reinforcing 'dividends': wellbeing, citizenship, capacity, and economic. In one loop of this system, active citizenship deepens, community networks and capacity increase, which fosters greater wellbeing and economic returns. One key challenge for this system is that the expression and benefits of active citizenship are not evenly distributed within or across communities. Working with people to reflect on their social relationships and on their connections to a range of community assets, however, can yield significant gains in civic participation and individual and collective agency.

The Community Capital work also showed that when social connections translate to a sense of belonging to a community, this significantly increases subjective mental wellbeing. We have a psychological need to belong: relationships through which belonging is experienced not only protect and promote wellbeing and self-esteem, but shape people's perceptions of themselves. Belonging is connected to family ties, friendships, place, lifestyle, multiple aspects of identity, shared interests and concerns, and grows on a platform of shared experience.

So as active citizenship, networked in a community, boosts the capacity of a local system to identify and respond to problems and opportunities collectively, it also improves how people feel when this grows a sense of attachment to place. If people do not belong, they are not situated in community and there is less motivation to participate in shared civic life. A vicious circle thus emerges. Analytical sociologist Peter Hedstrom shows that with five percent of people acting as 'egoists' (pursuing private interests) in a network, the overall level of cooperation in the network falls by 40%. With 10%, the rate falls by 60%. As free riders rely on others to produce public goods, so the sense of conditional altruism and solidarity among people in a community is undermined, resulting in fewer people contributing to the production of those goods. As per the Community Capital model, active citizenship should be understood as the outcomes of individual actions taking place in social networks.

Active citizenship

So what is active citizenship? And what dimensions of active citizenship resonate with the remit and interests of a social housing provider? This is a contested space and I won't attempt to summarise the overlapping conceptions of citizenship here, but in our work with Orbit, we considered multiple dimensions of 'active citizenship', which included reflecting on the body of work on Connected Communities undertaken by the Centre, and on wider public policy. The work also reflects the lived experience and passions of housing officers and residents as described to us in conversations, workshops and surveys. (It is also pragmatic: there are only so many dimensions we can include if the approach is to be practicable.)

Last summer the Government published its Green Paper, A New Deal for Social Housing. The different aspects of the Green Paper might be described as speaking to two conceptions of social housing tenant: the 'tenant-consumer', and the 'tenant-citizen'. The tenant-consumer is concerned with rights, choice, regulation, and on getting the best return from their residential investment. The tenant-citizen draws on Rousseau's notion of a citizen that acts in mind of the good of the community, and that considers themselves a member of a community of people who participate collaboratively to generate public goods. These conceptualisations are not inimical to each other – both are needed for people to be able to participate fully in the rights, roles and responsibilities of life. Our work, however, is focused on the latter and is offered as a counterbalance to the former which places people in 'the housing market' and invites us to think of people as consumers (or customers), players in this market who compete with others for homes and who prioritise private interests.

The foreword to the Green Paper describes a backdrop in which many of the people living in England's four million social homes feel ignored and stigmatised. Positioning social housing tenants wholly as consumers does not offer a sufficient platform to change this. The Paper also states the Government's desire to apply policies in the revised National Planning Policy Framework, aimed at creating safe, inclusive, well-connected and social environments, to social housing more effectively. While housing can be provided, communities and belonging need to be coproduced by people who are invested and empowered in their neighbourhoods.

Dimensions of active citizenship

As our account of active citizenship strongly reflects the valuing of tenants as citizens rather than consumers, we have not prioritised measures such as those based around rights (including voting). This is not to say such expressions of citizenship are not important, just that they are not the focus of this model of change, which is integrated with other parts of Orbit's social housing provision. Consequently, our framework for active citizenship is as follows:

1. Sharing information about what's going on in the local area

Information networks are key to a connected community, and turn the potential to participate and collaborate into a realisable opportunity. As psychologist David Good argues, the greater the amount of communication there is between actors in a network, the higher the likelihood of there being a mutually beneficial outcome.

2. Working with others to change things in the local community

A direct expression of active citizenship that reflects the notion of community, as put forward by William Galston (among others), as representing a cooperative endeavour in pursuit of shared purposes.[1] This links to our sense that belonging happens on a platform of shared experience.

3. Belonging to or volunteering with local groups

This directly addresses a sense of belonging and includes volunteering, identified as both key to and a strength of UK citizenship by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Engagement. However, group membership is also important because networks grow exponentially: by connecting to a group, we connect to the individuals within it and through them to all the other groups each member belongs to. This is known as Reed's Law: every time we add a person to our network, we connect to all the different 'packs' they are a part of, and these one-to-many connections also foster thicker information sharing networks. Access to a diversity of resources is greater when the group membership is diverse.

4. Socialising with other local people

On first inspection this perhaps seems an odd measure to include in a framework of active citizenship. What place does having fun and reflecting personal interests have in civic participation? As political scientist Richard Dagger argues:

"Any kind of association that brings people together and facilitates communication among them will encourage conditional altruism...As a network of associations develops that draws in more and more people, the sense of solidarity spreads and grows stronger...Participation in private associations thus generates reciprocity that spills over into the political arena."[2]

This point also relates to belonging to 'private' groups. It also reflects a common complaint we have about the process and purpose of community development: it can be dull, bureaucratic and reflective of institutional agendas rather than the needs and interests of local people. Encouraging local social participation helps to meet people where they are, psychosocially, and is a response to concerns about loneliness and isolation. It also perhaps provides a mechanism for thickening networks and developing skills that transfer to deeper forms of active citizenship.

5. Giving practical support to others

Our original research found that those people who could access practical support when they needed it had significantly higher subjective mental wellbeing than those who couldn't. From an active citizenship perspective, providing practical support to others reflects a purposeful, largely inclusive expression of informal care and concern for the day to day lives of fellow citizens. Such exchanges might be seen as building blocks of networks and skills that support deeper forms of active citizenship concern wider community issues. They might include such things as giving practical help with the maintenance of house, home, and communal spaces (all of which reflect the interests of social housing providers), but might also include things like 'trusted neighbour parcel collection schemes' on individual streets in which a (perhaps isolated) person who is often home can take responsibility for parcel collection across a number of households.

6. Being able to access support and services to meet your own needs

There is a maxim, co-opted from the airline industry, which is often heard in the helping professions: put your own oxygen mask on first. Being an active citizen to one's full potential and desire means being able to attend to your own needs and self-care too (and long before an equivalent emergency of cabin pressure failure). This dimension of active citizenship acknowledges and includes the support people need in their communities, rather than imply a requirement for self-sufficiency. People can only support other people if there are people who are willing to be supported – it's ok to ask for help. A common finding across our Connected Communities work is that people are much more likely to say they give support (of different kinds) to others than to say they ask for or receive it themselves. While some of us may find it difficult to acknowledge our own needs and ask for help, active citizenship has to be reciprocal if it is to grow. This also speaks to the idea of active citizens as conditional altruists.

But understanding individual expressions of active citizenship on a general basis is not enough if we are to understand how to grow the network capacity that is key to our model of change. So we decided to ask people about the different types of active citizenship in ways that borrow from a 'resource-generator' method – asking about connection to a list of resources across each domain of active citizenship. These resources types included family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, local community organisations and groups, public services, local business, and online and local media resources. In this way we could understand what type of connections support what kinds of active citizenship (and what type of connections are absent), and relates to how social capital is understood as being productive.

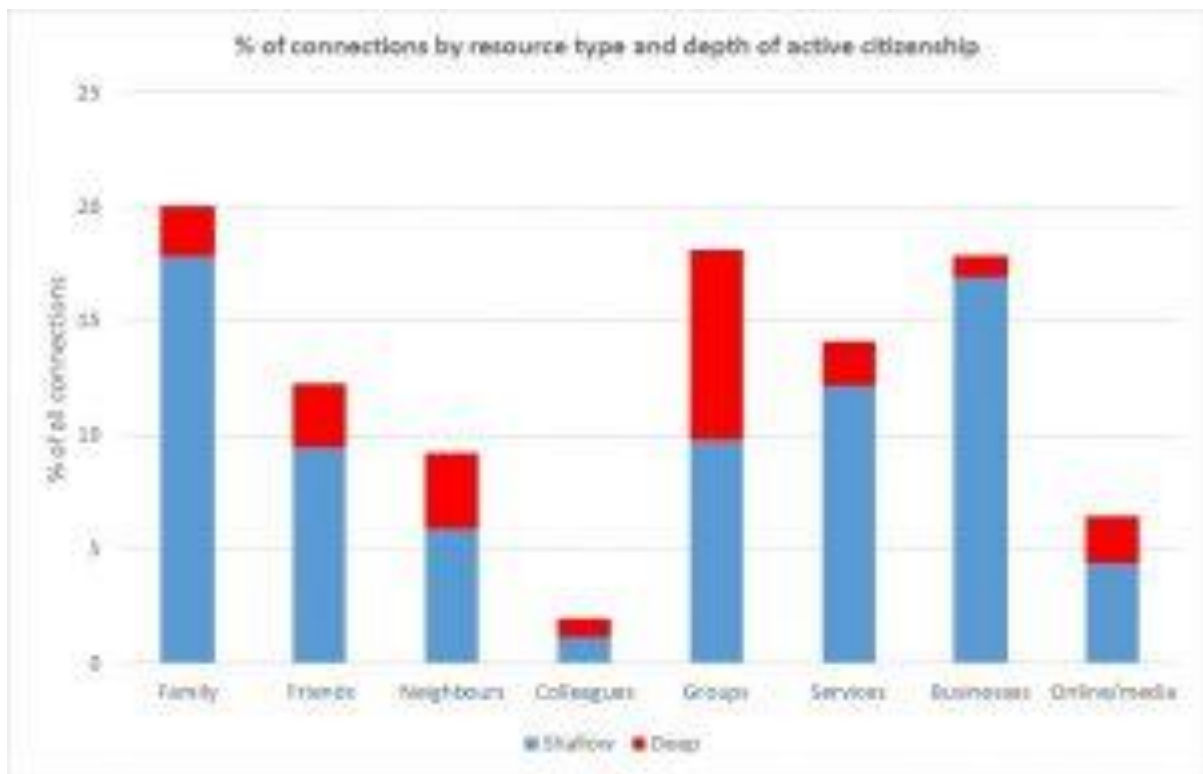
Active citizenship in neighbourhoods

To date, some 1,700 people across eight different neighbourhoods in which Orbit has housing stock have been surveyed, incorporating the framework described above. Here are some of the key findings:

- Around a third of people (Orbit tenants as well as other residents) are not active in any of the domains of citizenship described above: they do not socialise with other

local people, have connections through which they can get their own support needs met, give others practical support, share information about what's going on locally, belong to or volunteer with local groups, or work with others to change things locally. Further, over 20% are only active in one of these domains.

- There seems to be two tiers of active citizenship: one that is relatively shallow and more common, and one that is deeper and less common. The former includes getting your own support needs met (51% of people reported these connections), socialising with other local people (47%), and giving practical support to other local people (35%). Seemingly deeper forms of active citizenship include sharing information about what's going on locally (17%), belonging to or volunteering with local groups (14%), and working with others to change things locally (12%).
- Around a third of people rarely or never feel part of something they would call a community.
- All expressions of active citizenship are strongly positively correlated with a sense of community belonging. Deeper forms of active citizenship are positively correlated with a stronger sense of community belonging.
- Hundreds of different resources across the neighbourhoods were identified, but a quarter were only mentioned once, and two thirds were mentioned five times or fewer. Resource networks that support active citizenship are generally thin (people do not have many different types of resources through which to be active citizens), and are fragmented (people do not have many resources in common).
- Family and friends account for a third of all connections. While family and friends are important to most of us, it is interesting to see their dominance in active citizenship networks. Dagger suggests that as loneliness permeates society, as neighbourhood traditions erode or are absent, people can lose touch with and interest in neighbourhood affairs. This produces a form of what might be described as Tocqueville's individualism as people retreat into a small circle of family and friends. This points to the need to develop opportunities to engage around these social groups in ways that broaden social networks (for example through family-based activities, and initiatives that encourage people to bring friends along).
- There are sharp variations in how different types of connections support different kinds of active citizenship. While local groups and organisations account for 18% of all types of connections, they account for 36% of all connections that promote deeper forms of active citizenship (46% of connections to groups promote deep active citizenship). Strategies to promote deeper forms of active citizenship should therefore emphasise group/organisation membership (which also promotes geometric growth of neighbourhood networks and greater access to a diversity of resources). Similarly, over a third (35%) of connections to neighbours promote deeper forms of active citizenship – strategies to promote deeper forms of active citizenship should also include methods to increase neighbourliness.



- A significant minority of active citizenship connections (18%) are through local businesses, particularly local retail outlets, supermarkets, cafes and restaurants. This points to potentially new strategies for social housing providers: how might social housing providers work with local businesses to stimulate social interaction and active citizenship? This finding, however, sits in the context of declining high streets. English and Welsh town centres have lost 8% of their shops over the last five years, equating to an average of some 40 closures per town centre. Within this picture, aspects of the high street offer that have experienced growth in recent years have centred on ‘the experience economy’ – pubs, bars, tattoo parlours, health and beauty services, and cafés, for example, have all seen an upturn, but there are significant variations between and within towns and cities, and in ways in which changes on the high street attract different parts of the local population.
- While the above points describe overall patterns, there is a high degree of variation between the different neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods we explored are based across the Midlands, South East, and London suburbs, and have different civic traditions, norms and memories, and a wide variety in depth and breadth of social assets. Consequently, different age groups, genders and ethnicities have different experiences of active citizenship across the neighbourhoods. There is a need for a realist, local asset-based community development approach.
- However, one fairly common finding was that people who have lived in their neighbourhood for longer are more likely to be active citizens, particularly in terms of giving practical support, socialising, and belonging to groups/volunteering locally. This points to the need to develop strategies to welcome and engage new residents and promote a culture of active citizenship, and for social housing providers to enable long-term neighbourhood residencies where people desire this. Areas with more transient populations are more likely to experience loneliness and can tend to

have a lower stock of active citizens. Areas with stable populations develop warm ties that promote conditional altruism and which, as Elinor Ostrom noted, allow people to share a past and expect a shared future – it becomes important for them to maintain their reputations in the community and generate a sense of fairness that maintains active citizenship.[3]

Some reflections

The findings illustrate that active citizenship networks can be thin and fragmented, meaning that the social production of public goods falls disproportionately to a small segment of a local population, which in turn creates disincentives, free rider problems, and social exclusion.

But why should this be the concern of social housing providers? In addition to the points made above, our theory of change showed that developing active citizenship networks develops capacity in a local system to work towards common goals and on common problems, and also showed that as people become more invested in their communities (they feel a greater sense of belonging), social housing providers may experience fewer vacancies, lower tenancy turnover rates, and increased tenant satisfaction. If active citizenship networks are grown through community engagement and coproduction methods (such as those we employ at the Centre for Citizenship and Community), then greater resident empowerment is facilitated, and local services, choice and control improve: all key themes of the social housing green paper. Further, a study by the University of Westminster showed a strong correlation between involving residents in this way and delivering value for money for housing providers.

This way of working speaks to a relational approach to services. Such an approach is captured by The Relationships Project, which argues that “relational poverty” has become widespread and acute, principally through technology, ideology, and current managerial models. The Project asks what ‘our place’ would be like if relationships were central, if they were the organising principle across the multiple domains of local life. From this perspective, services, including housing provision, should focus on and demonstrate how they provide and develop the relationships that people need. This view is supported by Shared Lives Plus, which argues that *the* key test of services should be whether they aim to help people make and deepen connections with friends, family, neighbours, and whether they avoid weakening those connections.

A relational approach has to be a conscious, explicit choice and practised to become habituated and enculturated. In trying to tackle the challenges and complexities of community-building, developing relational approaches can be deemed too ordinary to focus on and is assumed to exist as foundational in services. Our experience is that it often does not exist to any great degree and that it requires an explicit, strategic, determined attention – and an ability to integrate this with processes that protect fairness, universalism, and rights. In its work on kindness, the Carnegie UK Trust describes this as a tension between a ‘rational lexicon’ (of metrics, value, growth, resources, and regulation) and a relational lexicon (of kindness, loneliness,

love, identity, and belonging). Both are important, but neither are adequate on their own.

Fostering active citizenship in a relational way reflects our and Orbit's desire to help people to develop their capabilities and enrich their lives more broadly. As John Stuart Mill argued,[4] active citizenship develops a person's faculties through engagement in public life – if people withdraw into private spheres they miss this developmental opportunity. The Select Committee on Citizenship and Engagement noted that active citizenship is associated with better employment prospects, educational attainment and health outcomes.

The job now is to work with local residents to translate our model and findings into practicable actions in each neighbourhood. Developing these networks of active citizenship takes time, resource and commitment, but the individual and collective rewards are, from our perspective, worthwhile and should be at the heart of social housing – the clue is in the name.

[1] Galston, W. (2005) *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[2] Dagger, R. (1997) *Civic Virtues – Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press

[3] Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons – The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[4] Mill, J. S. (2007) *Considerations on Representative Government*. Charelston: BiblioBazaar