Repairing our Social Fabric

Towards a new understanding of community strength

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About Onward

Onward is a campaigning thinktank whose mission is to develop new ideas for the next generation of centre right thinkers and leaders. We exist to make Britain fairer, more prosperous and more united, by generating a new wave of modernising ideas and a fresh kind of politics that reaches out to new groups of people.

We believe in a mainstream conservatism – one that recognises the value of markets and supports the good that government can do, is unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, and assiduous in supporting the hardworking, aspirational and those left behind. Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; and for all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster. We will achieve this by developing practical policies that work. Our team has worked both at a high level in government and for successful thinktanks. We know how to produce big ideas that resonate with policymakers, the media and the public.

We will engage ordinary people across the country and work with them to make our ideas a reality.

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Thanks

Onward is a small non-profit that relies on the generosity of our donors and patrons to do our work. We are particularly grateful to our partners for the Repairing our Social Fabric programme - the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Power to Change and Shelter UK - and our patron Richard Oldfield, who have collectively made this landmark two-year project possible.

We would like to thank the many people who contributed to this introductory paper, especially Jessica Hopwood and Francesca Fraser at Onward and the members of the Steering Group set out later in these pages. We are delighted to have been able to bring together such a terrific group of people to guide our work.

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Introduction

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The changing nature of local communities increasingly animates national politics. After years of political neglect, there are now widespread concerns across the Western world that public spaces are dying, civic institutions are decaying, and social relationships – the family, the workplace, the neighbourhood – are fragmenting. Many people no longer put down roots in the same way as they did previously: homeownership is at historic lows, fewer people settle in a single area, and levels of cultural and civic participation are in decline. The fraying of our social fabric is now known to hold back health, incomes and productivity, as well as economic growth.

There is a growing consensus that community matters in a deeper sense too. Politicians of all parties now agree that the places we live and the people that live among us give meaning and purpose to our lives.[1] That the loyalties we have to our neighbourhood and place, the mutual obligations we make to families, friends and colleagues, and the trust and values we share, are things to be strengthened, not left to atrophy as the world becomes faster, freer and more fragmented.

This "politics of belonging" has been made urgent by fallout at the ballot box. In places as disparate as rust-belt America, provincial Europe and the former factory towns of Northern England, people have delivered sharp rebukes to the political establishment. One feature these places are perceived to share is a declining stock of social capital – a sense of their lived environment having fallen into disrepair – as globalisation, technological change, urban agglomeration and public spending reductions have left their mark.

Yet community and belonging are contested concepts and there is little agreement on which elements of them matter, much less how to revive community in the places and among the people where it is in decline. This is partly because community is both imagined – a complex and interrelated web of feelings, relationships and personal commitments – and real – the places, institutions and activities that substantiate our sense of belonging. Community has proved hard to measure: the threads of our social fabric stretch from bingo halls, mum and baby groups and working men's clubs to cricket pitches, school governing bodies and the family dinner table. We have no reliable or respected index of belonging.

We believe we need to go back to communities to understand how they are changing, which features are especially valued or important, and where policy action or political leadership can strengthen community. In doing so, we must find ways to capture a richer social tapestry than limited measures of social capital, to fully explore how community has evolved over time and how it differs by geography.

This is the purpose of Onward's *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme. In a landmark cross-party study, we will over the next two years build a comprehensive understanding of the state of community in Britain, our recent past and how it exists today. We will consider not just the strength of civic society and local networks, but a broader set of indicators including local infrastructure and economic assets, cultural norms and behaviours, and relational institutions.

Unlike other studies, we not only plan to diagnose problems but provide options for reform and remedial action – to give national policymakers and local places a series of practical, popular and evidence-based steps to reimagine our Social Fabric for a new age. We expect many of these solutions to come directly from communities themselves, drawn from in-depth qualitative work in all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Crucially, this will not be a nostalgic exercise in bringing back aspects of the past people feel they have lost. As our *Politics of Belonging* research demonstrated, while people in Britain believe the country isn't working for them and have an appetite for the change, they don't believe that there was some golden period of our past when everything was better. People are looking forward, wanting a new policy agenda that prioritises community, place and belonging better than the politics of the past.

Much of our proposals will focus on revitalising local communities, and so our goal is to develop a serious set of reforms – to local government, local institutions, and community behaviours – that reinforce social connectedness and shared experiences, with detailed funding options and a broad range of political support to make them a reality. Our recommendations will therefore not only be for policymakers in Whitehall devolved nations, mayors, councillors, civic leaders, local businesses and people themselves.

This report introduces the programme, the approach that we are taking, and some of the key questions we think need asking and which we intend to answer. We are indebted to our programme partners – the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Power to Change and Shelter – and our cross party steering group for their support.

The state of community in Britain today

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The term community means different things to different people, but almost everyone believes it is in decline. In political debates, policymakers increasingly worry about the material and economic decline of community: the state of high streets, town centres, or public spaces. In the academic literature, much attention has been paid to changing norms, values and behaviours – the decline in "social capital" popularised by Robert Putnam in the United States and the growth of loneliness and social isolation.[2] Others lament the cultural ebb of community: the fragmentation of families, neighbourhoods or the nation.

Growing attention is also paid to the impact of digital technologies, which confer hyperconnectivity in one sense but which leave many concerned about their impact on physical relationships and the attention of young people in particular. The same is true of modern labour mobility, which promises prosperity for individuals moving to cities but can deprive some places, notably small towns, of their most prodigious talent – forcing a trade off between opportunity and local place.

Underpinning all of these concerns is the growing evidence base that stronger communities support a variety of valuable social and economic outcomes. In recent decades, studies have associated strong social trust and relationships with better public health outcomes and lower mortality,[3] more dynamic economic activity[4] and higher value creation by firms,[5] greater self-reported happiness,[6] lower rates of homicide and suicide,[7] reduced rates of criminality and rise in opportunity and social mobility.[8]

However defined and however valuable, we know surprisingly little about how our collective Social Fabric is changing and there is conflicting evidence about the causes and effects of change in specific places or among particular groups.

Headline statistics

At first glance, there appear to be reasons to be optimistic about the state of community. Survey evidence suggests that life satisfaction and local belonging is rising and that people generally believe that their neighbourhoods are cohesive and community-orientated.

- 62% of people feel that they very strongly or fairly strongly belong to their local neighbourhood, a figure that has risen by 4 percentage points, from 58%, since 2013–14. Over 75s (77%) are around 25 percentage points more likely to say they belong than 16–24 (51%) and 25–34 (53%) year olds, while the least deprived fifth of areas (67%) are around 12 percentage points more likely to say they belong than the most deprived quintile (55%).[9]

- The proportion of people who see their neighbourhood as a place where people from different backgrounds get along well together has remained stable in recent years, falling by 1 percentage point from 82% of people in 2013–14 to 81% of people in 2018–19. In 2018–19, 58% of people said that people in their neighbourhood would pull together to improve their neighbourhood, broadly similar to the share in 2013–14 (60%).[10]

- Overall personal wellbeing is improving. In 2011–12, the first measurement of wellbeing estimated that the average UK rating of life satisfaction was 7.42, the average happiness rating was 7.29 and the average feeling

that things done in life are worthwhile was 7.67 – all measured on a 0–10 scale. In the last seven years, life satisfaction has risen by 3.9% to 7.71, happiness has risen by 3.7% to 7.56, and worthwhile ratings have risen by 2.9% to 7.89 respectively. Average anxiety levels have fallen over the same period.[11]

Yet other evidence should give us pause. Previous Onward polling has found that 71% of people believe that community has declined in their lifetime.[12] The same share, 71%, of people think that more people living in cities has made society worse and three in five people (58%) think we have a special duty to protect local institutions such as pubs and post offices from closure.[13]

Onward's data is supplemented by more granular government data that expose declining levels of social trust, civic participation and community activities, and rising levels of isolation, despite the broadly positive headline statistics above. This chapter sets out a number of indicators of community and Social Fabric and considers how they have changed in recent years. The *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme will explore these and other factors in greater depth over the next two years, to inform a more granular understanding of how policy can strengthen community in Britain today.

Social trust and relationships

Social trust is the cornerstone of community. Social connections and activities mediate how we feel about the moral orientation and trustworthiness of our fellow citizens – with levels of trust correlated with how frequently one undertakes leisure, sports and cultural activities with other people. The work of Robert Putnam (1993) and others has shown how high levels of social trust can promote better democratic governance, more efficient markets and lower levels of corruption.

In the UK, the British Social Attitudes Survey has shown that social trust is actually rising: the share of people believing that people can be trusted has risen from 47% in 1998 to 54% in 2017.[14] However this is socially patterned by class and demographic factors and it does not translate to a local context, where social trust appears to be in decline:

- In 2017, 64% of people with a degree or higher trusted their fellow citizens, compared to 42% of those with lower or no qualifications, up from 58% and 39% respectively in 1998. 63% of people in managerial or professional occupations trusted their fellow citizens compared to 41% in routine occupations; in 1998 these figures were 56% and 37% respectively.[15]

- In 2018–19, 40% of people reported that many of the people in their neighbourhood could be trusted. This has declined every year since the survey was first conducted, in 2012–13, when 50% trusted many of their neighbours. The number of people saying that none or a few of their neighbours can be trusted has increased from 15% in 2012–13 to 26% in 2018–19.

- This decline in trust has occurred across all generations, but there has been a particularly pronounced collapse in trust among 25–49 year olds. In 2012, 82% of this age group trusted their neighbours. In 2018, this had fallen by almost twenty percentage points to fewer than 64%. Those aged over-65 have seen a smaller decline in levels of trust in their neighbours, from 89% in 2012–13 to 78% in 2018–19.

- The proportion of people who say they borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours has gradually reduced over the last six years, from 42% in 2013–14 to 35% in 2018–19. The number of people who say they chat to their neighbours once a month has fallen marginally from 75% to 72% over the same period.

Figure 1: How trust in neighbourhood has changed in local communities

Many of the people in your neighbourhood can be trusted
Some can be trusted
A few can be trusted
None of the people in your neighbourhood can be trusted

Borrow things and exchange favours with their neighbours
Chat to neighbours at least once a month

Source: Community Life Survey.

Civic participation

One aspect of community often analysed by academics is civic participation, including volunteering and membership of local organisations.[16] The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) suggests that contemporary volunteering encompasses a range of activities, from philanthropy and crowdfunding (27%) to mentoring (16%), representing a group/club or organisation at a meeting (25%), or supporting an activity, cause or event (39%).[17] In a local setting, it might include supporting a local charity or a school governing body or a spontaneous contribution of time and effort to help neighbours or improve the local area.

Previous studies have found little evidence for the kind of decline in civic participation witnessed by Putnam in the US over the latter half of the twentieth century. In *Social Capital in Britain,* Peter Hall showed that while women's organisations and service organisations experienced declining membership between 1951 and 1991, other types of organisation such as environmental groups, youth groups, sports clubs and recreational associations experienced gains.[18]
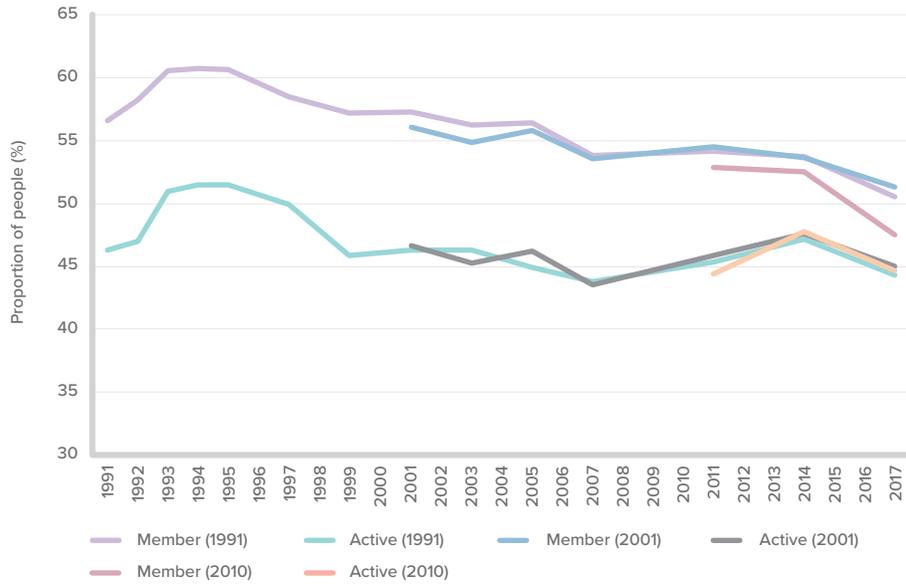
However more recent data raises questions about whether this is still true. ONS data from 1993 onwards shows that both local group membership and volunteering have been in broad decline in recent decades, suggesting fewer people are giving their time and resources to civic causes. While there has been some recent work to understand this, including where philanthropy is most in decline, we have limited understanding of what is driving it or whether new forms of participation are emerging.[19] There is clearly a need to consider whether old forms of membership are being replaced by new networks and organisations, which this study will explore in detail.

- Membership of local and community organisations has fallen by a sixth from a peak of 61% in 1993 to around 50% today. The greatest decline in membership occurred among 20–29 year-olds and 30–39 year-olds, decreasing by 17 and 18 percentage points respectively. In 1992, two-thirds of 30–39 year-olds (65%) were a member of a local organisation (second only to those in their 40s). By 2017, this group showed the second-lowest rate of membership, down to 46%.

- Active membership of local groups and organisations has also fallen. In 1995, 51% of people were active members of local groups and organisations, according to the Understanding Society survey. In 2017, that figure was 45%. As with group membership, active participation shows a similar age trend. 30–39 year-olds were the most likely to be engaged with local groups and organisations in the early 1990s, but this high level of participation declined steadily through the latter half of the decade and into the 21st Century – from a peak of 56% in 1993 to a low of 45% in 2001. A similar pattern holds for 20–29 year-olds, with active participation falling from 52% to 35% over the last 30 years. Conversely, those aged over 70 have steadily increased their participation rate from 42% in the early 1990s (the lowest of any age group) to 53% by 2017; people aged over 70 are now the age group which is most likely to regularly participate in local community activities.

- A similar picture is visible in volunteering trends. The share of people who have volunteered informally in the last year has fallen from just over 7 in 10 to just over 6 in 10 since 2012. In the same period, the number of people
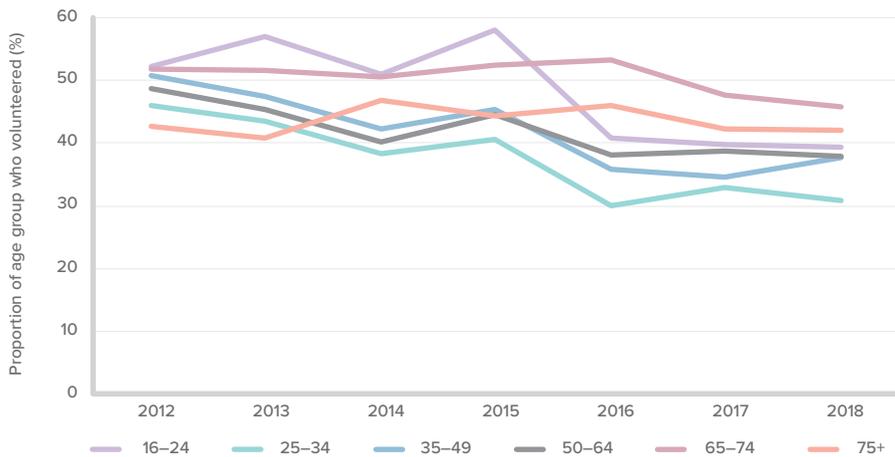
who undertook formal volunteering fell from 44% to 36%. The proportion of people who say they volunteered in the last month fell from 1 in 2, to just 38% since 2012–13. The largest falls are among the youngest cohorts, those aged between 16 and 34 years old.

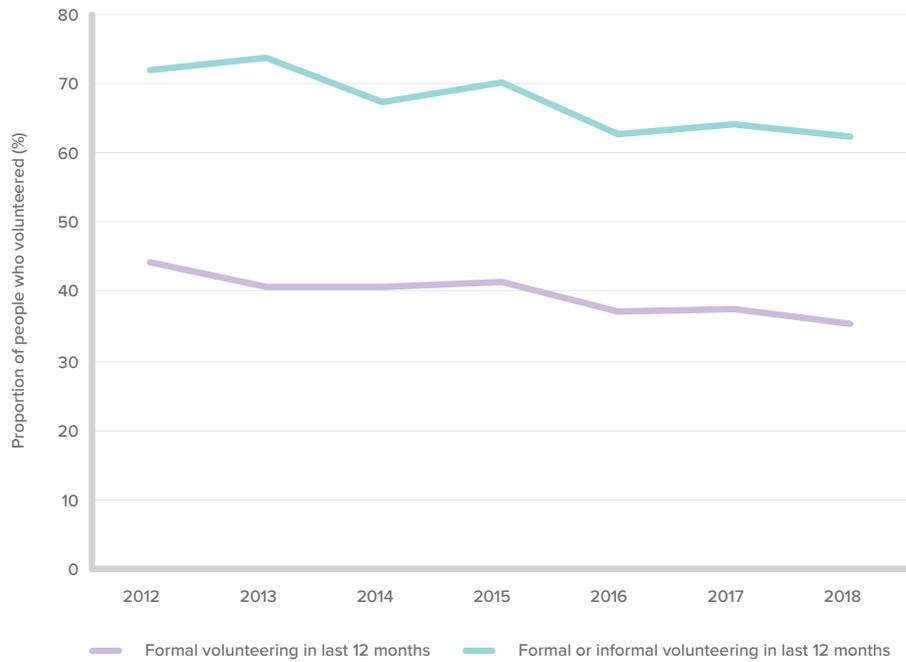**Figure 2: How levels of membership and volunteering have changed over time**

Membership and active participation in local community organisations (1991–2017)


- Member (1991)
- Active (1991)
- Member (2001)
- Active (2001)
- Member (2010)
- Active (2010)

Any formal or informal volunteering at least once a month

- 16–24
- 25–34
- 35–49
- 50–64
- 65–74
- 75+

Volunteered in the last year

Formal volunteering in last 12 months — Formal or informal volunteering in last 12 months

Volunteered in the last month

Formal volunteering at least once a month — Formal or informal volunteering in last month
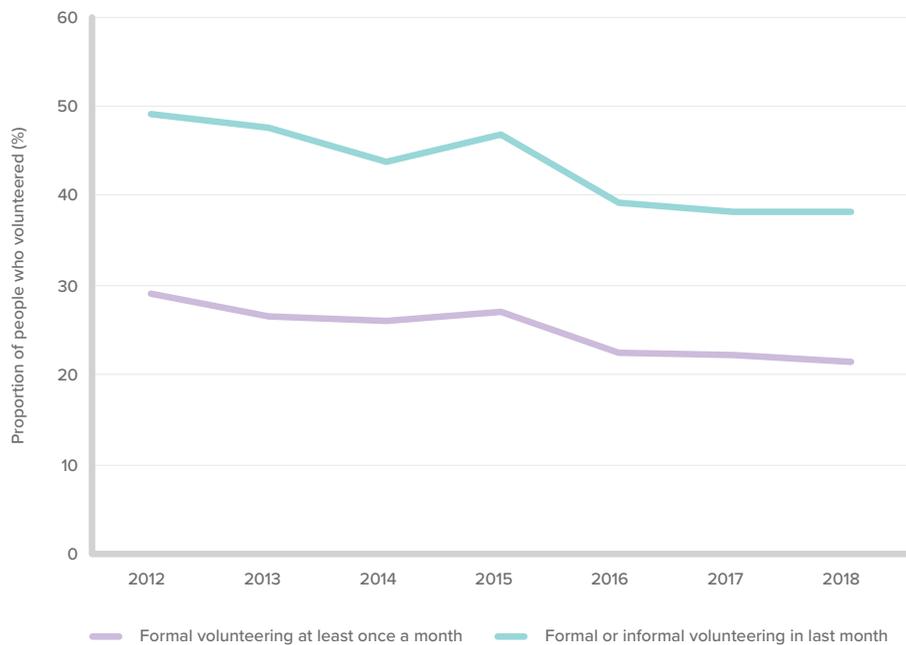
Source: Understanding Society[20] and Community Life Survey[21].

Satisfaction with one's local area

Social Fabric also manifests itself in a place. In our preliminary qualitative work, people repeatedly located community in the assets and arenas they frequented in their daily lives: their neighbourhood, the centre of town, local football stadiums, high streets or pubs.

Despite life satisfaction rising in recent years, satisfaction *with one's local area as a place to live* has been falling rapidly, with people feeling that their area is becoming worse to live in. This raises important questions about which places are most susceptible to falling levels of satisfaction, what characteristics are driving this decline, and what actions would reverse people's disenchantment with their place. We find:

- In 2008–09, 82% of people said that they were very or fairly satisfied with their local area as a place to live. This positive sentiment of community broadly continued, with an increase of 4% in satisfaction between 2008–09 and 2010–11. This corresponds to a fall in the number of people who felt that their area was getting worse from 27% to 18% over a similar period, from 2007–08 to 2010–11. The number of people who felt their area was getting better stayed relatively stable, falling slightly from 17% to 16%, over the same period.

- More recent data suggests this improvement has since been lost in the last five years. While data is not directly comparable to earlier periods due to methodological changes, the proportion of people who are very or fairly satisfied with their local area fell every year but one from 2013–14 to 2018–19, from 80% to 77%. Over the same period, the share of people who feel their area has gotten worse increased from one-in-five to one-in-four. In contrast, the share of people who feel their area has improved rose from 12% in 2012–13 to 14% in 2018–2019.

- Recent work by the UPP Foundation has shown that dissatisfaction is particularly related to certain types of place. 30% of people who live in cities say that their local area has improved (compared to 25% worse). However this figure decreases to 22% of those who live in large towns, and only 17% for those who live in small towns – suggesting that small towns are particularly affected by local dissatisfaction. In addition, 48% said the decline of the high street was one of the most important issues facing their local area.[22]

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who say they are satisfied or dissatisfied with their local area as a place to live
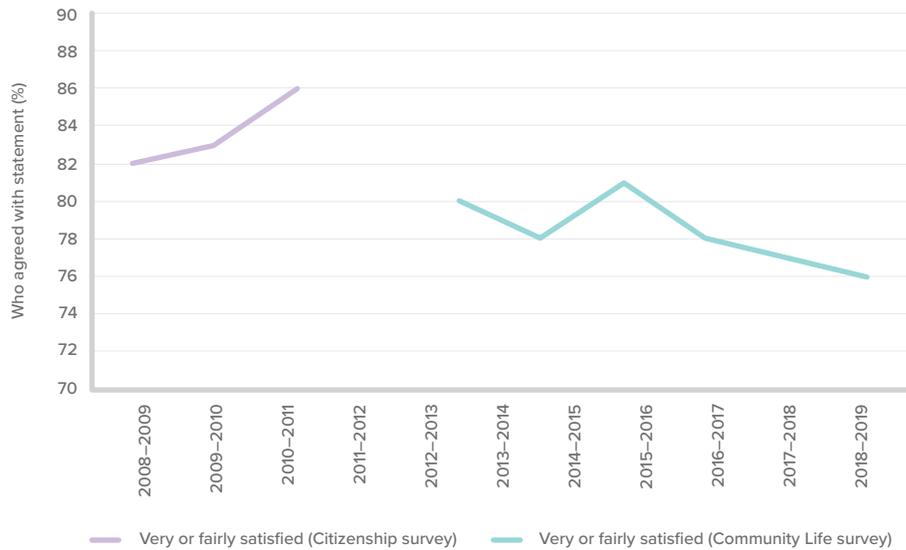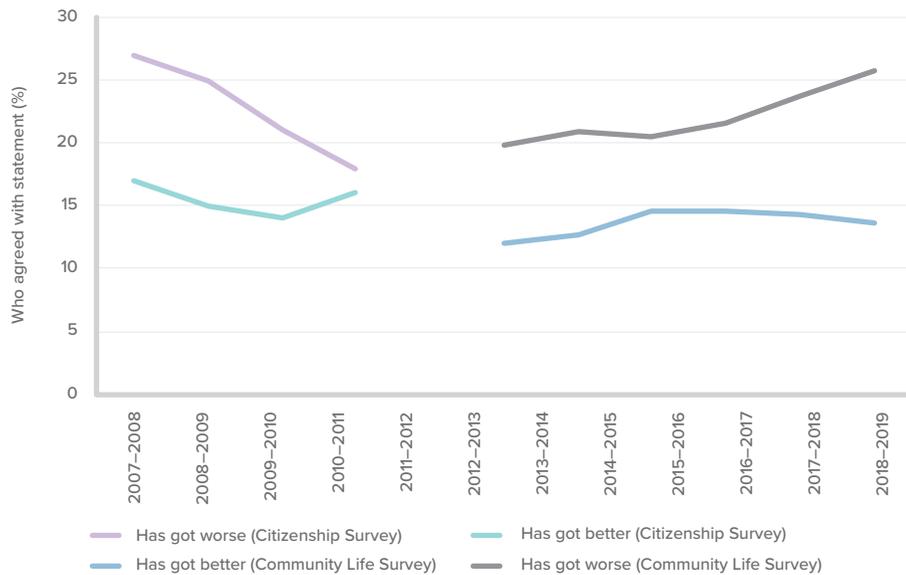

Very or fairly satisfied (Citizenship survey) — Very or fairly satisfied (Community Life survey)

Figure 4: Proportion of respondents who felt their area had become a better or worse place to live over the last two years

Has got worse (Citizenship Survey) — Has got better (Citizenship Survey)
Has got better (Community Life Survey) — Has got worse (Community Life Survey)

Source: Community Life Survey and Citizenship Survey.

Local assets

This may be in part related to the hubs, facilities and assets that comprise a local place and where people congregate, socialise and interact. These physical structures – for example, the coffee shop or library, – have historically been the areas where social capital has formed. There is a need to consider further how these assets, alongside different forms of housing and different forms of housing, levels of home ownership and transience affect community and belonging in different places. Recent evidence has shown that the number of traditional public assets such as post offices, public houses and bars (pubs) and libraries have all declined in number in recent years, with far-reaching consequences for local places:

- Over the last two decades, the number of pubs in the UK has fallen from 52,500 in 2001 to 38,850 in 2018, a 26% drop. The number of pubs fell most markedly during the financial crisis in 2008–09, during which the number of pubs fell by 6 percentage points, or 3,100 pubs, in a single year.

- A similar trend of decline is also true of libraries, which have seen the most drastic fall in numbers compared to the other two public assets. Since 2005, the number of libraries has decreased from 4,392 to 3,187 in 2018, a 27% drop. The decline in the number of libraries has primarily happened since public spending reductions began in 2011.

- The number of post offices in the UK has continuously declined every year since 1982. In 1982, the number of post offices totalled 22,405, but this has since decreased by nearly half (48%) to 11,547 in 2018.

- However, while the number of pubs and libraries in the UK has consistently declined since 2008, the number of *community*-run or -owned pubs and shops has increased year-on-year over the same period.[23] Since 1996, the number of community shops[24] trading in the UK has increased ten-fold – from 34 to 346. Not only does this contribute to the richness of the Social Fabric in a neighbourhood, community shops seem to fare much better than other small businesses, with a long term survival rate of 94%.[25]

Figure 5: Decrease in numbers of community assets – post offices, pubs and libraries – 1982–2018
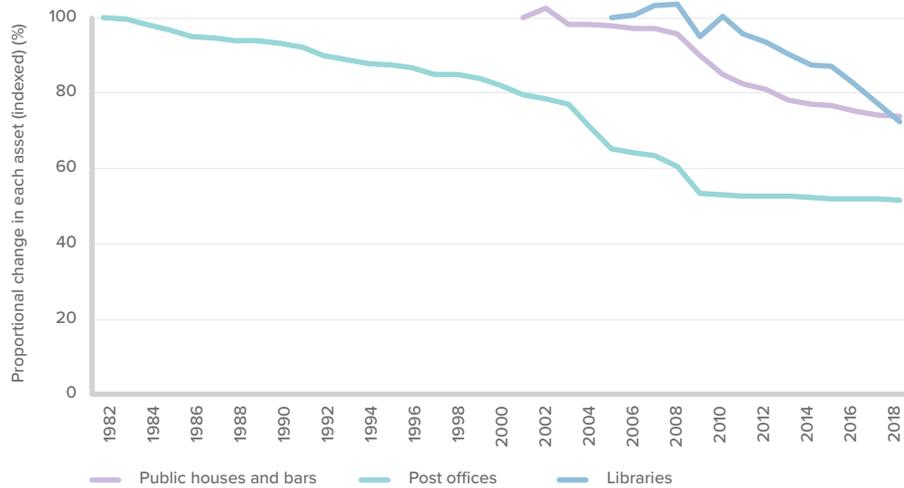

Legend: Public houses and bars — Post offices — Libraries

Figure 6: Net change in numbers of pubs and community pubs, 2007–2017

Legend: Community pubs — All pubs and bars

Sources: House of Commons Library; Community Pubs: Better form of Business, Plunkett Foundation (2018).

Fragmentation of family structures and working patterns

The structures of family are changing rapidly, but the relationships and meaning we draw from our "kin" form an intimate part of our identity. Family continues to be the most important institution and social network in many people's lives. In our early qualitative work for this project, respondents have spoken repeatedly of how growing distance and falling levels of available time affects their ability to engage in their local neighbourhood or place.

There is strong evidence that, in general, family ties protect individuals from myriad harms and support them to achieve health, wealth and happiness, but headline data suggests that modern life is fragmenting those relationships and changing the way people in communities spend their time. We do not have enough evidence to understand whether these changes are necessarily positive or negative, but it is clear that both the form and role of family is changing rapidly:

- Fewer people are living near their parents. Today, 26% of people live within 15 minutes of their father and 36% live within 15 minutes of their mother, both having declined by eight percentage points since 2002. This compares to 41% who live more than one hour from their father and 35% who live more than one hour from their mother, figures that have risen by 6% and 7%, respectively.[26]

- Childcare arrangements as a supporting feature of family structure has also evolved. The greatest change has been the proportion of people who say they only work when their children are at school, which has gradually increased since 1991 from 30% to 35% in 2008. People depending on their friends and neighbours also saw a marginal decrease from 3% to 1% over the same period.

- The growth of dual-working households has led to a substantial increase in the number of people using day nursery as a form of childcare (from 4% in 1991 to 11% in 2008) and a decline in the use of a spouse or partner to look after children (24% from 1991 to 15% in 2008). This was also reflected in the long-established use of friends or neighbours as a childcare arrangement.

Our early qualitative research has suggested that the workplace can offer an alternative form of community and belonging. This has deep roots in the labour and trade union movement but flexible working patterns may be making people more reliant on empathy from employment:

- While working hours in general have fallen over recent years, the number of additional hours completed as overtime has risen. In the twenty five years since 1992, people have spent an average of 8.8 hours a week at work in overtime. Self-reported overtime decreased through the late 1990s until the 2008 financial crisis, however the number of additional hours on top of normal working hours has increased markedly in the last ten years, from a low-point of 8.1 hours in 2008, to 8.9 hours a week in 2017.

- Time spent travelling to work has also increased. In 1992, people took on average 22 minutes to travel to their workplace, rising by more than a fifth to 27 minutes in 2017. The majority of this increase in travel time occurred between the period of 2010–2017, from 24 to 27 minutes.

Figure 7: Average commuting time
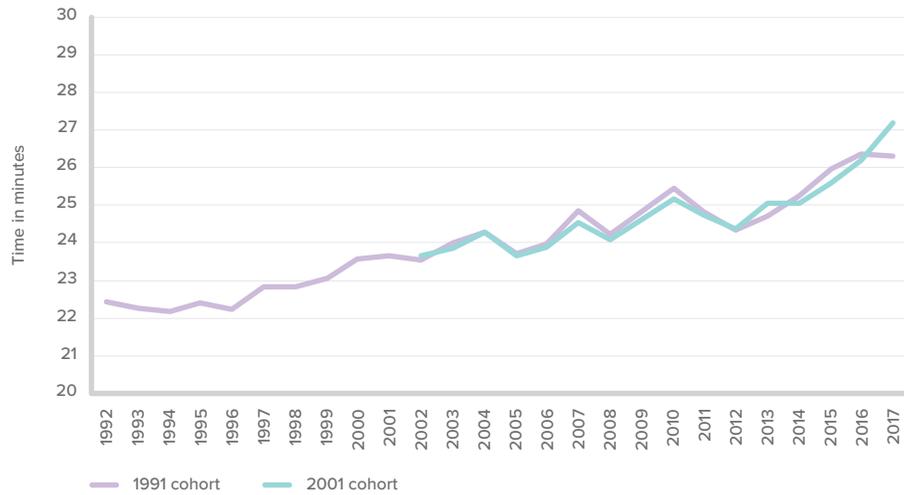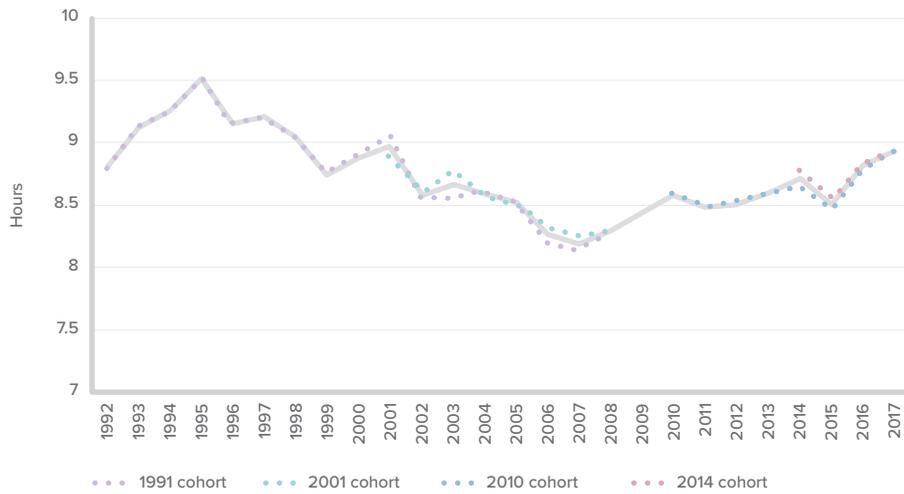

1991 cohort — *2001 cohort*

Figure 8: Average overtime hours in a normal week

1991 cohort — *2001 cohort* — *2010 cohort* — *2014 cohort*

Source: Understanding Society.

A new understanding of community strength

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This chapter looks at social capital in the wider conversation on community the wider conversation on community, and sets out our methodology and taxonomy for community strength for our study. It sets out our understanding our understanding of *Social Fabric*, and how our new understanding of community can be used to measure both existing and new forms of community strength today.

There is now a wealth of academic literature on "social capital" and associated concepts of community assets and local networks, but competing definitions of what they mean. Leading thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu define social capital in economic terms – "actual or potential resources, institutionalised relationships and linked to durable networks".[27] Other prominent commentators such as James Coleman concern social capital with educational achievement and social inequality, focusing on the "social structures and actions of actors",[28] linking social and human capital.

Robert Putnam, author of one of the best known analyses of community in *Bowling Alone*, brings these two definitions together by associating social capital as a private and public good for the people – church-going, civic participation, volunteering and social connectivity: the features of "social life that facilitate participants to act together to mutually acknowledge and pursue shared objectives".[29] To Putnam and Michael Woolcock,[30] this manifests in three forms of capital:

- **Bonding:** This is the form of social capital that exists *within* a group. It reinforces exclusive identities and groups.[31] It is good for "getting by". Examples include neighbours, family or friends or the relationship to someone with a similar background.

- **Bridging:** This is the form of social capital that encompasses people *across* diverse social cleavages that typically divides people.[32] It is good for "getting ahead". Examples include association between generations, income, sex or educational background, or relationships to people in different organisations.

- **Linking:** This is the subset of bridging capital associated with form of interaction *across and between* people and actors in formal or institutionalised power or authority gradients in society.[33] Examples include schools, political groups or legal institutions.

These and other academics have varying interpretations of what constitutes community, but all root it firmly in the interactions and institutions of people in a local place.

Social Fabric

Over the next two years, we plan to build upon traditional definitions of social capital to develop a broader concept of *Social Fabric,* taking into account not only the norms, behaviours, trust and reciprocity[34] across and between people, but also the economic, physical and civic assets within a place. In doing so we hope to capture not only the social conditions and environments experienced by individuals and the wider community, but also the institutions and networks that underpin them. We are concerned with both the quantum and quality of these aspects, recognising that some communities have social capital but that it can be weak, exclusive or inaccessible to certain groups.

This understanding of Social Fabric starts with the perspective of local people themselves and their conception of what a community should be. This has been informed by detailed qualitative work in communities and will continue to be tested and honed in participatory workshops over the two years of the programme. We want to ensure that we are measuring the aspects of community that people genuinely value, rather than merely what statistics show to have been lost. These workshops will take place in a number of locations around the UK, including Bolton, Glasgow, Bridgend, Tiverton, Dagenham and Enniskillen.

Our initial research leads us to believe that six aspects of Social Fabric are particularly important to ordinary people, and essential to understanding what is happening in local communities:

1. **Relationships.** The membership of formal groups in a community and their participation in activities with many people. We will consider the clusters of social but formally organised groups of people in the public sphere of a community. Examples include: volunteering, charitable giving, membership of local organisations like the Women's Institute, support service groups, such as debt advice, and participation at voluntary-run assets, like a community library.

2. **Physical infrastructure.** The physical resources and infrastructure that are present in communities which facilitate, structure and organise people within a community. As the name suggests, we will explore the visible buildings, transportation, spaces and local businesses found in the community that act as centres of daily life interactions and social connections between people. Examples include: libraries, green spaces, playgrounds, youth centres, broadband and telephony infrastructure, vehicle ownership and local transportation.

3. **Civic institutions.** The health of democracy and governance at both the local and national level in the community. We will look at the quality, trust and satisfaction of people with public institutions in the community in which they live. Examples include: locally provided services, local influence of local and national decision-making and contact with official representatives.

4. **Economic value.** The tangible assets which hold a monetary and/or economic value to an individual or family within a community. We will explore the impact of economically driven effects of belonging and interactions on both community and people within it. Examples include: housing, industry, occupation, type of employment, skills and training, income and other life expenditures.

5. **Cultural behaviours.** The personal well-being and cultural attitudes on everyday life, society and living structures of the people in a community. We will look at the influence of people's wider habits, behaviours and activities that are at play in a community, such as marriage and relationships, life satisfaction, household structure, crime, health, education, social trust, drugs, alcohol and smoking.

6. **Pride and belonging.** The identification with, and feeling of belonging to, a neighbourhood area, friends and family. This is different from other aspects as it will consider the feelings of individuals regarding their immediate local area, neighbourhood and neighbours, as well as the prevalence of social isolation, the diversity of the community, neighbourhood satisfaction, neighbourhood safety, trust between neighbours, and settledness.

This framework will help us explore how *"frayed"* or *"strong"* Social Fabric is across the country and how it is changing over time. Based on these elements, we hope to develop a landmark *Social Fabric Index* to measure the strength of community in Britain today, and how different communities fare against different elements.

We will also explore the relationship between different factors, as in the correlation matrix below. For example, the relationship between self-reported anxiety and the proportion of households who own their own home is statistically significant and strongly negative. The number of pubs per thousand residents is associated with greater life satisfaction. This list is necessarily limited, but gives an indication of the relative importance of different factors, which in turn may help to identify areas for policy action.

Table 1: Correlation matrix for ten Social Fabric Index indicators, at Local Authority level

	% NVQ4 or above	% NVQ1 or lower	% home ownership	Life satisfaction	Anxiety	% with no religion	Pubs per thousand population	Ethnic diversity	Local election turnout	Weekly gross pay
% NVQ4 or above	1									
% NVQ1 or lower	-0.85***	1								
% home ownership	-0.25***	0.13***	1							
Life satisfaction	0.10**	-0.07	0.53***	1						
Anxiety	0.18***	-0.17***	-0.37***	-0.51***	1					
% with no religion	0.07	0.09*	-0.10**	-0.10**	0.07	1				
Pubs per thousand population	0.11**	-0.17***	0.11**	0.34***	-0.22***	0.01	1			
Ethnic diversity	0.38***	-0.38***	-0.64***	-0.49***	0.36***	-0.15***	-0.40***	1		
Local election turnout	0.68***	-0.64***	0.46***	0.46***	-0.1	0.16***	0.37***	-0.25***	1	
Weekly gross pay	0.78***	-0.66***	-0.10*	0.09*	0.19***	-0.07	-0.14***	0.35***	0.44***	1

*Notes: * denotes significance at 10% level, ** denotes significance at 5% level, *** denotes significance at 1% level.*

Why policy matters

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There are many, including Onward, who have argued that politicians have been overly focused on individuals at the expense of communities in recent decades. Yet the strength of the Social Fabric and the decline of community has exercised politicians of all parties and has in fact been the first word of many new Prime Minister's programmes for government.

- In 1996, a year before he entered Downing Street, Tony Blair spoke of what he termed the "stakeholder economy", saying "we need a country in which we acknowledge an obligation collectively to ensure each citizen gets a stake in it".[35] It was an attempt to turn the nebulous concept of community into an economic and political programme.

- A decade later, in 2006, the new Conservative leader David Cameron addressed his first Party Conference with these words: "Building a strong society is not just a task for politicians. We are all in this together. We all have a responsibility to each other... For years, we Conservatives talked about rolling back the state. But that is not an end in itself. Our fundamental aim is to roll forward the frontiers of society."[36]

- In one of her first speeches as Prime Minister, Theresa May called for a shared society "that doesn't just value our individual rights but focuses rather more on the responsibilities we have to one another... that respects the bonds that we share as a union of people and nations. The bonds of family, community, citizenship and strong institutions... a society that recognises the obligations we have as citizens – obligations that make our society work."[37]

- The current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, used his first Downing Street address to promise to answer "at last the plea of the forgotten people and the left behind towns by physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together".[38]

However in the past these good intentions and the policies they led to have not affected the change that those that spoke them sought. As the last chapter set out, while people are more satisfied generally, they feel their place is in decline, they trust their neighbours less, and they contribute less to society in terms of time, membership and volunteering.

While everyone believes that community is important, civil servants and policymakers have not yet identified the policies and levers that can work to improve it. We have a limited evidence base about what works, much less a framework for intervention that could deliver material change to people's lives. That is the purpose of this programme: not just to measure the ways and places in which community is changing, but to develop solutions to strengthen our Social Fabric where needed.

In doing so, we are particularly interested in a number of questions:

- What can government do to empower local communities and organisations to take ownership and control of their own place and Social Fabric themselves, through funding, devolution, new forms of ownership and greater voice?

- How can we take better account of place in policymaking, to respond to the material concerns of people about the deterioration of their lived environment, with the related impact on trust, networks and community life?

- How can we diffuse positive habits and behaviours which are proven to drive better social and economic outcomes through communities and places where they are lacking, to avoid the acceleration of divisions between rich and poor, educated and less educated, and global cities and provincial towns?

- How can we foster a greater sense of reciprocity and connection between people of different backgrounds and circumstances at local level, strengthening a sense of community and belonging and developing greater civic resilience in places that need it most?

- What economic or institutional interventions should be prioritised to strengthen community in different places, recognising the potential links between social strength and economic prosperity and opportunity?

Over the next two years, we will explore these questions and more, speaking to people in towns, villages and cities around the United Kingdom as we do. If you would like to contribute data, academic expertise, or examples of community renewal that you think would be valuable for us to consider, please get in touch.

Our steering group

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We are delighted to have the support of an expert cross-party steering group to help guide the research programme over the next two years.

Lord James O' Shaughnessy
Chairman and Member
of the House of Lords

Jon Cruddas MP
Labour Member of Parliament
for Dagenham and Rainham

Eilidh Whiteford
Former SNP MP for Banff
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Danny Kruger MP
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Rob Walsh
Chief Executive of North
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Richard Clark
Former Executive Partner
of Slaughter and May

Will Tanner
Director of Onward

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Programme Manager

Endnotes

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2   Putnam, R (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and Revival of American Community*. United States: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

3   For example, the Harvard University Grant and Gluek Studies have shown that the strongest indicator for health outcomes aged 80 is the strength of social relationships aged 50.

4   For example, Knack and Keefer (1997) and Zak and Knack (2001) have shown for a cross-section of countries that countries with higher levels of measured trust are richer. www.merit.unu.edu/training/theses/akcomak_semih.pdf

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