

Promoting wellbeing and neighbourliness

by Geoff Mulgan, director, and Nicola Bacon, local projects director, The Young Foundation



You don't need to look far to see that the neighbourhoods and local communities we live

in are changing rapidly. Many places that 20 years ago were relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity and social class are now much more mixed, as new middle-class residents move into formerly deprived areas and international migration brings new communities to areas of the country that were, until recently, white British mono-cultures.

To respond to these changes policy makers need new lenses. They need to make sense of the complex interactions of race and class that have left some minorities well ahead of the white majority in terms of educational performance and earnings. They need to navigate the balance between supporting distinct cultures and trying to bridge them. But they also need to make use of new tools for bringing communities together, helping neighbours to get to know each other and diverse communities to solve their problems.

We argue for using two key frames to make sense of where to go next: one is to recognise the diversity there is in diversity itself. The second is to focus on wellbeing, which brings a healthy rigour to the often rather abstract discussions about local area agreements (LAAs) and multi area agreements (MAAs), social capital and multiculturalism.

The diversity of diversity

Let's start with changing demographic realities. Globalisation is often an abstract concept, but at

the very local level it becomes a reality whether in parts of London or Birmingham that are "hyper diverse", affluent rural areas with little history of migration from outside the UK or socially homogeneous former industrial areas now seeing the arrival of people from different countries and cultures in unexpected numbers. The extent of change and challenge to existing communities and residents isn't a simple result of the number of newcomers – often the shock of the new is most extreme for the places that have not developed a way of dealing with difference.

The UK's ethnic minority population is no longer characterised by a homogenous "black" population. In recent years, the number of different nationalities has increased enormously, leaving the figures from the 2001 out of date. More recent statistics give us a partial snapshot – the ONS this year announced that 42% of London's workforce are foreign born; in Sheffield in 2005 nearly 30% of births were to people from black and minority ethnic groups – compare this to census data for Sheffield's black and minority ethnic population recorded as slightly over 10% in 2001. East London and City Heath Authority estimates that the population of their area is 30,000 to 40,000 more than official census figures.

A recent study by the University of Manchester found that British society is becoming more mixed, not more segregated as is often believed. The number of inter-ethnic couples and children of mixed ethnic parentage have risen 20% in 10 years, and there are four times more children than adults of mixed ethnicity. However, affluence and disadvantage still have critical effects on where people choose to live: the overall

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trend is that, regardless of ethnicity, as people become more successful they move to more prosperous neighbourhoods away from inner-city deprivation. And alongside the overall trend of dispersal, both newly-arrived migrants and more long-standing deprived communities continue to cluster in areas where poverty and disadvantage dominate. The net result of these changes is that councils can no longer think of a simple division between minorities and the majority: instead they have no choice but to deal with a quite messy reality of relative successes and failures, and differentiated patterns of assimilation, integration and strongly asserted difference.

New ways of thinking about wants and needs

However, we also have the chance to bring some new approaches to bear on very diverse policies, within the umbrella of 'place shaping'. Conventional metrics of poverty and disadvantage give us a familiar picture of social need. Overlaying this with information about psychological wellbeing, how people feel about their lives and how able they are to deal with difficulties, can give us a very different way of understanding what different communities and groups want and need.

The Young Foundation is carrying out a major project on wellbeing, working with Manchester City Council, South Tyneside Council and Hertfordshire County Council, as well as the IDeA and Professor Richard Layard at the London School of Economics. The overall aim of this work is to accelerate local authority interest in wellbeing – building on the work we are carrying out in the three areas. Our three local government partners serve very different populations with varying social needs. Their motivations for exploring this agenda are also diverse: for Hertfordshire the driver is a concern about those young people left out of the county's overall prosperity, particularly in towns like Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead, for Manchester the aim is to increase aspiration and wellbeing and find a new way of unlocking potential in the city's disadvantaged areas. For South Tyneside it is part of an overall strategy to revitalise the area and find new ways to address persistent needs.

Local government positively promoting wellbeing

A wellbeing lens can give local government a new perspective on how to assess people's needs at the local level. It can present a different view of the circumstances of places and populations that challenges conventional needs-based policy development. To give one example, wellbeing is often lowest in middle age, yet this is a time when people are least likely to use local government services (being neither children or young people, parents, or older people) and very little central or local government money is spent on this group. A wellbeing focus raises new questions about the impact of public policy: deprived areas often have homogenous and long-standing populations with relatively high levels of wellbeing, running in parallel with high social capital and insularity. Area regeneration can increase incomes and opportunity but may, by introducing new groups into the community, reduce social capital, community cohesion and wellbeing.

Some of local government is interested in wellbeing as a way to improve on conventional social policy interventions focused on alleviating needs and misery. However there is also a developing interest in what public services can do to positively promote wellbeing and self esteem. Part of our local wellbeing work is piloting new ways of increasing emotional resilience for 11 to 13 year olds, with a parallel project aiming to have similar results amongst older people. We have also explored how community engagement at the neighbourhood and very local level can be used to build wellbeing, and here the link with place shaping is most strong.

Is diversity a threat to communities' wellbeing?

The evidence from numerous surveys shows that there is a very strong link between contact with neighbours and wellbeing – people who know more people in their street and local area report that they feel more positively about their lives. This is particularly relevant for areas where populations are changing and new neighbours – from different parts of the world, from different

social classes or different cultures – are breaking up longer established communities. Here the strain of globalisation in practice is often acutely felt. The negative impact of high diversity at the neighbourhood level can mean that tensions build up within communities over resource allocation – particularly between long-standing (white or black) residents and newer arrivals – leading to politicisation of very local issues; that conflicts play out through violence particularly among young people and that particular groups become demonised – especially recent arrivals.

Robert Putnam – whose work on the atomisation of US society has been highly influential – has written recently about the corrosive effects of ethnic diversity on trust. He has argued that the more diverse a community is, the less likely its inhabitants are to trust anyone, from their next-door neighbour to the mayor.

However, recent government survey research in the UK suggests a different story. The CLG Citizenship Survey shows that people who live in multi-ethnic areas, and people with friends from different ethnic groups to themselves, tend to have the most positive views about the level of racial prejudice, and more positive views about services and institutions. Similarly while London is the UK's most multicultural region, polling consistently also shows that it is the region in the UK that is most comfortable with diversity.

Bringing people together to help communities thrive

Oxford Professor of Psychology and Young Foundation Fellow Miles Hewstone, has explored what happens to relationships between different groups in conflict areas. His research – in Northern Ireland, areas of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India and in former Yugoslavia – has established that when people have more contact with people from other backgrounds, understanding increases and hostility reduces. This challenges the more popularly accepted (within the UK) "threat" theory which proposes that more diversity leads to more misunderstanding and competition, and increased prejudice. Hewstone's work suggests the opposite, that as long as there is contact

(which isn't always the case) diverse populations can develop understanding and less discomfort between different groups.

The sorts of activities needed to bring people together to increase contact are not new – street festivals, very local volunteering, trying to get residents fully involved in local activities, whether that's the PTA, the allotment association or the tenants' and residents' associations. Increasing wellbeing by making sure that neighbourhood services focus on belonging and neighbourliness can also make us all feel more at ease with our neighbours and create places with the sort of "bridging" social capital that can help everyone within the community thrive.

Geoff Mulgan is director of The Young Foundation. He was previously head of policy in the prime minister's office. He founded Demos, is a visiting professor at LSE, UCL and Melbourne University and on the boards of the Work Foundation and the Design Council

Nicola Bacon is The Young Foundation's local projects director. In the last two years she has set up major programmes on neighbourhoods and community empowerment, wellbeing and London. Before this Nicola worked in government and in the voluntary sector