

## Tool: Key tips to mapping social networks

Social networks are all around us, in our connections with friends, relatives and neighbours. Understanding them is vital for community engagement and community resilience.

Network theory, as described in the economist Paul Ormerod's pamphlet 'N Squared', tells us that networks, while frequently resistant to change, also allow the potential for sweeping changes to result from seemingly minor interventions.<sup>1</sup> Taking into account even limited information on the structure of networks can make interventions and changes more effective – ensuring they reach more people and don't leave people feeling excluded or disengaged.

But how do you do this? There are four tips:

### 1. Understand informal relationships

The RSA began its 'Connected Communities' programme in April 2009. Research as part of this in New Cross Gate successfully mapped the networks of 280 residents, to demonstrate how networks work. One key finding was that "‘familiar strangers’ like postmen and dustmen appear to be under-utilised community resources."<sup>2</sup> By understanding the casual relationships people have – who they chat to, where they get their information you can start to use networks better.

Giving more responsibility and a greater buy-in on policies and messages to frontline staff and to others who speak to residents on a day-to-day basis, like hairdressers and publicans can help this happen, by bringing more people in on the conversation.

### 2. Understand informal meeting places

The RSA research also found that, in each area, supermarkets or shopping centres were the most used local place, while GP surgeries and health centres, hair salons and cafés also played key roles. Learning to recognise that these places are where people meet and treating these, rather than council facilities as hubs is a key start-point in effective engagement through social networks.

<sup>1</sup> Ormerod concludes "The potential gains from more effective policies built on a better scientific understanding of how the world operates are enormous."  
N Squared, Public policy and the power of networks, Paul Ormerod, RSA 2010, p.37

<sup>2</sup> 'Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society', RSA, 2010, p.II-V

In your area, this might mean going to the café of the local supermarket, or even a barber shop or pub, when you next need to get feedback or ask people about changes to services. This will often work much better than using council facilities. It will help you speak, on their own turf, to those who don't normally come into contact with the council.

### 3. Think about the least networked

People cut off or alienated from mainstream channels are the groups that it's most important to think about reaching when you engage through social networks. These individuals are the most likely to be vulnerable and need council help, or else to be angry. Reaching alienated and isolated people usually means going through more networked individuals, the café owner who is the lonely pensioner's sole point of contact, for example. The long-term goal, from an engagement perspective, should be to bring the least connected back into the loop.

A strong example of this was in Newham, a classic 'borough of extremes. In 2011, the council held a formal consultation into resilience.<sup>3</sup> Out of this sprang several new initiatives, and changes to existing ones, which tried to improve resilience by strengthening connections and bringing isolated or alienated groups back into the conversation. These initiatives included Community Hubs, Every Child a Musician, Shared Lives, Enablement, The Skills Place and Newham Workplace. (See Newham's 'Quid pro quo, not status quo' report for more on these).<sup>4</sup>

### 4. Bring different groups into contact

A key element of using social networks to engage is about making sure messages are reaching all the different areas your council serves. It's all very well if the most affluent wards or those with the greatest capacity are taking advantage of new services, taking on board council messages or buying in to changes the council is making. However, the key thing is to make this happen across the board.

<sup>3</sup> The outcomes of this are written up in 'Community resilience in Newham', Newham Council, 2013; an earlier report was the 'Quid pro quo, not status quo: why we need a welfare state that builds resilience,' Newham Council, 2011

<sup>4</sup> 'Quid pro quo, not status quo: why we need a welfare state that builds resilience,' Newham Council, 2011, p.36-42

Again, Newham is a good example here. As part of the research described above,<sup>5</sup> the council found that jobs in Stratford were being given to people the employer already knew i.e. those who were already well-connected, and predominantly those living in just one part of the borough. Less well-connected people weren't hearing about jobs or being offered them. There were implications of this for engagement as well as cohesion. If residents feel the progress of a borough isn't being shared evenly then alienation and disaffection is inevitable. Newham's research showed the importance of taking steps to forge connections so that everyone was included. Subsequent increased investment in Newham Workplace, the borough-wide employment service,<sup>6</sup> was part of the council's efforts to try and ensure the benefits of local regeneration reached all Newham residents. Workplace starts by understanding the needs of employers and building relationships with the major employers in the borough, then offering residents support and training focused on those real jobs. Since it launched in 2007, Workplace has supported 32,000 people into work, with half of these long term unemployed. It has high sustainability rates with around 70 per cent of those finding jobs through Workplace still in work a year later.

<sup>5</sup> 'Community resilience in Newham', Newham Council, 2013, p.4-10.

<sup>6</sup> See [Newham Workplace website](#).

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