

CIVIC HEALTH SEMINAR:

A Fresh Approach to Evaluating the Civic Health of Place

*What is civic health and
how do we measure it?*

*Is our account of civic health still
relevant for the challenges of today
and tomorrow?*

*What kinds of individual and
collective capabilities should every
person hold?*

*How can we accurately
understand and measure true
levels of civic health?*

Seminar Attendees:

Arianna Haberis
Benedict Dellot
Ben Rogers
Bobby Duffy
Danny Dorling
Edward Andersson
Emma Norris
Gerry Stoker
Jeff Masters
Julian Thompson
Lenka Setkova
Matthew Taylor
Nina Mguni
Rachel Newton
Rebecca Daddow
Sam Mclean
Sam Thompson
Steve Broome
Tajbee Ahmed
Tom Andrews
Victoria Savage

Matthew Taylor is Chief Executive of the RSA. Prior to this he was Chief Adviser on Political Strategy to the Prime Minister and Director of IPPR.

Benedict Dellot is a researcher on the RSA's Citizen Power programme of work and is leading the Civic Health project.

Lenka Setkova is Director of the Democracy and Civil Society Programme at the Carnegie UK Trust and has recently led the work of the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society, chaired by Geoff Mulgan.

Sam Thompson is a researcher and consultant at the New Economic Foundation's Centre for Wellbeing and has co-authored a number of reports on wellbeing including the Happy Planet Index.

SEMINAR AIMS

The concept of the Big Society is at the heart of the coalition government's vision of public service reform and civic renewal. As Lord Wei, the person charged with delivering the Big Society agenda acknowledges, building a society of community organisers and social entrepreneurs requires a better understanding of the capabilities and behaviours people and places need to have in order for active citizenship to grow.

These questions are being explored by the RSA through the Citizen Power Peterborough programme and, in particular, the Civic Health project. The expert seminar explored the emerging model of citizenship being developed at the RSA and our approach to evaluating civic health. To do this, the seminar addressed two questions with a team of academic and public policy experts on issues of civic health, behaviour and public service evaluation:

- What is civic health?
- How are places to measure civic health?

CONTEXT

Introduction by Matthew Taylor, RSA

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA, provided an overview of the morning session by focusing on some of the challenges preventing us from closing our 'social aspiration gap' – the gap between the society we say we want and the society we have based on existing forms of behaviour and thinking. Taylor outlined three specific areas where we as citizens need to change if the social aspiration gap is going to be closed:

- Firstly, we have to become more aware, realistic and understanding of the trade-offs that need to be made between competing views of the good life
- Secondly, we need to have a stronger capacity to be resilient, resourceful and self-sufficient in the face of personal and collective pressures
- Thirdly, we have to become more pro-social in our everyday lives and realise that a healthy civic life can only be achieved if we give something back to society

These shifts will only become more urgent as local government budgets are cut by anything from a quarter to a third in the next few years. Rounding up his overview, Taylor noted that this will only happen if people are supported and empowered to become the kinds of citizens the twenty-first century needs. This requires a new model of 'sustainable citizenship' that will allow us to tackle the emerging 'decade of dearth'.

“We are now entering into the decade of dearth”

— Matthew Taylor

“There has rarely been more of an onus on the individual to actively place-shape”

— Benedict Dello

Session one: WHAT IS CIVIC HEALTH?

Presentation by Benedict Dello, RSA

The focus of the first session was the question: what is civic health? **Benedict Dello**, Researcher on the Citizen Power programme and the lead on the Civic Health strand of work, began by outlining the RSA’s emerging model of civic health.

Building upon the context outlined by Taylor, Dello highlighted a strong localist agenda to put more power back into the hands of everyday citizens alongside cutbacks to public expenditure as two of the key drivers of change.

The coalition government’s focus on the Big Society and the inevitable shrinking of the state will mean individuals and communities being expected to take a great deal more responsibility for place-shaping (i.e. using their influence, ingenuity and abilities to create more prosperous communities) and for closing their own social-aspiration gaps.

Because of this, it is important for local public services and government to recognise two things. First, that not everybody has the necessary capabilities and power to take greater amounts of social responsibility for place-shaping. Second, that current methods of civic health and public service evaluation are not adequate for understanding the true capacity of individuals to actively place-shape.

Addressing this concern, Dello outlined the key proposals of the Citizen Power Civic Health project. The RSA’s Civic Health Audit tool (currently in development) calls for local public services and places to reassess how they understand civic behaviour and how they evaluate it. Dello outlined four examples of how the Civic Health Audit tool might add value:

- First, it develops a Capability Approach to civic health which is focused on the capabilities and qualities people need in order to become active citizens. These capabilities are grounded in a ‘civic logic’ which includes more tacit aspects of civic health such as being other-regarding, creative and resourceful, in addition to more traditional measures such as participation and trust
- Second, the methodology combines in-depth qualitative approaches such as social network analysis and ethnographic case studies with a more traditional quantitative survey element
- Third, it is co-designed by communities to understand and evaluate the civic vibrancy of their own places. This approach offers local authorities a cost-effective tool for both evaluating civic health at a very local level and cultivating civic health and social capital in the process
- Fourth, it might be used by local authorities, public bodies and third sector organisations to understand which ‘civic capabilities’ are most lacking in their area and where funding might be allocated more efficiently to address those deficiencies

“We need to understand the capabilities that allow us to achieve what we most value”

— Benedict Dellot

“We need people to have the capabilities to deliberate what a good society looks like and how we get there”

— Lenka Setkova

As Dellot discussed, the Civic Health Audit could be designed as a two-tiered framework with one ‘universal approach’ that has a place-wide single survey element and another more ‘targeted approach’ which uses these in-depth methods to understand the civic health of a particular area or social group.

Presentation by Lenka Setkova, Carnegie UK Trust

Lenka Setkova, Director of the Democracy and Civil Society Programme at the Carnegie UK Trust, responded to Dellot’s presentation by situating the issue of civic health in the context of the findings from Making Good Society, the final report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland.

Setkova focused on the concept of ‘sustainable citizenship’ and how this might be developed further. The following points were made. We need:

- Citizens who are ‘futures thinkers’ and who are able to consider longer-term horizons rather than short-term gains
- Greater awareness of and support for the new forms of civil society associations that people are affiliating with and which can foster ‘sustainable citizenship’
- To ensure that we avoid parochialism and that we develop a new form of citizenship that connects the dots from local to global and that extends solidarity beyond geographic boundaries
- To recognise the capacity to deliberate as a key capability of active citizenship where individuals have the space and capacity to communicate and acknowledge differences, particularly in a world where we share different values and visions of what a good society looks like
- Citizens who are able to appreciate their own latent capability to affect change and who know how to map and influence power

Setkova concluded by emphasizing the need to develop a practical understanding of ‘sustainable citizenship’ and the conditions and processes necessary to nurture it. Furthermore, the Civic Health Audit tool would be particularly useful if it could help diagnose which specific capabilities are most in need of being cultivated and by which public services.

“Can we place a normative value on capabilities?”

— Sam McLean

DISCUSSION

This was followed by a roundtable discussion on the concept of ‘sustainable citizenship’ and the possible opportunities and challenges which may arise throughout the programme of work. Led by the seminar chair, **Sam McLean**, who leads the Citizen Power programme, there were a number of key questions and central themes raised during the discussion:

- Whether we should place more emphasis on individual or collective capabilities. Perhaps the latter is more appropriate for addressing collective challenges
- What degree of normativity we can take when constructing capabilities. Not everyone will agree on the same values so we may have to draw a line at some point. It may be better to place a value-judgment on the ‘right’ behaviours and qualities
- It is important that communities and individuals are able to develop their own understanding of capabilities and those which are best suited to them. When considering capabilities for achieving vibrant places we also need to include the core Big Society conditions outlined by the CLG:
 - A healthy number of civic **institutions** (old and new)
 - Resourcefulness of communities to find their own **funds**
 - Access to public **assets** and shared spaces
 - **Information**, knowledge and a practical sense of how decisions are made
- It is important to recognise that people require a feeling of control over their own lives, confidence about the future and a sense of security. A stable platform is required before active participation can take place
- Parochialism is not always a bad attribute. The idea of ‘self-reliance’ needs to be tempered to ensure that individuals are able to interact and communicate with one another and see each others interests. But at the same time we have to be aware that parochialism can act as a strong motivation to participate
- Our existing group of capabilities such as ‘self-reliance’ may actually prevent civic and pro-social behaviours – in some cases ‘self-reliance’ might help to foster selfish communities. Perhaps the qualities of fairness and justice might be better than altruism and other-regarding behaviour in certain instances
- We need to be aware of the ‘inequality of capability’ between different communities. This is important when allocating scarce resources
- We need rigorous processes allowing and enabling people to monitor and audit local civic behaviours to ensure that people actually do what they say
- To deliver noticeably improved levels of civic behaviour in a place, a critical mass of civically active individuals is needed. The first stage is to identify a small number of people committed to civic action and encourage them to be regularly involved

“A vibrant place may only require a fraction of civically active people”

— Gerry Stoker

Session two: HOW DO WE MEASURE CIVIC HEALTH?

Presentation by Sam Thompson, New Economics Foundation

Responding to Delloit’s earlier presentation and discussion of the RSA’s emerging framework of ‘sustainable citizenship’ and the Civic Health Audit tool, the focus of the second session was arguably the more difficult discussion of how to accurately and effectively measure local civic health.

Sam Thompson, researcher and consultant at the New Economics Foundation, initiated the discussion with an overview of some of the practical challenges and issues facing any organisation or group of people wishing to measure and evaluate more intangible aspects of life such as wellbeing, ‘quality of life’ and civic health.

Thompson spoke of the need to:

- Involve people as deeply as possible within the design of measurements. Without this, indicators are unlikely to capture what really matters to people or empower them to live the lives they want to lead
- Measure strengths as well as weaknesses and find out what attributes and qualities are most likely to enable people to succeed. This means changing the focus from what they need to what they already have (i.e. assets)

Given these requirements, Thompson offered two broad approaches towards measuring the ‘softer’ aspects of civic health:

- Focusing on and measuring subjective attitudes. This goes beyond concentrating solely on happiness to include a broader self-reported view of how people function in the world which includes their values, thoughts, feelings and experiences. Any form of measurement has to tap into these subjective indicators if it is to have any explanatory value or depth
- Using the ‘Social Return on Investment’ model. This involves finding out what matters to people by directly talking to them and then defining ‘social value’ from the bottom up

Thompson added to this bottom up vs. top down argument a number of other questions to consider. Among them whether:

- Subjective measurements are robust enough
- A measurement could be generalisable in different contexts

Ultimately, the Civic Health Audit needs to be an evaluation tool able to add substantial value to our understanding of civic health beyond existing methods of evaluation already in use.

“Social value, as defined from the bottom up”

— Sam Thompson

“We need a rich dialogue about the barriers preventing success”

— Lenka Setkova

DISCUSSION

Attempting to expand on these issues, **Sam McLean** initiated a second roundtable discussion focusing on some of the issues that can arise when measuring civic health.

A number of initial points were made concerning what we might have to take into consideration when designing any evaluation tool:

- There are many capabilities people need in order to be active citizens but it is another question as to whether or not we should set government targets around ‘civic capabilities’
- We need to be realistic about what we mean by success in terms of civic behaviour change. It is important to make sure we are not measuring ‘civic capabilities’ assuming that we are going to affect these capabilities significantly in a short period of time
- What gets measured gets done. We should make sure we capture what is valuable to people so that we don’t distort the incentives and efforts of local bodies and authorities
- We therefore have to undertake a local conversation about what barriers may be preventing people from becoming more civically active
- We also need a richer dialogue concerning the social assets that allow for places to become more vibrant and which components of civic health may be important for developing others
- It is important to be aware that individual perception can be severely affected by what the media, friends, family and neighbours say. People also tend to give more positive answers when the focus is local and more negative answers when the focus is national

Any consideration of a civic health evaluation tool will have to take into account future challenges and the changing context that we may have to operate in. Because of cuts in the order of twenty-five per cent to local government expenditure, we need to find smarter ways of both fostering and measuring civic health. Highlighted within the discussion, one possible way of doing this would be to use the Audit as a facilitating tool for communities to pair-up with one another, allowing them to engage in peer learning and share innovative ideas that aid their ability to place-shape.

Another important point raised was that the days of the standard Place Survey may be coming to an end. In the future, we will have to capitalise on social media and produce socially-useful websites that can collect data cost-effectively while at the same time linking residents to one another and with their local institutions and social assets. Building upon the current issues and future challenges facing civic health evaluation laid out during the early stages of the discussion, the seminar went on to consider where the Civic Health Audit might best add value.

“Encourage communities to pair-up and engage in peer learning”

— Bobby Duffy

“Using an evaluation tool as a ‘can-opener’ where communities can self-diagnose their own capabilities”

— Gerry Stoker

Two particular functions for an evaluation tool were highlighted:

- A ‘dial’ approach that could effectively quantify levels of civic health
- A ‘can-opener’ approach that would open up information on civic behaviour and social assets for the community

A ‘dial’ approach to measure progress would be a useful tool for local authorities and third sector organisations, but we are not yet at the stage where we know exactly what drives civic health. Instead, if the evaluation tool was to operate as a ‘can-opener’ it may prove to be a more valuable approach in acting as an intervention in itself.

In practice this would mean playing the results of an Audit back to the community, allowing them to self-diagnose their civic health, ask searching questions about their capabilities and understand which aspects of their civic behaviour are working well and which need more attention. The process of collection and feedback would act as a type of reflexive ‘civic therapy’ where individuals can become more aware of their own place-shaping abilities and improve them in the process.

This ‘can-opener’ approach would have another important function. By collecting and mapping out information on social assets, organisations and community networks, the Audit can develop a ‘civic directory’ which residents and the community can draw upon to assist place-shaping in the future. This could map information ranging from particular voluntary organisations to a local innovation network linking funding opportunities.

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NEXT STEPS

The feedback generated by the expert seminar, and the diverse collection of challenges and opportunities it highlighted, will now be used to refine and develop the RSA’s Civic Health project as part of the Citizen Power programme. It will also play a key part in informing the first tool to be piloted in Peterborough among recovering drug users.

The full RSA Civic Health pamphlet will be published later in July 2010. This will set out the initial framework of a tool which local public services, community organisers and other organisations can use to both understand and foster civic health at the very local level.

For more information on the Civic Health project please email benedict.dellot@rsa.org.uk

RSA Projects put enlightened thinking to work in practical ways. We aim to discover and release untapped human potential for the common good. By researching, designing and testing new social models, we encourage a more inventive, resourceful and fulfilled society.
