

We need to ensure that group behaviours are taken into account across policy initiatives

Caroline MacFarland addresses the oversights of the Big Society in not laying out the fundamental means to harness and encourage social group activity. This is vital as clubs and social groups cultivate social capital, wellbeing, and counter social ills such as loneliness and anti-social behaviour.



I recently attended the launch of a report by our colleagues at Theos, in partnership with the recently launched Sports think tank. The report addressed the role of sport in society and asserted that claims of its social, political, moral and economic benefits are over-inflated. Rather than getting swept away with the Olympics hype, sport, our theologian friends argue, should be appraised for its intrinsic good: “sport for sports sake”.

ResPublica also published [a report](#) last week, on a parallel topic analysing the social and public benefit of participation in broader social clubs and group activity. As a co-author of the report I sympathise with the dilemma faced in trying to analyse something inherently and primarily ‘social’. There is little hard evidence out there of the added value of informal group activity. Much of the participation in question takes place ‘under the radar’ and is not easy to capture, and the majority of work on the topic is based on anecdotal accounts.

But this is not to say that there are no lessons to be learned for policy-makers. Whilst it may be unnecessary and even undesirable for policy makers to actively intervene in social activity, there are certainly ways in which they could encourage and facilitate a climate conducive to group interaction and the social capital stemming from it.

As Prof Lord Layard wrote in [a letter](#) to the FT last month, the government has focused enormous efforts on infrastructure spending and economic growth but has left social capital and the ideals of the ‘Big Society’ by the wayside. Recognising and learning from the wealth of social good which already exists but is often seen to be ‘outside the realms’ of normal policy-making is a good start to addressing this civic and social deficit.

In the [ResPublica report](#), *Clubbing Together: The Hidden Wealth of Communities*, we address the oversights of the Big Society in not laying out the fundamental means to harness and encourage social group activity. In an age of declining trust in traditional institutions – religion, the media, financial institutions, government – Government should not seek to create a ‘Big Society’ from scratch, but should look instead to prevailing and successful civil society models.

Clubs and membership organisations are exemplary of how people are motivated to gather and spend their time, and indicate how some activities take precedence over others in our everyday social lives. This is important for policy makers considering incentives for recruitment of volunteers, and meeting philanthropy targets for example.

Clubs and social groups cultivate social capital, wellbeing, and counter social ills such as loneliness and anti-social behaviour. An ethos of membership often provokes an additional sense of purpose which inspires other civic activity.

Recognising this social value and harnessing the potential public benefit does not require a top-down approach. Instead, it is about ensuring that group behaviours are taken into account across policy initiatives, and used to promote as well as inspire government interventions. Promoting neighbourhood interaction should not be restricted to residents, but account for the groups and clubs where people congregate locally. Town centre regeneration policies should be mindful of community needs for

congregating and interacting socially as well as commercially. Digital inclusion initiatives also, should be geared towards using online tools as a means for face-to-face interaction.

I do agree that social activities such as sport should be valued for their intrinsic good – and in many cases no further analysis is needed. But to rule out further value for society and public policy is to miss an important opportunity. We don't have to resort to 'social engineering' to help grassroots groups flourish, we just need to make sure that policy is not overly weighted towards individual incentives and behaviours. After all, society at its most basic is defined by human interaction.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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