

Understanding neighbourliness and belonging

The importance of belonging in contemporary Britain

There has been much political and media debate over recent years about what belonging and identity mean in Britain today. *The Governance of Britain*¹ published in 2007 by the Ministry of Justice raised a raft of issues about national identity, what it means to be British, active citizenship, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and developing a statement of British values. The Government uses 'belonging' as a proxy for what it terms active citizenship and sees developing a statement of British values, as a way to bind people together.

The 2010 Citizenship Survey shows that a sense of national belonging is already high. 87 per cent of people in England and Wales felt that they belonged to Britain and 76 per cent of people felt they belong to their neighbourhood.² There were noticeable differences in the degree to which people felt a sense of belonging based on age and ethnicity.

Older people (those aged 65+) are more likely to feel they belong to a neighbourhood, with 86 per cent of respondents in the 65-74 age bracket, and 87 per cent of people aged 75 and over feeling that they belong. The lowest sense of belonging to a neighbourhood was among the 25-34 year olds, at 67 per cent.³ In terms of ethnicity, people of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin are most likely to feel they belong in their neighbourhood and in Britain, with levels at 81, 83 and 88 per cent respectively, compared with 77 per cent of White people.

Whilst research into residents' sense of belonging can be helpful in informing service provision and engagement, it should be remembered that a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood does not necessarily lead to neighbourly behaviour and increased civic engagement. At the same time, a lack of belonging and feelings of isolation do not necessarily lead to anti-social behaviour.

The Citizenship Survey also found that 37 per cent of residents feel they can influence decisions in their local area and 34 per cent have engaged in civic participation in the last year. Civic participation includes contacting local or national elected representatives or officers, attending public meetings or demonstrations, and signing a petition. However, the number of people involved in civic participation falls to three per cent on a monthly basis. Volunteering is high with 29 per cent volunteering informally and 25 per cent volunteering formally on a monthly basis.⁴ While these statistics are high, they show that a person's sense of belonging does not necessarily correlate with their levels of civic or civil participation.

¹ *The Governance of Britain*, Ministry of Justice (July 2007) see <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/governanceofbritain.htm>

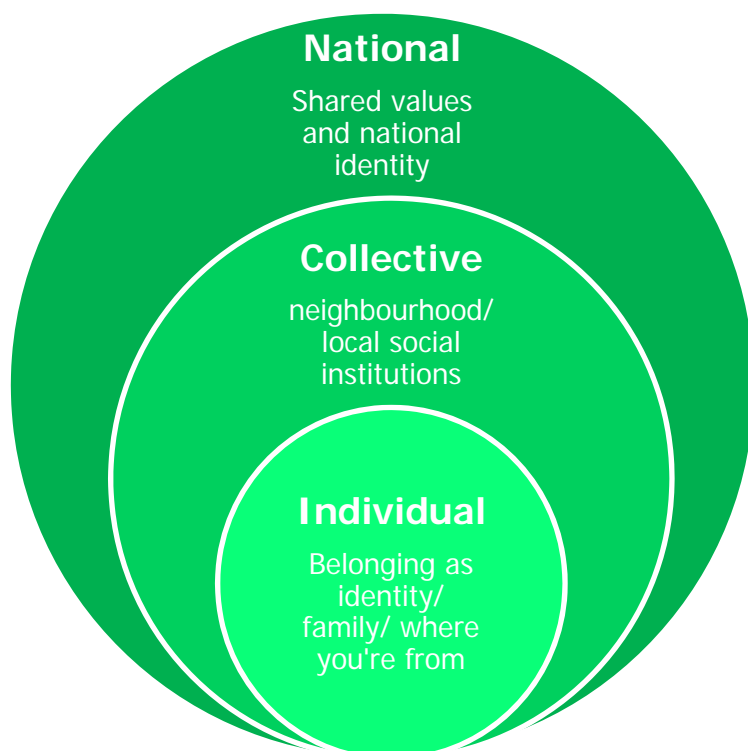
² *Citizenship Survey: April 2009-March 2010, England*, Communities and Local Government (July 2010) see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/164191.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

What do we mean by belonging?

What contributes to a sense of belonging will be different for each individual. Some people have a strong sense of belonging; others may struggle to articulate it. While the Government says that "the nation state remains the anchor of belonging"⁵ this is unproven. The vast majority of people in England and Wales feel they belong to Britain, but there is often plurality in belonging. Individuals can feel they belong to the nation-state, a neighbourhood and a closer network of kin and close acquaintances at the same time. For every individual the degree to which these experiences influence their understanding of their own sense of belonging will differ. The diagram below outlines three levels at which belonging can be understood: individual, collective and national.



National

- National identity
- Shared national values i.e. liberal, secular, democratic

Collective

- Wider networks – ‘Familiar strangers’
- Neighbourhood – where you are versus where you are from
- Professional identity
- Religious association
- Membership of sports clubs and allegiances to professional clubs
- Lifestyle choices and values
- Socio-economic class
- Ethnicity
- Schools
- Local clubs and organisations

Individual

- Individual belonging as individual identity
- Family and where people are from

The Young Foundation is developing a framework that tries to tease out the most common threads in what makes people feel they belong. At its core is the premise that individuals can instinctively sense acceptance from groups such as family, colleagues, the neighbourhood, and society. These operate through informal ‘feedback circuits’ which can either reinforce a sense of belonging or make individuals feel excluded.

⁵ ‘The politics of identity’, Justice Minister Michael Wills (26 March 2008) see <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/sp260308b.htm>

The ten feedback circuits identified by the Young Foundation are:

1. informal but strong ties of family and friendship
2. weak ties of association that bind people together in churches, clubs and voluntary bodies where they find connection and common purpose
3. messages from the economy, positive ones if it offers entry level jobs as well as opportunities for advancement, negative ones if it overtly discriminates, or simply has no place for a significant part of the population
4. messages from power and politics – a political system in which key roles are filled by people who look like you and share your values will encourage feelings of belonging
5. messages from culture in its widest sense that reinforce a sense of belonging or of alienation
6. messages about physical safety – levels of violent crime and anti-social behaviour strongly influence feelings of belonging
7. physical environment
8. everyday public services – schools, hospitals, frontline government offices
9. homes – where there are homes for people like you, your friends and family
10. law and its enforcement – if people help to shape and believe in the law, they are more likely to obey it.

The list of 'feedback circuits' is intended to be extensive, but not finite. There are likely to be other factors involved in determining feelings of belonging. But it provides a starting point for making sense of feelings of belonging of any particular individual or group in a place, and explains why some long-standing residents feel that they no longer belong, or conversely why in some places newcomers feel at home.

Choice may also play a role in this. Recent evidence from the Henley Centre HeadlightVision suggests that people with sufficient income and wealth are consciously choosing areas which send strong signals about community and belonging.⁶ By contrast people with little choice about where they live – in particular dependent on social housing – feel less good about their area and how much they belong.

What will become clear in the next section is that there are a number of other similarities between what influences our sense of belonging and what influences our attitudes towards neighbourliness. In particular, our ties of association – either weak or strong – and the social interactions that underpin them are a strong common denominator.

⁶ Unpublished research. Visit <http://blog.hchlv.com/> for more information

Neighbourliness – is it on the decline?

There is a common assumption that in the past people were more neighbourly. People knew the names of those living on their street, they supported each other during hard times and society was better for it. In particular, there were certain groups, such as the poor working class and elderly people, who relied on their friends and extended family for a range of help and support – from child care to talking over a cup of tea.

Michael Young and Peter Willmott's famous study, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), analysed the social relations that underpinned the offerings of mutual aid and support between neighbours at the time. Bethnal Green in the 1950s was characterised by long-standing populations who had developed social ties across generations. Residents were relatively similar; they shared the characteristics of being white and working class. Many of the men worked in the docks or as labourers whilst their wives tended to the home and children – who were often out playing in the traffic-free streets. As the cliché goes, front doors were often left unlocked.

The assumptions about modern day attitudes towards neighbourliness contrast with those found in Young and Willmott's study. Modern society is much more mobile – in terms of transport, employment and housing (though it's worth noting that a century before Young and Willmott's study the rapidly growing cities of London, Manchester and Birmingham were just as fragmented and alienated as any city today). We have also become more individualised; how we choose to spend our leisure time, like watching television, is a perfect example of this. Most people are more affluent and can afford to pay for some of the services that the close-knit community used to provide. Advances in information and communication technology have allowed us to develop social networks that are not bounded by geography. In short, the assumption is that we no longer require some of the functions that the neighbourhood and its inhabitants once provided.

Yet the language of neighbourliness remains in the mainstream. Notions of community spirit and neighbourliness are being referred to by a range of people – from politicians, journalists and policy makers, to estate agents, community workers and residents' groups. Each of these groups has a different idea about what neighbourliness actually means.

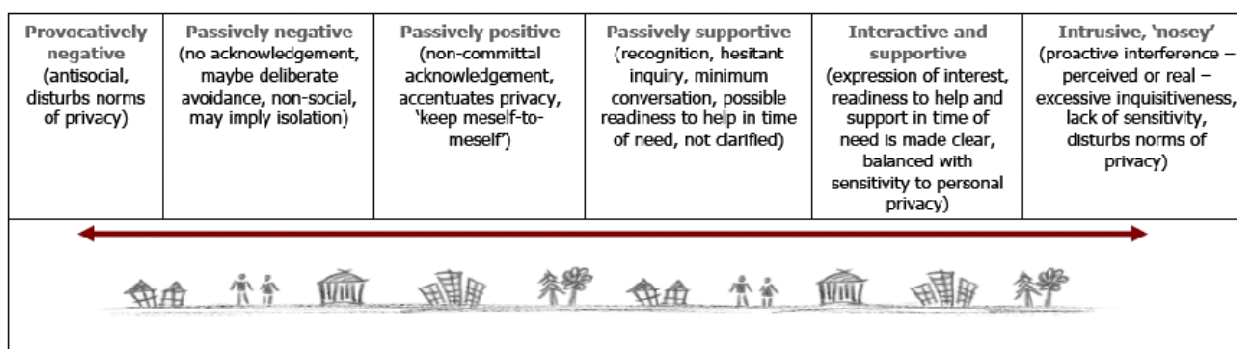
Defining neighbourliness

Defining neighbourliness is far from easy – by its very nature it is highly subjective and means different things to different people. Academics continue to debate definitions and measures and have yet to reach a consensus. Even so, neighbourliness can be broken down into different components which are useful in helping us conceptualise the attitudes and behaviours that can bring positive outcomes to local communities.

Manifest neighbourliness relates to 'observable social interaction and exchange of help and goods.'⁷ Because it is observable, it is also measurable through surveys and questionnaires. Questions usually distinguish between two types of behaviour: social interaction, such as chatting over the garden fences (if people have them); and exchange of help and goods, such as borrowing tools.

Measurements of manifest neighbourliness, which can be quantified and presented as statistics, are useful indicators as to the extent of **latent neighbourliness**. Latent neighbourliness refers to the *feelings or inclination towards* neighbourliness, which turn into actions in the event of an emergency or event. For example, a death in the British Sikh community will often trigger outpourings of support and assistance from other Sikhs living in the neighbourhood. This can range from emotional support to practical assistance such as cooking, help with shopping and funeral arrangements.

The Neighbouring Continuum



Source: Kevin Harris, Local Level (2006)



⁷ *Neighbouring in Contemporary Britain*, Buonfino, A. and Hilder, P., Young Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2006)

In the modern world, encouraging latent neighbourliness seems more appropriate than trying to develop the more close-knit neighbourly relations of 1950's Bethnal Green. People are often willing to help others during a time of great need, but they also require boundaries to be respected which allow them to retain their sense of privacy.

Respecting boundaries is articulated as a key aspect of good neighbourliness. The Manchester Neighbourliness Review⁸ identifies three common aspects of neighbourliness taken from the views of local residents:

1. awareness of the situation of other residents
2. respect for their privacy
3. readiness to take action if help is needed.

Good neighbourliness should be as much about restraint, non involvement and latent qualities as well as tangible activities and actions.⁹ People should also have the choice to opt out of neighbourly behaviour, especially when they do not have the ability or capacity, or merely do not want to engage with their neighbours.

Given the recent political emphasis on cohesion and integration, it needs to be remembered that neighbourliness can reinforce segregation. When neighbourly behaviour is heavily concentrated among people of similar class, ethnicity, ideology or religion, it may strengthen tensions and hostilities between different societal groups.

⁸ 'Looking out for each other: Manchester Neighbourliness Review', Harris, K. and Gale, T., Community Development Foundation (2005)

⁹ *Neighbourliness*, The Smith Institute and Age Concern (2006)

Case Study: Limehouse, Young Foundation Taskforces Project

Since the industrial decline of the docklands and the development of Canary Wharf, Limehouse, in Tower Hamlets, has experienced yet another wave of newcomers – largely white, middle-class professionals as well as a minority of residents from accession countries. This time people are moving into the numerous new apartment blocks, some gated, which have sprung up along the riverside. This has led to tension between the new residents and some of the more established community over how residents, predominately young people, use the area's public space. Tower Hamlets Partnership was interested in developing networks between the newer and older residents that might help some of those young people understand the world of work and exploit the employment opportunities offered in Canary Wharf and the City, which though so geographically close have proved difficult for local people to infiltrate.

The Taskforce brought together service providers, voluntary organisations and local residents, all of whom were committed to improving their area. Within a short space of time misunderstanding and feelings of animosity seemed to evaporate as people worked together to choose a project that they wanted to plan and implement. At the end of the third and final meeting they had decided to plan two projects: a local art competition and exhibition, linked to an existing summer fete; and to arrange for local people to take part in skills-sharing sessions at the local youth club.

Getting people together, listening and co-producing – again the simplest concepts can reap great rewards.

Why do we want to encourage neighbourliness?

The Young Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Neighbouring in Contemporary Britain* (2006) highlights the benefits of neighbourliness which is at an intensity comfortable to local people.

1. It can improve wellbeing

Over the past 30 years, Britain's gross domestic product (GDP) has roughly doubled, with no corresponding increase in happiness. This has prompted academics across the world to study what actually affects our happiness. Richard Layard, in his book *Happiness: lessons*

from *a new science* (2005), identifies seven of the most influential factors on our wellbeing. One of these factors is the nature of our community.

The Young Foundation report, *Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing: is there a formula for happy communities?* (2008), uses case studies from three English local authorities to demonstrate that neighbourhood working that facilitates regular contact between neighbours, and helps put local people in control of local circumstances is likely to impact positively on the wellbeing of communities.

2. It can facilitate mutual aid and support between people

A positive disposition to neighbours can bring with it advantages through tangible, manifest acts of neighbourliness as well as enhanced feelings of wellbeing and personal satisfaction. Everyday interactions, from chatting at the Post Office to saying hello to a neighbour walking their dog, can help to develop an atmosphere which makes neighbours feel comfortable to offer and ask for help from each other. Where relationships become more substantive, offerings of help can branch out into emotionally-sensitive support, such as that offered in a time of grief or financial difficulties.

3. Informal social control and cutting crime

In areas where neighbours know each other, they are more likely to look out for one another. This combination can create an atmosphere of informal social control. Findings from the Home Office Citizenship Survey tell us that in neighbourhoods where residents feel that people were willing to help their neighbours, 83 per cent thought that someone would intervene if children were spraying graffiti. Of those who thought that neighbours would not help each other, 43 per cent felt that someone would intervene.

4. Improving life chances

Living in an area with high levels of social capital can bring numerous advantages to its residents. The choices and opportunities for children growing up in a neighbourhood where there are high levels of trust, strong local networks and where people look out for each other are likely to be higher than when these characteristics are absent. The choices and opportunities for adults are also likely to be higher in such neighbourhoods. Most notably, strong and wide-reaching social networks can significantly help with career progression by, for example, increasing information about potential employment.

What influences neighbourliness?

Neighbourly behaviour in 1950's Bethnal Green was a product of the circumstances of the day – from homogenous communities living in overcrowded houses to a lack of cars on the street and old-fashioned local grocers. Modern inclinations towards neighbourly behaviour are still influenced by housing, cars and local shops, but the extent of their importance to our everyday lives have somewhat changed. Here are some of the factors which influence modern day neighbourliness.

Socio-demographic factors

The characteristics of the people and families living in a neighbourhood will have a significant impact on levels of neighbourliness. For example, families with young children tend to interact more. They spend much more time in their localities – using local parks, chatting at the school gates or nursery, or looking after each other's children.

Men and women who spend a significant proportion of their time in the neighbourhood – perhaps because they are looking after children, retired, self- or unemployed, tend to exhibit more signs of neighbourliness than those who are, for example, commuters.

Families who have lived in the area a long time, owner-occupied homes and minority ethnic communities can also influence levels of neighbourliness. The Manchester Neighbourliness Review shows that Asian/British Asian residents were most likely to get on with all or most of their neighbours (56 per cent). However, where social interactions are largely confined to people of the same ethnicity – particularly if they are reinforced by language barriers, segregation can become a problem.

Safety, the public realm and existing civic engagement

Real or perceived levels of safety impact on levels of neighbourliness. If people feel as though their neighbourhood is unsafe, they could either unite to tackle the problem or begin to mistrust their neighbours. Fear of crime tends to make people, including older people and young people in some urban areas, wary of leaving their homes in the evening.

The ways in which the public realm is designed and maintained also affect levels of social interaction. Cleanliness levels help to make public spaces appealing to residents; very few people want to have a picnic in a park full of dog mess and graffiti. The design and use of public spaces is also significant. Having the following local facilities or urban design features can help encourage neighbourliness:

- multi-use parks, that can be used for lots of different activities and have playgrounds and cafes
- local shops, coffee shops, libraries, youth clubs and sports facilities
- streets designed to put pedestrians before cars, such as a Home Zone.

Local projects, such as Neighbourhood Management Partnerships and Sure Start, are often well placed to encourage interactions between residents. It is often locally-based staff who instigate street parties, local festivals and other events, which provide residents with an opportunity to meet each other. In areas already high in social capital, it may be the case that this role is undertaken by community or residents' groups.

The challenge for local authorities: what can be done practically to support neighbourliness and belonging?

The first steps for local authorities looking to develop a shared sense of local belonging and neighbourliness is to understand the local characteristics of their neighbourhoods. The extent to which the feedback circuits of belonging, or influences on neighbourliness, matter at the local level will differ depending on the nature of the neighbourhood. Once the significance of each of these is understood, local institutions can focus their efforts on developing and supporting the most important ones.

In supporting neighbourliness and belonging, local authorities should be clear that difference and a lack of conformity to the norms need to be accommodated. People who do not feel they belong, or who do not talk to their neighbours do not automatically have a negative impact on the neighbourhood. The most common medium for exploring *belonging* is art in its broadest sense. It gives people a medium by which to creatively express something they may not necessarily be able to articulate.

Case Study: Manchester's Sense of Place Framework

Manchester City Council has developed a Sense of Place Framework, which helps the local authority and its partners better understand the community they serve. In developing the Framework the council worked with residents including migrants, refugees and young people. They were involved in art projects aimed at making them think very specifically about what made them belong to Manchester. Residents were encouraged to think differently about their history, where they live now, and what is important to them.

The Framework is helping council officers to better understand the culture and history of residents and is a tool for them to think differently about how they engage and consult with citizens. It challenges assumptions that council officers may have about residents and is attempting to create an honest internal dialogue.

It is hoped that applying the Framework will help improve the understanding of what is important to the lives of local people and the area they call home, eventually resulting in better quality local service provision and improved local community spirit.

In terms of encouraging neighbourliness, the most practical solution is to promote interaction between neighbours. This helps to develop latent neighbourliness, which in time could result in acts of manifest neighbourliness.

The proliferation of locality working, from Neighbourhood Management to Sure Start and the expansion of programmes such as Extended Schools, means that local authorities increasingly have locally-based resources which can help provide spaces for social interaction. The Young Foundation report *Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing: is there a formula for happy communities* (2008) provides a number of low-cost, practical ways in which this interaction could be promoted by locality workers. The report suggests that local events, such as street parties, festivals or firework displays could be used to promote interaction. Also, local projects that encourage residents to take collective action to solve problems, such as poorly maintained public spaces, are more likely to involve local people than committees and meetings.

Case Study: Local interaction through Manchester in Bloom

The *Manchester in Bloom* competition has encouraged local people to take pride in transforming and maintaining their neighbourhood environment. For the competition organisers, the outcomes of *Manchester in Bloom* have often been surprising.

In one neighbourhood, Hulme, *Manchester in Bloom* has helped instigate major social changes. Upon first entering the competition over 200 residents, supported by staff from the council and other services, regularly met in a local car park to discuss and work on the competition entry. Local agencies, in particular the police, were quick to capitalise on the goodwill and desire to be involved that was expressed by local people. The Safer Neighbourhoods Police Team took note of the mobile telephone numbers of the residents that attended *Manchester in Bloom* meetings, and have successfully created a text message-based network of local people. The network is used to engage residents in community activities, to encourage local residents to report incidents, and to make people aware when there is concern about particular criminal activity, such as a spate of burglaries. As a result burglary is down, as is graffiti and vandalism.

The links between residents and services in Hulme have been strengthened because of *Manchester in Bloom*. In addition, residents have maintained their contact with each other. Tea and coffee mornings are still held in the same car park, regularly attracting up to 50 residents on Sundays.

New technology can be used to stimulate interaction between local people. The common assumption is that the internet is diminishing the role of the local area, as we can now shop, read about and talk to people all over the world at the touch of a button. But we should not assume that blogs, online forums and other internet-based tools can be utilised to engage people at the local level. More costly ideas involve the design of public spaces and the promotion of schemes such as Home Zones, which give pedestrians the priority over cars on local streets.

Some of the practical ways to foster neighbourliness and belonging require extra resources and new programmes to be approved and delivered. Other solutions require existing resources and services to be delivered in a different way. Given the drive for efficiency savings in local government, the latter seems more appropriate.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed two quite amorphous subjects: neighbourliness and belonging. Both of these are highly subjective and relate to the disposition of individuals, therefore it is always useful to think of these concepts in the context of our own lives; our memories and experiences of living in a neighbourhood and what makes or made us feel part of an area. Was it the shops, schools or friends, family? Do we speak to our neighbours? If not, why not? Personalising neighbourliness and belonging can sometime bring more clarity than trying to think in terms of community engagement, empowerment or service improvement. As human beings we share the desire to be social and each of us has an urge to belong to something. Wearing both a professional and personal 'hat' can help us understand the feelings and outcomes that we are trying to encourage.

Neighbourliness and belonging are two different but closely interrelated concepts, with a strong common denominator being social interaction. Creating safe spaces for local interaction, be it a neighbourhood forum or a well-kept public park, is just one practical, relatively low-cost activity that local government and other public institutions can do to improve neighbourliness and belonging.

We have listed many of the acknowledged influences on levels of neighbourliness and belonging. The extent to which they matter at the local level will differ depending on the neighbourhood, therefore understanding the character of the local area is the starting point for this agenda. Once this is understood, local public bodies and their partners can put into practice solutions that involve either setting new initiatives or delivering existing services in a way that encourages social interaction and a shared sense of belonging.

Further reading

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About this paper

This paper was written by Mandeep Hothi and Corinne Cordes and was first published in 2007 as part of the Young Foundation's Neighbourhood Action Network programme.

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. We have a 55 year track record of success with ventures such as the Open University, Which?, the School for Social Entrepreneurs and Healthline (the precursor of NHS Direct). We work across the UK and internationally – carrying out research, influencing policy, creating new organisations and supporting others to do the same, often with imaginative uses of new technology. We now have over 60 staff, working on over 40 ventures at any one time, with staff in New York and Paris as well as London and Birmingham in the UK.

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