The State of Our Social Fabric published by Onward

SCSN Briefing September 2020

Full report https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-State-of-our-Social-Fabric.pdf

This paper, published by Onward, is the culmination of two years' research with communities across the UK. It explores the social fabric of places in the UK and makes some recommendations for policy-makers on how to support social fabric in local areas.

The researchers explored how people viewed 'community' and based on this they explored some measures that capture this 'social fabric' They found that 'community' was narrower and deeper than the literature previously thought: people view community as entirely local and place-based (narrower than previous research would suggest); the aspects of community that people value, or long for, are not merely social and civic, but also economic and institutional, ranging from jobs to transport connectivity to the quality of the town centre (deeper than previous research would suggest).

The index therefore is made up of five 'threads': Relationships, Physical Infrastructure, Civic Institutions, Economic Value and Positive Social Norms. Each thread equally incorporates three to five different stands, which are composed of multiple indicators, each representing a different statistical measure.

In developing the index, they have deliberately included only measures that relate to real or behavioural aspects of community, rather than their emotional effects. So, the number of charities or the amount of green, public space are included, but not whether people feel a sense of charity to local people or pride in their area. This allowed the researchers to differentiate between inputs to community strength, on the one hand, and outcomes that these deliver, on the other. It also allows them to explore the nature of the relationship between social fabric and more imprecise feelings like belonging and social trust.

Key Finding

The traditional response to the deterioration of place - building new infrastructure and bringing new jobs - is important but is not likely to do enough to re-stitch the social fabric of lagging places. It is the security in an individual's personal life, like secure jobs and housing, alongside the important establishment of civic institutions to corral and drive community-led action, action to restore positive social norms, from strong families to higher levels of education, and support for tighter relationships in the form of volunteering, group membership and local philanthropy.

We need to start building local institutions, seeding local networks, empowering local leaders and devolving power - real power - to places to take back control of their own place.

Some of these measures are also looked at within the SG Covid survey analyses as well as the regular annual SG surveys but some interesting findings worth starting a conversation between community planning and community safety partners.

It is also a useful read alongside SCSN's summary of surveys report <insert link>, the piece by Andrew Magowan from LinkUp about self-determination https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/we-start-with-hope/ and the inquiry of the Scottish Parliament local government and communities committee into community wellbeing https://www.parliament.scot/S5_Local_Gov/CWKey_themes_paper.pdf.

Some qualifications:
- *Some of the language in the report is a bit deficit focused ('fraying communities') but picks up on some interesting Scottish experiences including some heatmaps for each 'thread' of the index.*
- *It also doesn't call out some of the drivers of the poorer social fabric in these areas as much as it could/should i.e. poverty, decades of under-investment, people struggling with a day to day life that leaves them little room for the luxury of volunteering etc.*
- *It's a paper that is designed to stimulate political action and policy development so is heavily focused on what politicians can do but for local authorities, CPPs and other institutions it's got some important messages. The exclusion of some of the 'nebulous' feelings like belonging and social trust one could argue are as important as the real/behavioural aspects of the community so more exploration of the relationship between these would be welcome.*

Will Tanner, director of Onward: "We have instinctively known that communities have been fraying for decades but we have always struggled to measure how and in what ways. This has meant we have placed too much focus on what we can measure, rather than the social networks, institutions and norms which underpin our neighbourhoods and local places and give people a sense of belonging."

Taken together, these findings suggest that **the ways policymakers and politicians have tended to think about community needs to change**. Economic policies alone - from new infrastructure to inward foreign and direct investment - are always welcome but not always sufficient to fix social problems; nor will community revival offset more precarious housing tenure or declines in job security. It is the **interplay between economic and social factors that drives the improvement, or deterioration, of the social fabric of a place**. This means that "levelling up" must be a social as well as economic endeavour. It also requires that the **scale at which interventions take place may need to be at a local, community level, rather through regional or national action**.

To make progress - and start to give people back a sense of belonging - policymakers will need to embrace a different set of interventions, using an **approach which pulls on both social and economic levers within a specific local geography**.

<u>Heatmaps</u>
Some local context will be useful for some of these heatmaps to understand the scoring.

The relationships between these social fabric threads is explored in the paper and summarised here:

- The strength of Relationships is strongly indicative of a place's social fabric
- The more active people are within their communities, the more politically engaged people are
- Positive social norms and behaviours matter
- Physical infrastructure is less important than public attitudes suggest (this in contrast to some recent publications from Carnegie UK). There are two exceptions to this: the number of pubs and local businesses, including both independent businesses and convenience stores.
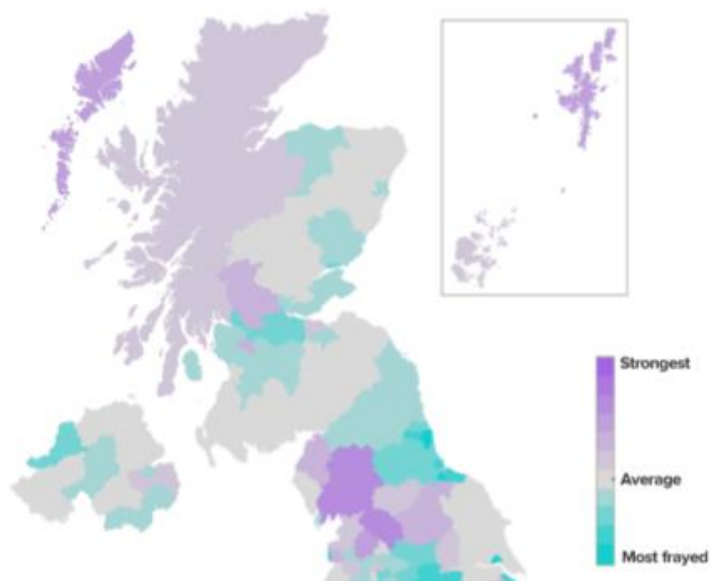
Figure 1 Variation in the strength of relationships around the UK (Source: Onward social fabric index)
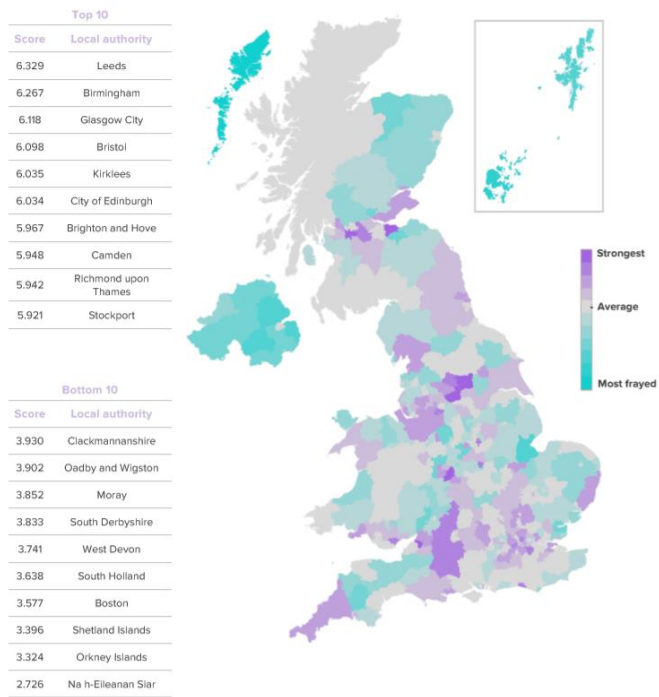
Top 10

Score	Local authority
6.329	Leeds
6.267	Birmingham
6.118	Glasgow City
6.098	Bristol
6.035	Kirklees
6.034	City of Edinburgh
5.967	Brighton and Hove
5.948	Camden
5.942	Richmond upon Thames
5.921	Stockport

Bottom 10

Score	Local authority
3.930	Clackmannanshire
3.902	Oadby and Wigston
3.852	Moray
3.833	South Derbyshire
3.741	West Devon
3.638	South Holland
3.577	Boston
3.396	Shetland Islands
3.324	Orkney Islands
2.726	Na h-Eileanan Siar

Figure 2 Variation in the strength of physical infrastructure around the UK (Source: Onward social fabric index)

Top 10

Score	Local authority
7.553	East Renfrewshire
7.151	East Dunbartonshire
6.647	Kingston upon Thames
6.634	Bath and North East Somerset
6.535	Brighton and Hove
6.389	Stirling
6.341	Waltham Forest
6.304	South Lakeland
6.275	Harrow
6.231	Cheshire West and Chester

Bottom 10
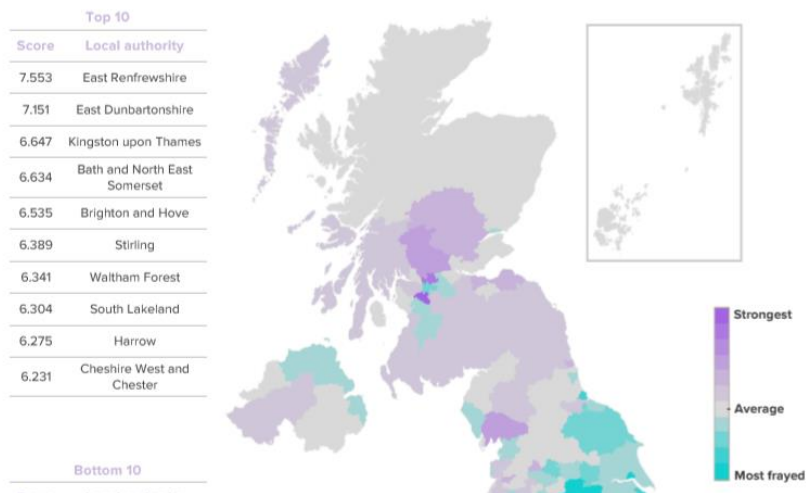
Figure 3 Variation in the strength of civic institutions around the UK (Source: Onward social fabric index)

Top 10	
Score	Local authority
7.076	South Cambridgeshire
7.032	Rushcliffe
7.014	Na h-Eileanan Siar
6.931	East Renfrewshire
6.887	Waverley
6.877	Richmond upon Thames
6.770	Wokingham
6.770	St Albans
6.757	Chiltern
6.728	South Bucks

Bottom 10	
Score	Local authority

Strongest
Average
Most frayed
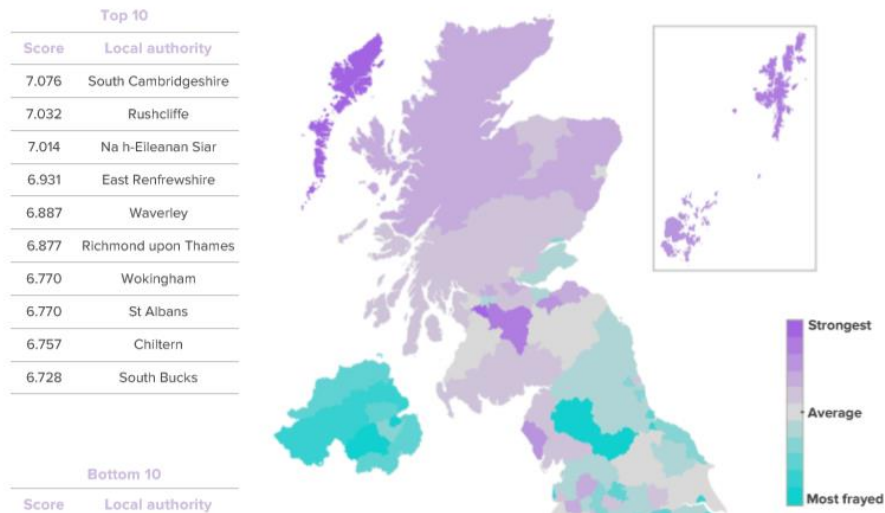
Figure 4 Variation in the strength of economic value around the UK (Source Onward social fabric index)

Top 10	
Score	Local authority
7.954	Chiltern
7.686	Richmond upon Thames
7.588	Rushcliffe
7.517	East Renfrewshire
7.489	Elmbridge
7.463	Waverley
7.389	Wokingham
7.340	East Dunbartonshire
7.324	Epsom and Ewell
7.280	St Albans

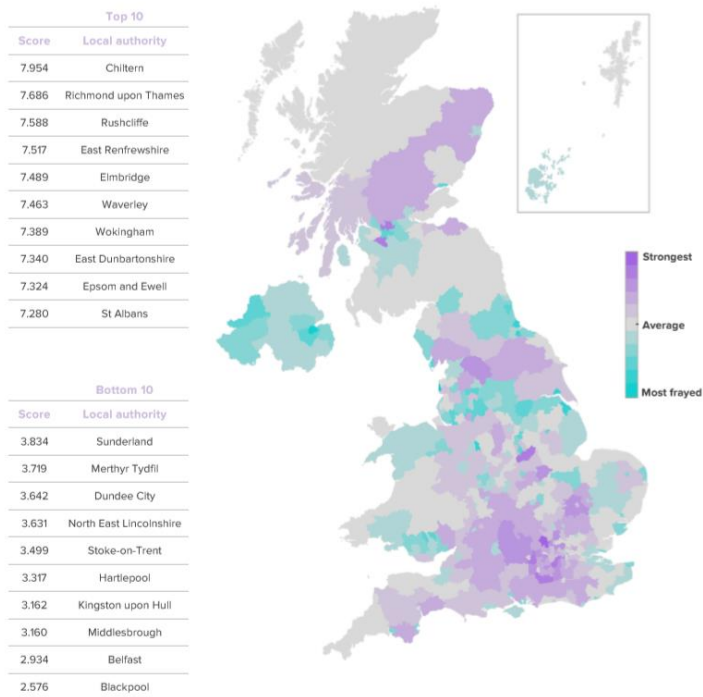| Bottom 10	
Score	Local authority
3.834	Sunderland
3.719	Merthyr Tydfil
3.642	Dundee City
3.631	North East Lincolnshire
3.499	Stoke-on-Trent
3.317	Hartlepool
3.162	Kingston upon Hull
3.160	Middlesbrough
2.934	Belfast
2.576	Blackpool

Strongest
Average
Most frayed

Figure 5 Variation in the strength of positive social norms around the UK (Source: Onward social fabric index)