Social Connections and Wellbeing: why we look at people's networks.

The RSA has pioneered the use of social network analysis as a means of helping improve community development and evidence-based public policy at a local level. We have developed a methodology that involves analysing people's social and community connections and seeing how these impact on wellbeing, life satisfaction and other life outcomes, with a view to developing local projects that build on assets and address the particular risks and needs of a given area.

The 'Mental Wellbeing and Social Inclusion Project' is a five-year longitudinal study in seven deprived areas of England. In each area we are working in – including Knowle West – we worked with local community researchers to conduct in-depth surveys with between 350-500 respondents to understand how people's social and community connections – *who they rely on, who they have fun with, who they get advice from, where they go locally* - impact on their wellbeing.

Having analysed the data alongside local groups and local people, we are using these insights to pilot projects aimed at increasing wellbeing and healthy personal and community connections in our seven sites. Examples include providing mental health first aid to key community members; developing intergenerational conversation hubs based on social network data; and strengthening links between GP surgeries and community organisations so that GPs can direct isolated people to community services.

Figure 1 These sites are (in a rough South to North zig-zag) the Wick estate in Littlehampton, Arun; SE14 and SE4 in Lewisham, South London; Knowle West in Bristol; Tipton, near Sandwell; Bretton in Peterborough; the Merseyside L8 area in Liverpool; and Murton, an ex-mining village in County Durham.

Our findings are still a work in progress, however some 'rules' are emerging:

- **People need a social context and social support:** For some this may mean somebody they feel close to, for others it could be someone who can offer them practical help. But everybody needs somebody important to them who they can rely on.

- **Vulnerable groups:** In each site we visited, we found there are certain site-specific at-risk groups for whom increased or closer social connections seem especially important - for example single parents in an ex-mining village in Durham, or older people in Lewisham.

- **Aspirations matter**: The fit between an individual and the expectations and norms in their area is important. So, for example, single parents (most of whom are mothers) in Murton had lower life satisfaction than average, whilst those in inner-city London fared quite well. Similarly, whilst having higher qualifications is generally better for your wellbeing, in the L8 postcode area of Liverpool we found that those educated above GCSE level tended towards having lower life satisfaction, and in Tipton we found that the unemployed without qualifications fared better than the unemployed with high qualifications.

- **Everything is linked – neighbourhood satisfaction, health satisfaction, social support:** There seems to be a link between people's satisfaction with their neighbourhood and their satisfaction with other areas of their lives, such as their health. A holistic approach to wellbeing and social life is therefore important.

- **Feeling part of something matters – and so does having a voice:** Across our sites, knowing people who can get things done locally, or having sources of local information were linked to higher wellbeing. However, simply knowing people who are connected to authority doesn't seem to be enough – it's important to feel you have *agenc*y; to feel that you happen to life, rather than the other way around.

- **Barriers to community are harmful:** One of the most common links between wellbeing and relationships to come up in our research was that between perceiving barriers locally – or identifying places you try to avoid – and having lower life satisfaction.

Social Connections and Wellbeing in Knowle West, Bristol.

In Knowle West we asked over 350 people about their community and social connections: who they go to for local information, who they go to for advice, who they enjoy spending time with. Fig. 2 highlights where these people live, and Fig. 3 shows the kind of information we get by connecting people's answers up: Fig.3 is a map of all respondents connections to local activities and resources in the area, allowing us to drill down in the information and find that similar people mentioned both helping or being helped by a neighbour and the Knowle West Media Centre (this will be explained in more detail further along in the text).
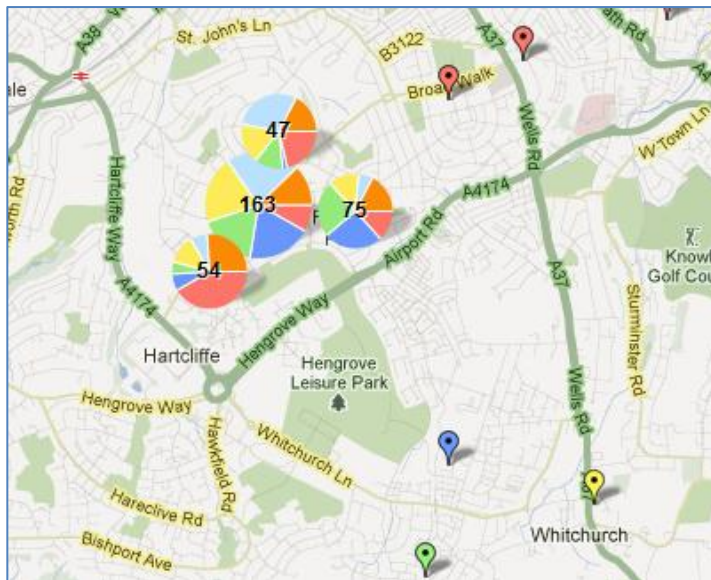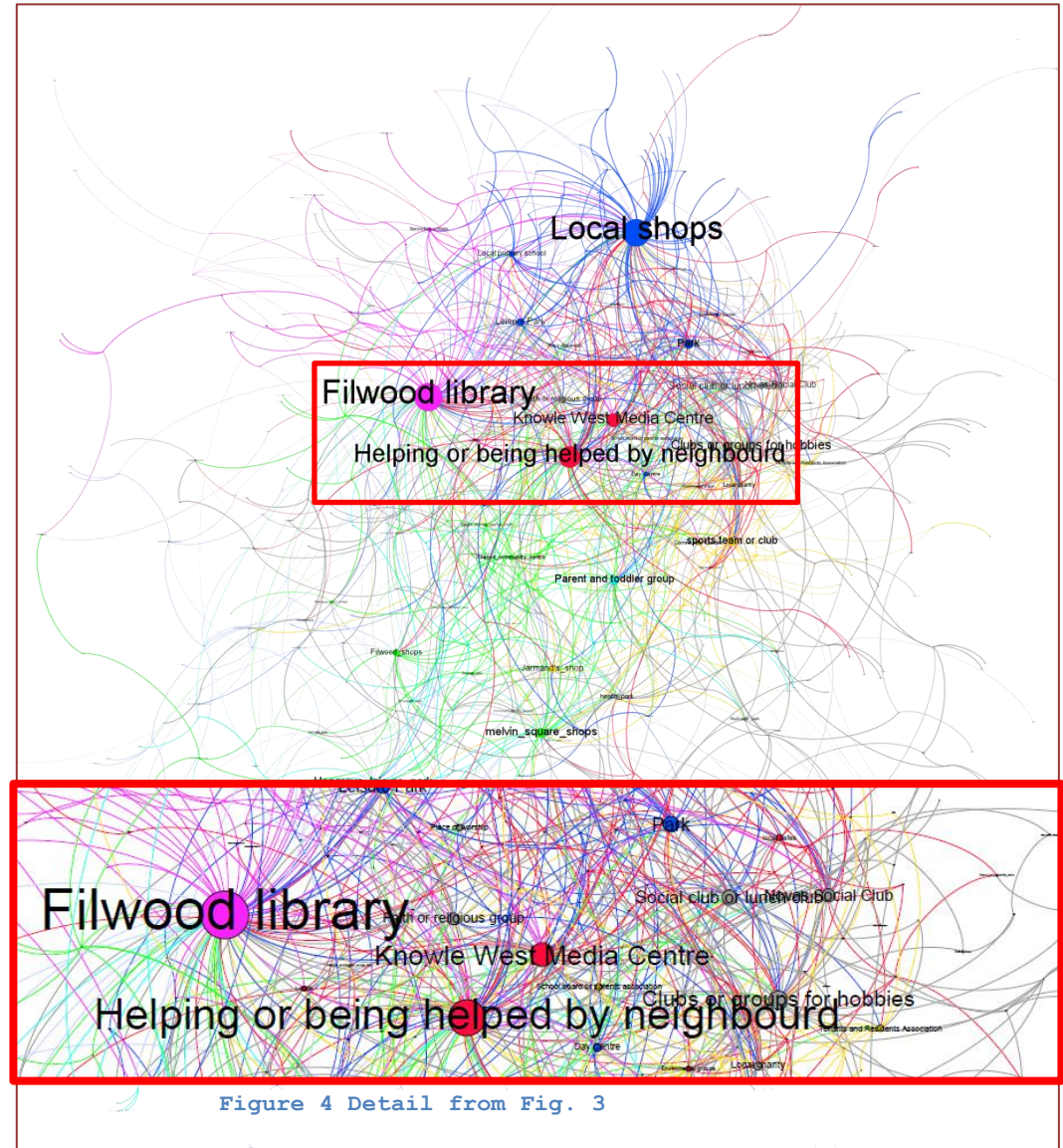

Figure 2 This is where our respondents live

Figure 4 Detail from Fig. 3

Figure 3

What do all these dots and lines mean?

In our research we ask people all sorts of questions about who they rely on and who they are connected to. Once we get all the answers in, we build network visualisations – the spaghetti junction scribbles this report is full of - that represent the answers given. When a network is created patterns can be analysed and visualised using a variety of techniques.

What are the dots?

We use "dots" to represent "nodes". Nodes are whatever it is that you are researching and/or visualising. They can be anything that has relationships or links to anything else. In our work nodes represents a person, organisation or institution, and every dot is an answer somebody gave us. We tend to size them by how many people mentioned them, which is why Filwood library is so big in Fig.3. on the previous page.

Figure 5 Nodes: dots that can represent anything… a person or neighbours or the GP surgery or an organisation

What do the colours mean?

Each node has attributes, or characteristics, and these can be represented visually. An attribute is any quality that belongs to the individual, group or organisation studied.

In each diagram, a key is provided which explains what the colour, size, shape and/or other visual features of the node means.
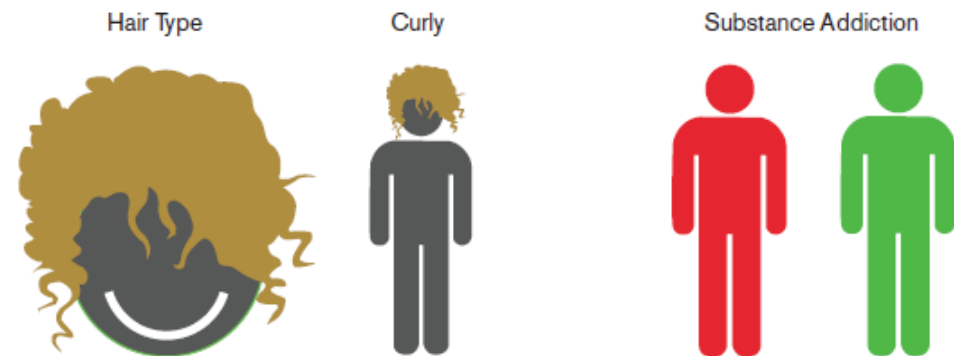

Figure 6 Possible attributes… from hair type to addiction!

What are the lines? Nodes are linked by lines called 'ties' or 'edges'. These ties can represent anything from friendship, to the spread of disease, to emails going back and forth. If someone we spoke to mentioned the Filwood Hope Drop-in, there will be a line between them and the Filwood Hope Drop-in.
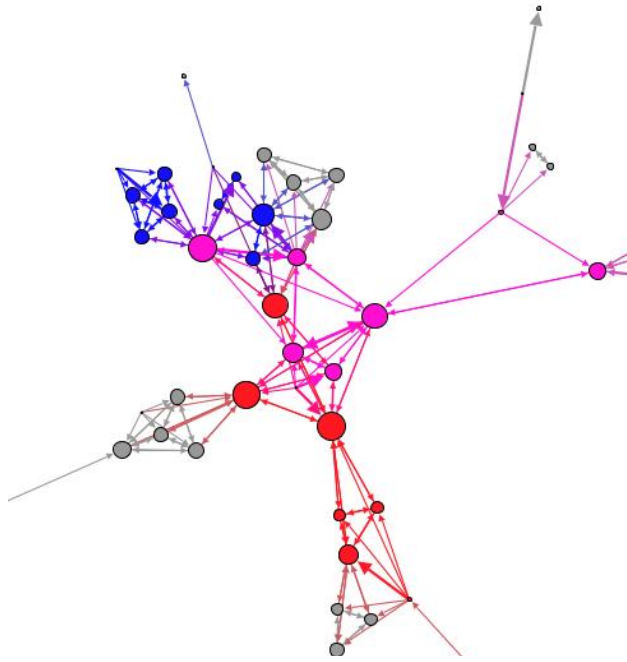

Figure 7 Advice and emotional support networks of local activists, health park workers and volunteers. Size indicates the amount of times someone was mentioned. Colour shows that these represent four sets of people's answers. I haven't labelled this diagram to respect the confidentiality of the answers.
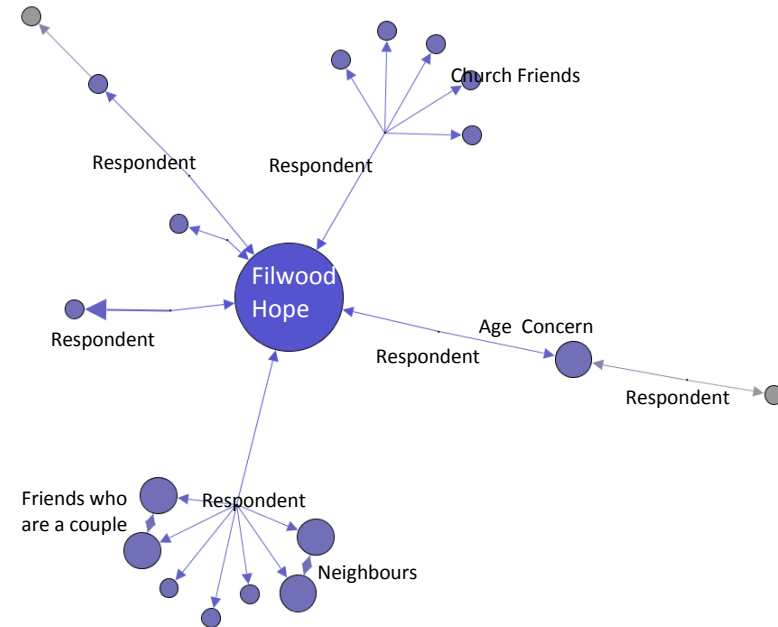
Figure 8 Advice and emotional support networks of respondents who rely on Filwood Hope drop-in/

Figures 7 and 8 represent the networks formed when we joined up who people told us they enjoy spending time with, who they go to for advice and emotional support, and which of the people they rely on are also close to each other (*whether their friends are friends with each othe*r).

In Figure 7 the nodes represent local activists, local volunteers and people who work at the health park: as you can see there are a lot of overlapping ties as many of these people know and trust each other. In Figure 8 we see the same answers, but for people who rely on the Filwood Hope Drop-in. In this case the respondents are far less connected, which is why they do not have ties in common with each other.

Knowle West Topline findings:

- The most satisfied people have one to four close friends – not more.

- Being mentioned by others – as somebody people enjoy spending time with, receive information or support from, or see as a source of authority – is linked to better life satisfaction.

- There is evidence that the middle aged groups have lower life satisfaction than other groups.

- Some evidence that older people in Knowle West are more at risk of low life staisfcaction than they are nationally.

- There are very low advice levels: few people have people they get advice from. There is some reliance on doctors for this kind of support.

- There are very low levels of activism and links to authority.

- Unemployed people and those with low health satisfaction have lower life satisfaction.

- Neighbourhood satisfaction has a significant effect; the more dissatisfied somebody is with the local area, the lower their life satisfaction.

- Those surveyed tend to have lived in the area for a long time – 7 out of 10 have lived there for over ten years.

- Older people tend to be more religious.

- The older you get, the more likely you are to be off work due to illness.

- Men in Knowle West are less likely to have access to information about the local area or to know people who get things done locally.

Some Caveats

- Our sample had a gender imbalance – more than 6 out of 10 of those surveyed were female.

- Our sample was less economically active, and less religious, than official ward statistics for the area.

What do people's networks look like?

Resource use - We asked: "Please tell me what types of groups, activities, and organisations you take part in"
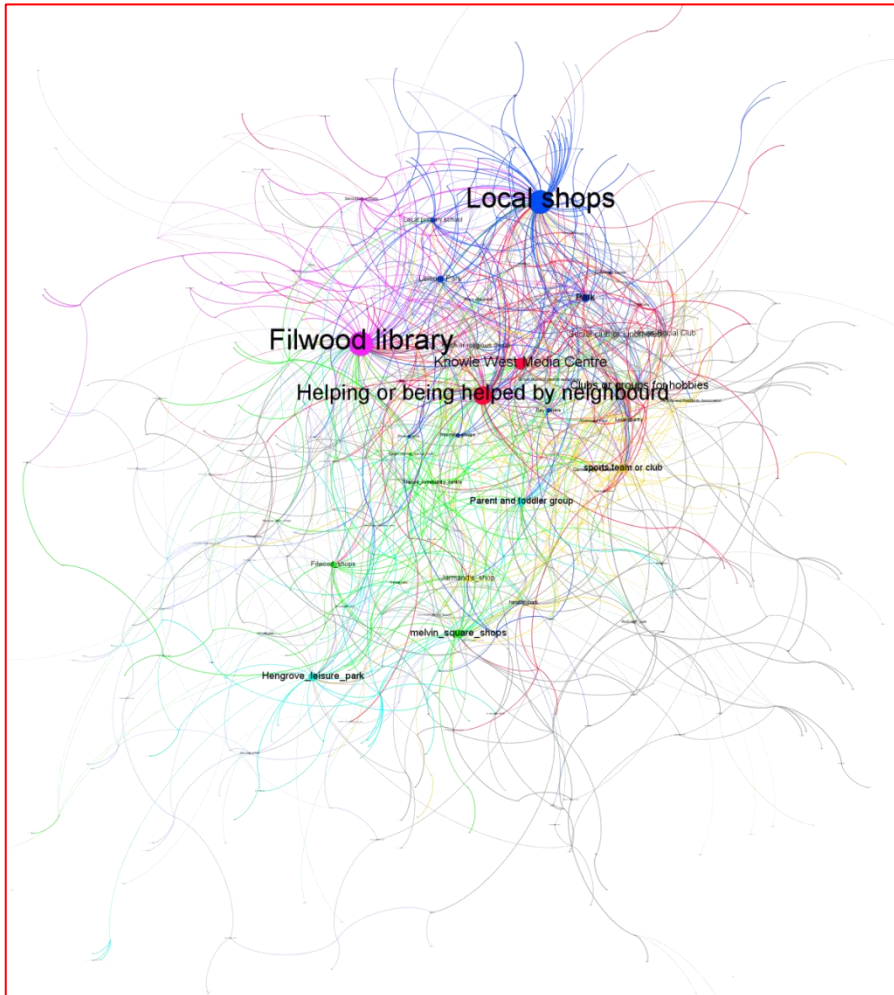
In these diagrams the size of the dots show how many people mentioned them: more than a quarter of respondents gave the Filwood library as an answer to this question, and the range of different coloured ties that link to it suggest that it might be a good area to spread information or facilitate contact between diverse groups of people.
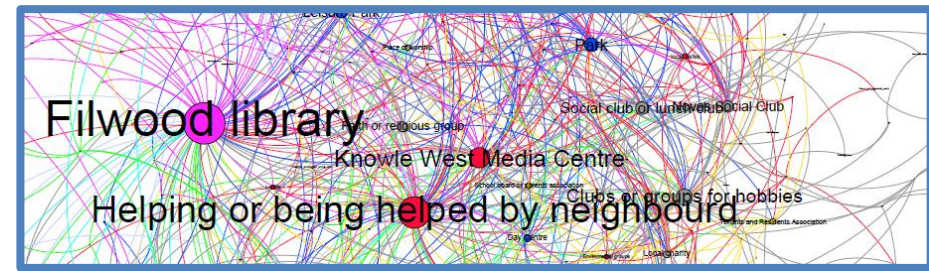
Meanwhile, local shops, the leisure park and the park are coloured royal blue; this shows that similar people gave these places as answers. The red area of the network shows that people who mentioned 'Helping or being helped by others' were more likely also to mention the Knowle West Media Centre and the Novers Social Club.

Local Information networks - We asked: "Where do you go or who do you speak to in order to find out what's going on in your local area?"

The Knowledge, a community newsletter produced by the Knowle West Media Centre and Community in Partnership, sits at the centre and dominates this network, with 31% of respondents identifying it as a source of information (Fig.9). Fig.10 shows the disjointed, sparse information network that would be left in its place, were *The Knowledge* to be removed. Across our sites, the data suggests that having access to local information has a positive effect on wellbeing. With a quarter of our sample not having anywhere they can get information from, and almost two in five respondents having only one source of local information, the importance of the publicly funded *The Knowledge* is heightened all the more.
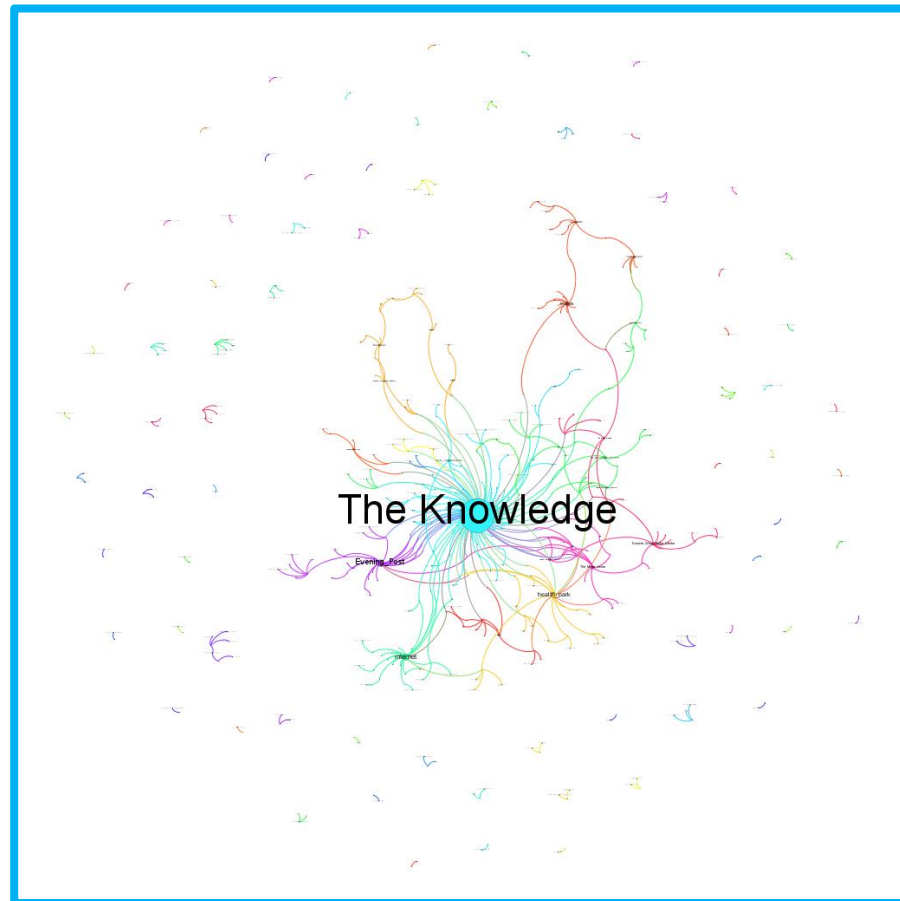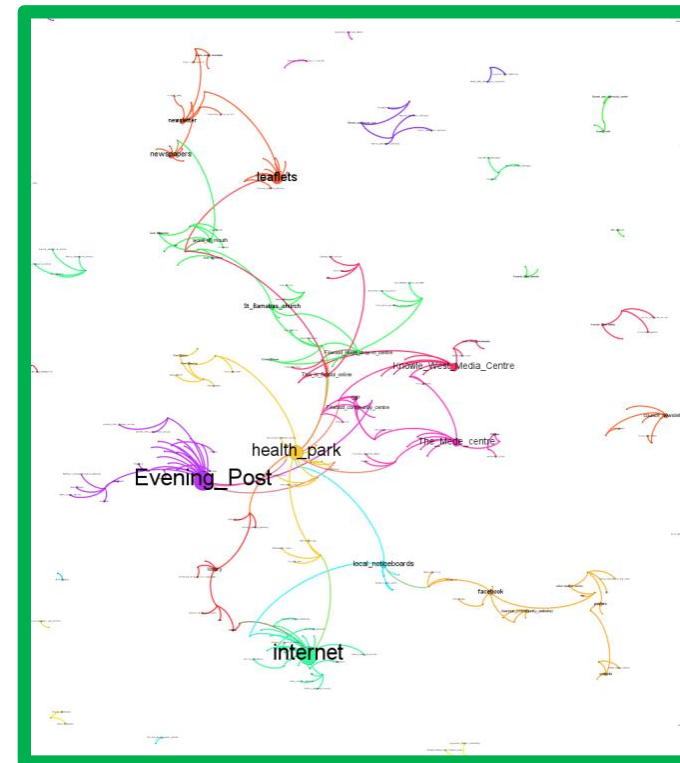

Figure 9

Figure 10

Friendship networks – We asked: "Who do you most enjoy spending time with?" and "Who do you go to for advice or to discuss any problems?"
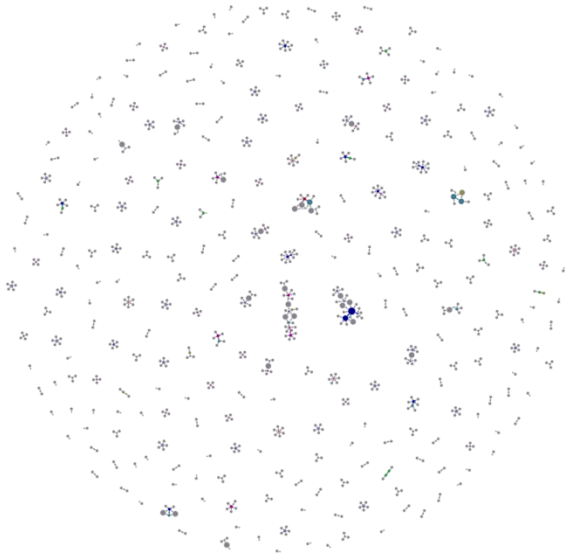

People's support and friendship systems were not very joined up, as can be seen in the scattered diagrams in Figs.11 and 12. This may be of concern given that the local data suggests that having between one and four friends is beneficial to life satisfaction. About 10% of people did not have anybody at all that they could go to for advice or that they enjoy spending time with.

There is some evidence that the health and social sector may be making up the gaps in community support. Fig. 12 plots the answers to the question "Who do you go to for advice or to discuss any problems?". Again, the graphic shows a scattered and disconnected network, but with clusters of people who mentioned the Filwood Hope advice centre and various doctors visible.
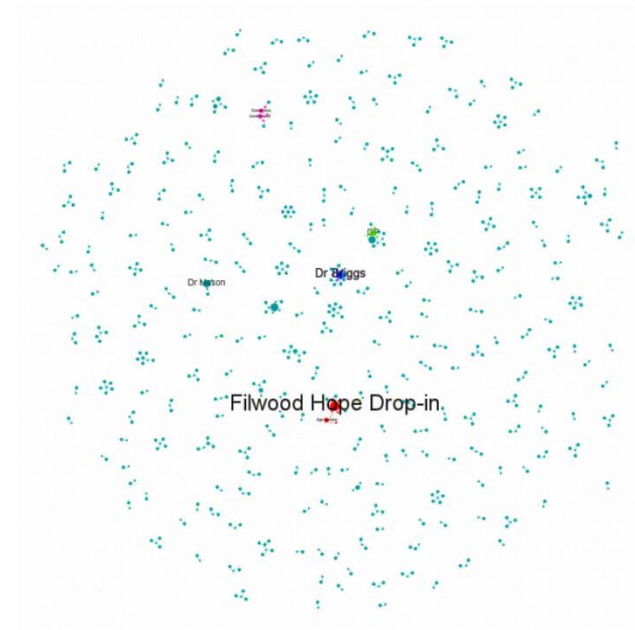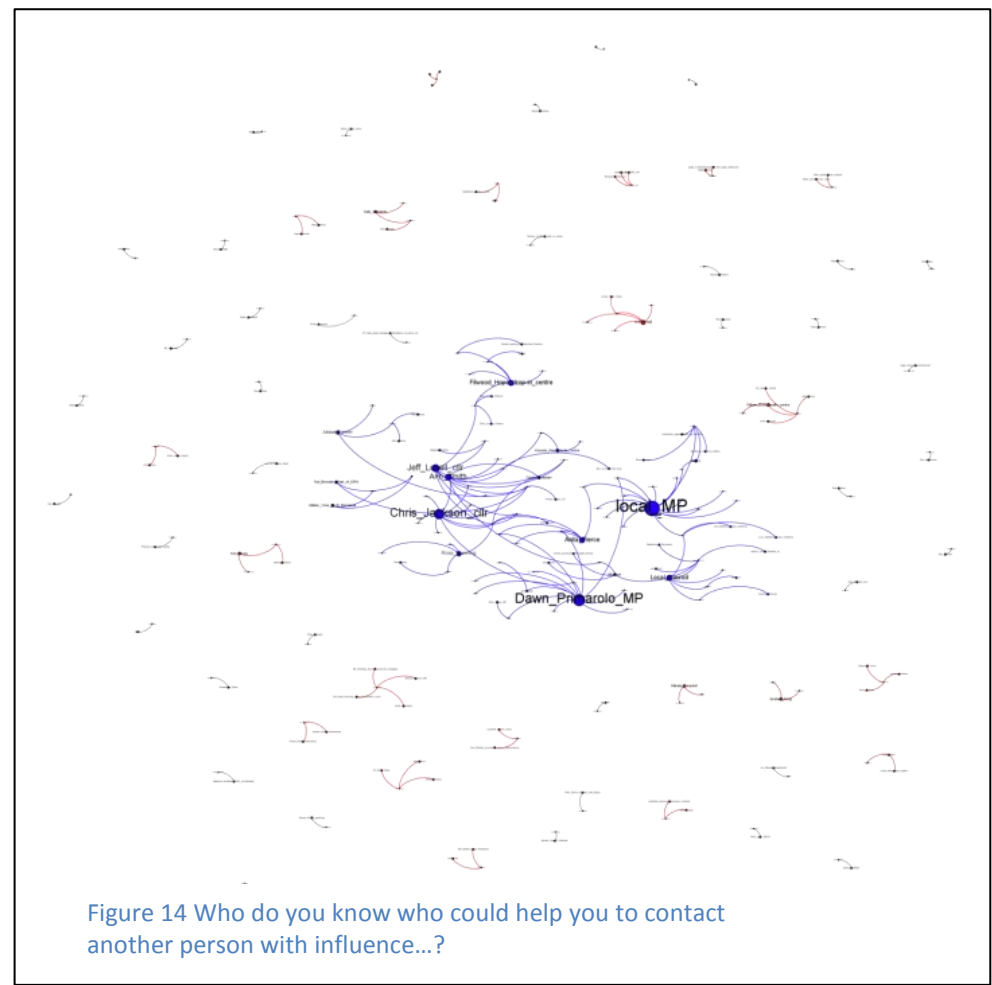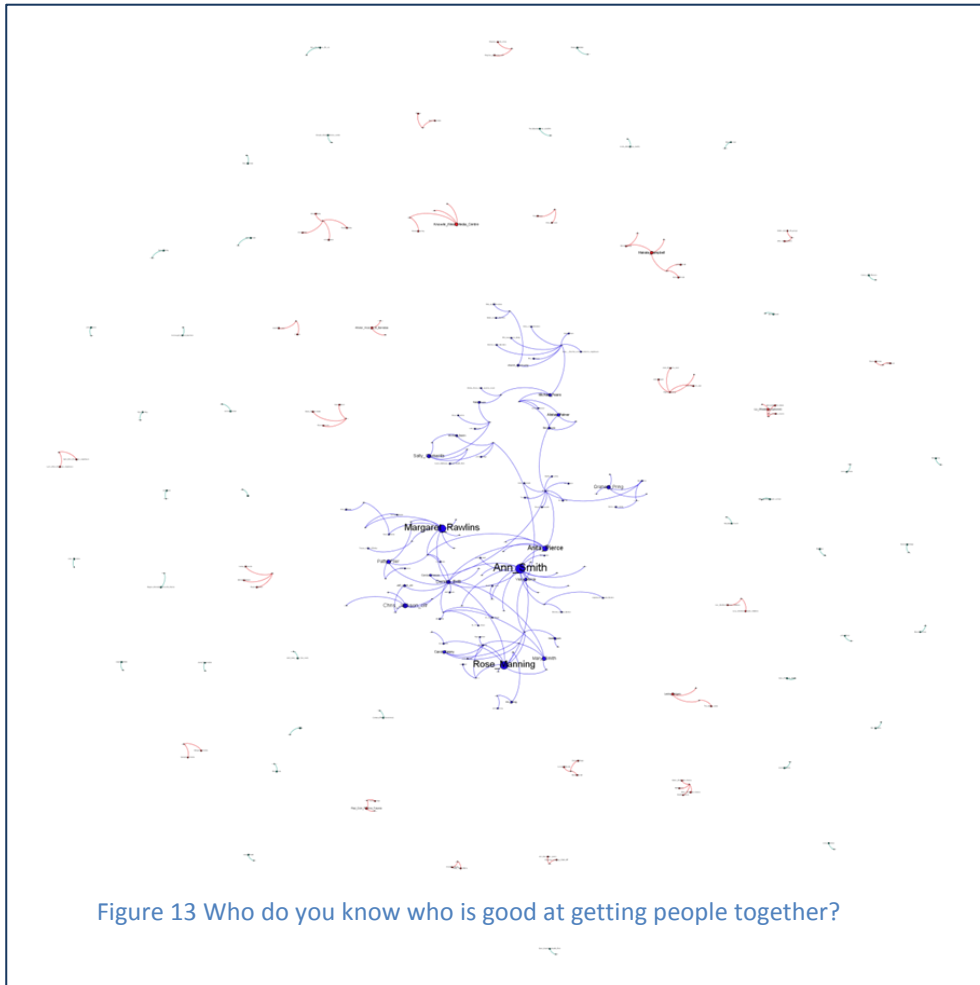
Figure 11 Who do you enjoy spending time with?

Figure 12 Who do you go to for advice or emotional support?

Getting things done - We asked: "Who do you know who is good at getting people together, if you want to change things or organise things locally?" and "Who do you know who could help you to contact another person with influence, power or responsibility to change things locally?"

Across our sites, having access to people with influence or who you perceive to be good at organising people is linked to higher life satisfaction. In Knowle West, less than two in every five people (37%) mentioned somebody who they felt was good at organising people or changing things locally, and a similarly low figure (39%) knew anybody with influence or power. The people who were identified as local power brokers were predominantly the interconnected members of the Community In Partnership (CIP), elected MPs and Councillors. This group is shown in royal blue in Figs. 13 and 14, and there are few clear inroads to this traditional authority network.

Figure 13 Who do you know who is good at getting people together?

Figure 14 Who do you know who could help you to contact another person with influence…?

Barriers and problems

Across all of our sites, perceiving barriers to the local community or having somewhere that you avoid is linked to having lower life satisfaction. In the Knowle West survey of 355 people, 178 responses were given to the question, "Is there anyone or anything you avoid and/or that stops you taking part in your local area?". Of these responses Melvin Square was the most frequently cited barrier, with just over 10% of our respondents identifying it as a place they avoid. Other locations such as Filwood Broadway and certain local shops and landmarks were also identified as places to avoid by numerous people, while various medical and mobility issues were also identified as barriers to local participation.

Fig.15 A 'word cloud' displaying answers cited as barriers or places to avoid. The bigger the font, the more often that word was mentioned.

Action!

So now that we have all of this data, what are we going to do with it?

Over the next few weeks and months we'll be working with our local community partners across our seven sites to put bespoke community programmes into action on the ground, to help people build their social networks by paying particular attention to some of the areas of interest detailed above. This might take the form of a befriending service among single mothers that we're piloting in the ex-mining village of Murton, or something like our digitally aided community prescription project in Knowle West, Bristol, which you can find out about by watching our online video - http://vimeo.com/52844426 .

Lots of hard work and imagination will be needed to put our research into action as we reach this exciting juncture of putting our thought into practice. To keep up-to-date with the progress, email janet.hawken@rsa.org.uk and ask to be added to the Connected Communities email list.

RSA
8 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6EZ
Tel +44 (0)20 7451 6882

www.thersa.org
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