

How experiments can help get Britain to the Big Society

Professors Peter John (The University of Manchester), Gerry Stoker (The University of Southampton) and a group of researchers looked into what more citizens can do to help create and maintain a good society, and how governments and other agencies can help to stimulate citizen action.

The team has carried out a range of research developing innovative experiments on charitable giving, recycling, volunteering, and people deliberating controversial topics online. They used randomised control trials and other experiments to get robust evidence about ways to change civic behaviour.

The research speaks to current policy debates about how to provide public services and programmes in an era of retrenchment:

- It supports the idea that *in local and decentralised settings* you can get innovation and value for money in public services and programmes.
- It suggests that if approached in the right way citizens *are willing to change their behaviour* and *do more to help themselves and others*
- It indicates though that government will have to *learn to operate differently* if the big society is to be encouraged
- It proves the value of *robust research methods* that could be used to develop and test a raft of initiatives aimed at promoting the big society

Headline results

- Door-to-door canvassing led to a 10% increase in kerbside recycling;
- A 6% increase in household food recycling as a result of residents getting 'smiley face' feedback on how their street was performing;
- Book donations going up by 22% as a result of people pledging to donate, and donators' names being publicly displayed;
- Citizens calling a call centre were asked if they were interested in civic activity and in a pilot over a short period from two neighbourhoods, 63 people said yes;
- Provision of tailored information about organ donation resulted in a 17% increase in registered donors.

Summary of Experiments and Key Findings

More info at http://www.civicbehaviour.org.uk/policy_briefings/

Policy Brief No. 1. RCT to test the impact of canvassing on household recycling

- In partnership with EMERGE – a social enterprise which delivers a weekly kerbside recycling service. 6580 households in 194 streets.
- 194 streets (6580 households) were randomly assigned to either control group or treatment group. Treatment group were visited by canvassers trained to promote and encourage recycling.
- The canvassing campaign raised participation in kerbside recycling by 5 percentage points, that is, an increase of 10%.
- The effect was sustained after three months, but was reduced to 4%.
- Canvassing was most successful in streets with low initial recycling rates, deprived areas, and areas with a high ethnic minority population.

Policy Brief No. 2. RCT to test whether providing information on the number of signatures of an online petition affects participation

- Those presented with high numbers were more likely to sign the petition than those presented with low numbers.
- Petitions that provided information that more than a million other petitioners had signed were more effective.

Policy Brief No.3 Building resilient communities

- Petitions that provided information that more than a million other petitioners had signed were more effective.
- The Wiltshire Council design experiment focused on whether moderation could be aided by the production of an audio-visual 'issue book' which would serve as a stimulus for discussion in area boards
- A 20 minute film was created which was used together with a facilitator to engage Area Board participants in a deliberation on a key county-wide issue: 'How can the Council best engage local communities in decision-making?'
- People who were selected for inclusion on the DVD were 'those who do not normally engage in formal Council mechanisms' including those from ethnic minority groups, young people, the military, people with disabilities, and other people who might find it difficult to engage
- The DVD issue book proved a novel way to bring in the voices of those who would not normally be present at organised decision-making forums.

Policy Briefs No.s 4&7. Online deliberation experiment

- 6000 participants randomly allocated to 4 treatment and 2 control groups.
- 2 deliberation groups were invited to participate in an online discussion focused on their attitudes and government policy towards anti-social behaviour and community cohesion.
- 2 information only groups had access to the same boards, but were only able to post – they could not read the comments of other participants.
- Those who posted tended to be female, older, with qualifications and politically interested.

- Only modest changes in policy preference were found in relation to youth ASB, and only amongst those who posted.
- The policy preferences of those who posted tended to move away from legal punishment and heavier policing towards the promotions of better role models and improved monitoring of young people by adults.

Policy Brief No. 5. RCT to test whether giving people feedback on their street recycling rate promotes participation in kerbside food waste collection scheme

- In collaboration with Oldham Council and EMERGE recycling – a social enterprise.
- 318 streets (9082 households) randomly assigned to either treatment or control group.
- Each household in treatment group received postcards giving feedback on the recent recycling performance of their street compared to other nearby streets.
- Streets performing above the average got a 'smiley face' postcard. Streets below the average got a 'frown face' postcard.
- Providing feedback cards to households had a positive impact, raising participation in the food waste scheme by 3 percentage points, an increase of 6%.
- Positive feedback encouraged those in high performing streets to carry on making the effort, while negative feedback persuaded those in low performing streets to join in with the scheme.

Policy brief No. 6. Secondary data analysis of citizenship survey

- Distrust in government institutions serves to stimulate individual and collective civic behaviour, and community voluntarism.
- Positive feelings about the neighbourhood are positively associated with all types of civic behaviour.

Policy Brief No. 8. Testing different approaches to lobbying councillors

- Recruited 8 community groups, spread across the country in 8 different local authorities.
- Each group had real local issues they wanted to tackle.
- Each group sent local councillors 2 different letters on the same topic. One letter was based on the literature on how to campaign and lobby and the other was not.
- The groups then randomly selected councillors in their authority to receive one of the two letters.
- The less detailed letter (the one not based on the literature) had a higher level of response and more helpful responses.
- Urgent need to further develop ward members as community leaders.

Policy Brief No. 9. Experiment to see if citizens calling a Council contact centre would be interested in getting involved in civic activity

- In partnership with a north-west council . Citizens who called the council's contact centre were asked if they would like to find out more about how they could get involved in community issues.
- Citizens were very enthusiastic about the project and happy to be asked.

- In a pilot of two neighbourhoods, over a short period, 63 people signed up.
- A broad range (in terms of age, gender and ethnicity) of new faces came forward, a third of whom had not previously been involved in civic activity.
- However, the initial enthusiasm did not tend to translate into action. This was because volunteering opportunities were not tailored to what people wanted.
- However, new more exciting projects were created e.g. A Good Morning Scheme – where citizens ring up isolated older people to say good morning.

Policy Brief No. 10. RCT to test the effectiveness of pledging and publicity in encouraging charitable donations

- Book collection organised jointly by University of Manchester with the charity Community HEART, and supported by Manchester City Council.
- Letters sent to 12,000 households in Manchester asking them to donate a book to help set up school libraries in South Africa.
- Households were randomly assigned to 3 groups:
 - o Pledge group – who received a letter advertising the book collection and asking them to pledge a book
 - o Pledge and publicity group – who received a letter, were asked to pledge and were told that a list of donors would be displayed in the local drop-off points.
 - o Control group – who just received a letter.
- 7000 books were donated.
- Asking households to pledge by itself did not increase book donations significantly beyond simply asking people to donate.
- The offer of public recognition for the donation, together with the pledge, had the most impact, raising the number of donations from 7% of population to 9%, an increase of 22%.

Policy Brief No. 11. The impact of discussion versus information on organ donation

- The project compared the impact of information alone versus information and discussion on organ donor registration levels.
- 180 students were randomly assigned to three groups to receive one of the following interventions:
 - o A four page information booklet encouraging registration, based on the principles of behavioural economics
 - o The booklet followed by a 15 minute deliberation
 - o An information booklet about swine flu (placebo control)
- After the intervention, students were invited to join the organ donor register.
- Registration increased across all 3 groups.
- However, the information booklet had the greatest effect, and raised the number of students on the organ donor register from 23% to 57%, an increase of 17%.