

## 6.5.11 Social Capital and Civic Engagement

*Social capital* refers to the norms and networks that enable collective action. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion — social capital — is critical for poverty alleviation and sustainable human and economic development. Good communication and interaction are at the heart of thriving communities. The significance of social cohesion and its potential effects has been described in the following terms:

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*“We are not talking here simply about nostalgia for the 1950’s. School performance, public health, crime rates, clinical depression, tax compliance, philanthropy, race relations, community development, census returns, teen suicide, economic productivity, campaign finance, even simple human happiness – all are demonstrably affected by how (and whether) we connect with our family and friends and neighbours and co-workers.”<sup>1</sup>*

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Measuring levels of ‘social capital’ is problematical. Nonetheless, it is accepted that the issue is bound up with the notion of an active community. In this context it is possible to develop an overview of the activities and links that form the foundation of a cohesive society. A Wales Council for Voluntary Action survey in 2001 indicated that there were over 2,600 voluntary organisations working in Cardiff. A Sports Council for Wales survey in 2002 showed that 52% of the adult population of Cardiff participates in Sport (includes billiards, snooker and walking over 2 miles), although the Welsh average is 55%.

### Civic Engagement

The 2001 General Election saw the lowest voter turnout in the UK since 1918. Turnout was 59%, compared to 71% in 1997 and 78% in 1992. This follows similar sharp falls in European and Local Elections. Indeed at the 1999 Local Elections a turnout of less than 40% was seen in half the polling district in Cardiff, with the lowest attracting a turnout of just 10%.

This decline in voter turnout reflects a general decline in trust of public authorities that has been documented over recent decades. There is however a body of evidence that indicates that where social interaction within a community is strong - public health is improved, crime levels are lower, educational performance is higher and voter turnout is higher. The challenge is how we rebuild trust between local communities and the public bodies that serve those communities to improve well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> Putnam R D ‘Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community’, New York: Simon and Schuster; 2000