

Covid and Society

An overview of Bennett Institute research

Overview

Background

The British Academy has been asked by the Government Office for Science to produce a report on the long-term societal effects and impacts of COVID-19. The desired outcome of the study is that it *“should leave us in a position to better understand what societal effects we want to cement, which we want to reverse, and what the trade-offs are.”*

Through the first phase of the project a number of particular policy areas and cross-cutting analytical themes have been identified. This process of prioritisation established three integrated areas of policy (Health and wellbeing, Communities, culture and belonging, and Knowledge, skills and employment) to be examined using five-cross-cutting analytical themes (Governance, Trust, Cohesion, Inequalities, and Sustainability). The analysis will also consider dimensions of scale, time and place.

This paper highlights how the work of the Bennett Institute addresses some of the areas of policy and the key themes identified by this project.

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge was launched in April 2018 to conduct high-level academic and policy research. The goal of the Institute is

“. . . to rethink public policy in an era of turbulence and growing inequality. Our research connects the world-leading work in technology and science at Cambridge with the economic and political dimensions of policy-making.”

Our research proposes sustainable, innovative policy approaches under three themes: Place, Progress and Productivity. Within each theme are a number of different research projects, some of which have concluded, while others are in different stages of delivery and development.

The Institute is also home to the Cambridge ‘hub’ of the national Productivity Institute.¹ The latter brings together world-leading experts from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, working directly with policymakers and businesses to understand, measure, and enable improvements in productivity across the whole of the UK, with the aim of improving living standards and well-being.

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy

¹ Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

What are the long-term societal effects of COVID-19?

There will, of course, be many lessons to learn from the policy responses to COVID-19. We are already seeing the importance of being able to adapt in the face of uncertainty.

The policies we select will do much to shape the future that we create. Throughout the pandemic there has been talk of returning to normal and building back better. Our focus at the Institute has been upon the different ways in which we can shape opportunities to build forward differently.

In many ways COVID-19 has exacerbated some of the most pronounced societal challenges which policy-makers need to be engaging. These include: the economic, social and health inequalities apparent in different parts of the UK, and among different groups of people; unequal access to public goods such as clean air or adequate infrastructure, for many people and communities; the weaknesses of some of our public institutions; and the low productivity apparent in many parts of the UK. These are all complex issues that belie easy answers.

It was exactly these kinds of challenge that the Bennett Institute was established to address through its programmes of research and policy engagement.

This short paper sets out some examples of where our work touches in particular on the areas of Health and Wellbeing, and Trust and Governance. As a key hub of the new national Productivity Institute we will also be starting research and engagement on the theme of Knowledge, skills and employment. As well as focusing on our

programme of research, we have also drawn on the COVID-19 blog series that we have developed.² Since the start of the pandemic, this has contributed over 40 blog posts on a wide range of different topics written by 43 different expert authors, most of whom are experts from Cambridge University. These have enabled us to comment on events as they unfold, while demonstrating the relevance and importance of academic research to the issues facing the UK and the world.

As we move forward through the next stages of coming to terms with living with COVID-19, our work will continue to address the long-term societal consequences of the pandemic.

² <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/?categories=30>

Health and Wellbeing

One of the key themes that has emerged through COVID-19 has been whether there is a real divergence between protecting the public health of the population and maintaining economic activity, and how to develop policy measures that are able to enhance both of these goals. A good deal of our work considers the fundamentally inter-related nature of these two areas.

The Many Dimensions of Well-Being³

The Many Dimensions of Well-Being project is exploring how sources of well-being differ among individuals and different communities and groups. The project also seeks to develop a set of well-being indicators for public policy that balance the need to represent this diversity with the requirement to develop a sufficiently small number of indicators to be useful for policy-makers.

Well-being is an inherently value-laden concept, so that defining it involves making value judgements about what is good for people. Our contention is that well-being public policy requires both technocratic and democratic input. The Many Dimensions of Wellbeing Project therefore takes both a quantitative and qualitative approach to public policy.

The quantitative side of the project uses existing data from the Office for National Statistics, and elsewhere, to analyse -- using statistical techniques -- differences across a range of well-being

³ The Many Dimensions of Well-Being project is funded by the ESRC/AHRC and is being carried out in co-operation with the What Works Centre for Well-being.

indicators by spatial scale. The indicators in question are happiness, life satisfaction, anxiety, and a sense that one's life is worthwhile. The variables that are typically found to drive variance in these items at the individual level often lose their predictive power at the level of cities or regions, and vice versa. Education, for example, explains little of the variation in these well-being indicators at the individual level, but is the most important variable for explaining differences in aggregate well-being between the populations of cities.

The quantitative analysis will explain how the key dimensions of well-being change, when moving from larger to smaller spatial scales, thereby providing policymakers with important insights into what levers they should target when considering how to improve well-being in their jurisdictions.

The qualitative side of the project is exploring the extent to which well-being measurement can be scaled up. It considers in particular how citizens tend to define well-being, and explores metrics that reflect these popular views, while also considering the various social and cultural factors that might be shaping these perspectives.

Bennett Institute researchers are currently working with Turn2us⁴ – a national charity helping people in financial need gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and other financial help – to coproduce a theory of well-being and associated metrics for them to use in their work.

⁴ <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/>

Health and Wellbeing

Townscapes

The Townscapes project supplies a deep analysis of how towns are faring, in economic terms, across Britain, and offers a finely grained picture of their fortunes. The preponderance of support for Brexit among town-dwellers, and the countervailing values of many young urbanites, has sparked a deep debate about how and why towns are locked out of the circuits of growth in the modern economy, and how the inequalities associated with economic geography can be more effectively tackled.

To date, we have published reports covering Scotland, Wales, and the North-East and South-West of England. Each report uses a unique data set to explore: the ways in which long-term demographic and economic shifts are continuing to affect different towns; how towns relate to their wider economic contexts; and different kinds of policy response to spatial inequalities between towns and other places.

We have also published a report focusing on England's health inequalities. The report identified that *there are some marked, and worsening, health inequalities within the English townscape. Its most deprived towns have worse health outcomes on a variety of important measures. Shorter life expectancy, worse self-reported health, and the higher relative incidence of a number of illnesses mean that people who live in these different places have much lower wellbeing than their counterparts in more affluent places.*

The report, published in May 2020 concluded that *there is every chance that the ongoing coronavirus pandemic will make these*

inequities worse, not least because of its impact upon the employment prospects of those in the lower part of the income distribution.

COVID-19 and subjective wellbeing

Through the first UK-wide lockdown, it was widely expected that lockdowns would negatively impact wellbeing. However, by analysing 12 months of data on subjective well-being collected before, during and after coronavirus outbreaks in different countries, our research paper on Covid-19 and Subjective Well-being found the opposite to be true.

While the initial weeks of the pandemic saw a large rise in negative mood, lockdowns were associated with improvements in subjective well-being, which rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels.

The report noted that *"during lockdown, welfare schemes were expanded and hardship funds were introduced, along with amnesties on overdue rent and bills. This probably reduced stress for people living precariously."*

As we continue to learn how to live with COVID-19, this finding has significant implications for governments concerned about the negative effects of further lockdowns on wellbeing.

Weak ties: how casual social encounters contribute to well-being and are good for business

On the Bennett Institute blog, Dr Simone Schnall drew upon research she had conducted to consider the importance of 'weak tie'

Health and Wellbeing

casual encounters – those “*brief, casual encounters that we used to take for granted*” – and how they contribute to both well-being and the economy. The blog outlined how these types of interactions “*can be a surprising source of positive feelings and wellbeing.*”

Dr Schnall concluded “*it is worth considering how to facilitate the brief, casual encounters that we used to take for granted but that have become increasingly rare over the last few weeks [of lockdown]. Doing so could pay off in multiple ways.*”

Key Reports and blogs

The Many Dimensions of Well-Being (The Bennett Institute, 2020)

The Townscapes Project (The Bennett Institute, 2020)

Townscapes: England's Health Inequalities (Goodair, et al., 2020)

COVID-19 and Subjective Well-Being: Separating the Effects of Lockdowns from the Pandemic (Fabian, et al., 2020)

Lockdown led to happiness rebound, after wellbeing plunged with onset of pandemic (Lewsey, 2020)

Weak ties: how casual social encounters contribute to well-being, and are good for business (Schnall, 2020)

Trust

Our research shows that trust is a key contributor to the creation of social capital. It also plays an important part in generating economic productivity. Sitting at the nexus between social policy and economics, policy interventions focusing on increasing trust could make a significant impact in the post-COVID world.

The Wealth Economy: social and natural capital⁵

The Wealth Economy project aims to value the intangible assets upon which we rely, and asks:

"... how we can move to a world beyond GDP? Our measurement of economic success has evolved to include diverse critical assets: physical, financial, intangible, human, natural and social capitals. Could there be a radical replacement of GDP with a small dashboard recording access to these six key assets?"

The work focuses on natural and social capital. Natural capital has attracted international attention, and a few different statistical agencies have begun developing natural capital estimates. The two kinds of asset therefore offer different types of opportunity to shape the ways in which statistics are used and policy is developed.

The report on the project's first year reflects research completed by the Bennett Institute using principal component analysis to look at the relationship between trust and social capital. The research

identifies two components – *General Trust* and *Trust in People v Institutions* – that can explain 50 per cent and 15 per cent of the total variation in trust responses, respectively.

The report concludes that *these preliminary results are encouraging for the prospect of policymakers being able to measure the broad concept of social capital in just two variables that crystallise the results of many survey questions."*

As part of its success metrics, the Industrial Strategy Council⁶ has adopted *General Trust* and *People v Institutions* as its measures of Social Capital.⁷

Trust and Productivity Growth: an empirical analysis

In a subsequent working paper, Diane Coyle and Saite Lu considered the relationship between trust and productivity by *exploring whether total factor productivity could be the channel through which trust affects levels and growth rates of income."*

The research found that

Trust does have a significant positive association with total factor productivity for a sample of European countries . . . our results consistently show a sizeable and highly statistically significant positive link between trust and productivity . . . the theoretical emphasis on social capital combined with the strength of our empirical findings

⁵ The Wealth Economy project is funded by LetterOne

⁶ <https://industrialstrategyCouncil.org>

⁷ <https://industrialstrategyCouncil.org/15-social-capital>

Trust

suggests the importance of improved measurement of trust or social capital for a better understanding of productivity dynamics.”

In a pandemic, your real wealth is other people

Writing about social capital as an asset that needs to be at the centre of policymakers’ attention, Matthew Agarwala identified three important lessons to be learned. First, *our public discourse and economic analyses need to take social capital more seriously.”* Second, *We need to find a way to build trust and trustworthiness – in governments, communities, and their ability to support each other.”*

The final lesson outlined by Dr Agarwala is that *we must re-think what constitutes capital investment. Much of social capital revolves around trust, dignity, and respect. Many keyworkers used to be referred to as unskilled or low-wage’ labour. Yet when push comes to shove – as it literally did in the quest for flour and toilet paper – they are the ones carrying this country through the crisis. Perhaps it is time to re-imagine public sector pay and minimum wage increases as social capital investments, rather than economic costs.”*

Social Capital and the Response to COVID-19

At the start of the pandemic, the United Kingdom saw the emergence of a network of Mutual Aid Groups – volunteer-led, grassroots support at a community level to help those self-isolating, and the most vulnerable, physically and mentally.

Marco Felici looked at the distribution of these groups and considered what this revealed about the nature of social capital and trust in contemporary society. His analysis showed a great deal of variation across different Local Authority areas, with ranges equivalent to between one group in a local authority with a population of about 250,000 to 58 groups in a local authority of 250,000.

The research also indicated that there was a positive correlation between the number of Mutual Aid Groups per 10,000 people and measures of socio-economic advantage, such as gross disposable household income per head, or the share of individuals with an undergraduate degree or above, as well as the median wage. The correlation is also positive, looking at the average scores for well-being measures including happiness and life satisfaction.

Felici,

Key Reports and blogs

Trust

The Wealth Economy (The Bennett Institute, 2020)

Measuring Wealth, delivering prosperity (Zenghelis, et al., 2019)

Valuing Wealth, Building Prosperity (Zenghelis, et al., 2020)

Trust and Productivity Growth – An Empirical Analysis (Coyle & Lu, 2020)

Social capital and the response to COVID-19 (Felici, 2020)

In a pandemic, your real wealth is other people (Agarwala, 2020)

Governance

Brexit reflected some fundamental changes in the ways in which many people viewed democracy and the legitimacy of government in the UK. COVID-19 has also thrown these issues into relief and exposed some of the key fault lines in the UK's system of territorial government.

Between Two Unions⁸

The (ESRC-funded) Between Two Unions project brought together leading experts from universities across the UK and Ireland to examine the process of constitutional reinvention required as result of Brexit. The Bennett Institute's research focused on the institutional and inter-governmental challenges associated with this profound change in the UK's external relationship with the EU. The research studied how different parts of Whitehall are engaging with the devolved governments on both a formal and informal level, how England is represented in these processes, and the different questions which Brexit has raised about the UK's territorial constitution.

Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Time for a Radical Overhaul?

⁸ The project was funded by the ESRC

In an article for the journal *Political Quarterly*, Professor Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon, along with colleagues from Edinburgh University, considered intergovernmental relations (IGR) between the UK government and its devolved counterparts in the wake of Brexit. The article *make[s] the case for: (i) a clearer articulation of the principles that underpin IGR; (ii) concrete changes to enhance the effectiveness of IGR machinery; and (iii) consideration of options for how England might be brought into the fold.*"

In a related blog, they conclude that *in normal times, reform of a little known, barely visible, system of meetings might seem like a peripheral concern. But, in the midst of the constitutional challenges unleashed by Brexit and the public health and economic consequences of Covid-19, finding ways to facilitate better dialogue between the UK's four administrations could help to restore trust, and contribute to more effective governance across the UK.*"

How should the UK govern itself in the time of Brexit?

In his inaugural Bennett Institute lecture, Professor Michael Kenny focused on wider questions about the implications of Brexit and how the UK should arrange its territorial parts. He argued that a different perspective should be adopted when considering how the UK is governed:

Rather than following the established habit of considering each as fundamentally separate . . . we

Governance

would do better to approach the UK as a complex and interactive system made up of different political communities, all moving at different speeds and – in some respects – in different directions.”

He also proposed a *focus on building viable, legitimate and robust forms of devolution and finding ways to ensure that the central state supports and works in partnership with the mezzanine tier.”* He concluded:

One of the key moves here is for the central state to internalise a different kind of understanding of its own role in relation to the other political communities it has spawned. The reverse logic of devolution is that the centre needs to become an arbiter and co-ordinator, as well as a player in its own right. And this means learning and adopting the language and ethos of partnership with other centres of political authority across the UK.”

Place-based policy after Brexit

In a lecture delivered at the annual conference of the Centre for Science and Policy in June 2019, former Permanent Secretary of the Department for Exiting the EU, Philip Rycroft, considered Brexit and place-based policy at three different levels: the UK in the world; the UK as a multi-nation state; and also place and identity at a more local level. The lecture concluded:

And like the outcome or not, the challenge of place and of identity cannot stop at the point of exit, whenever that

might come. In a very profound way, Brexit will oblige us to think very hard about ourselves, our place in the world and how we hold ourselves as a country. Our sense of social cohesion, indeed the very cohesion of the United Kingdom, will depend on it.”

Territorial governance and the coronavirus crisis

Whilst the pandemic initially saw the devolved governments *being seen to set aside their differences with London and respond to the crisis in a co-ordinated fashion”,* a blog written mid-way through the first lockdown by Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon considered the underlying tensions between the UK government and the devolved nations.

The blog concluded that *it does seem increasingly likely that the deep crisis triggered by Covid-19 will become a vital chapter in the history of the UK as a pluri-national state.”*

How might English metro-mayors adapt to the post-coronavirus world?

COVID-19 has also been identified as a key factor in the ongoing development of English devolution. In a blog published by the Institute, Mark Sandford asked whether the UKs management of the coronavirus pandemic could *provide the impetus to a more systematic approach to the devolution of power to metro-mayors*

Governance

within England?” As we have seen over recent months, it is probably too soon to tell.

As Sandford concludes: Suggestions of regulatory devolution signal a willingness to challenge conventional interpretations of what place leadership means in the UK's political culture. Their prognosis depends, however, on acceptance from the UK government and a willingness on its part to share the role of governing territory in the post-coronavirus world . . . To achieve decentralised capacity and constructive intergovernmental relationships, a clear vision of the respective roles of different governmental organisations is indispensable.”

Between Two Unions (The Bennett Institute, 2020)

Will a no deal Brexit lead to the break up of the UK (Kenny & Sheldon, 2019)

Reforming intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom (McEwen, et al., 2018)

How should the UK govern itself after Brexit (Kenny, 2019)

Place policy after Brexit (Rycroft, 2019)

Territorial governance and the coronavirus crisis. (Kenny & Sheldon, 2020)

Why have the UK's governments diverged on easing lockdown? (Kenny & Sheldon, 2020)

How might English metro-mayors adapt to the post-coronavirus world? (Sandford, 2020)

Key Reports and blogs

References

Agarwala, M., 2020. *In a pandemic, your real wealth is other people.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/pandemic-your-real-wealth-other-people/>

Coyle, D. & Lu, S., 2020. *Trust and Productivity Growth - An Empirical Analysis*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/trust-and-productivity-growth-empirical-analysis/>

Fabian, M., Gilbert, S. & Foa, R., 2020. *COVID-19 and Subjective Well-Being.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/covid-19-and-subjective-well-being/>

Felici, M., 2020. *Social capital and the response to COVID-19.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/social-capital-and-response-covid-19/>

Goodair, B., Kenny, M. & Marteau, T., 2020. *Townscapes: England's health inequalities.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/townscapes-englands-health-inequalities/>

Kenny, M., 2019. *How should the UK govern itself in the time of Brexit.*
<https://consoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Prof-Michael-Kenny-How-Should-the-UK-Govern-itself-in-the-Time-of-Brexit.pdf>

Kenny, M. & Sheldon, J., 2019. *Will a no deal Brexit lead to the break-up of the UK?.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/will-no-deal-brexit-lead-break-uk/>

Kenny, M. & Sheldon, J., 2020. *Territorial governance and the coronavirus crisis.*

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/territorial-governance-and-coronavirus-crisis/>

Kenny, M. & Sheldon, J., 2020. *Why have UK's governments diverged on easing lockdown?.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/why-have-uks-governments-diverged-easing-lockdown/>

Lewsey, F., 2020. *Lockdown led to happiness rebound, after wellbeing plunged with onset of pandemic.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/news/lockdown-led-happiness-rebound-after-wellbeing-plu/>

McEwen, N., Kenny, M., Sheldon, J. & Swan, C. B., 2018. *Reforming intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/reforming-intergovernmental-relations-united-kingd/>

Rycroft, P., 2019. *Place policy after Brexit.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/place-policy-after-brexit/>

Sandford, M., 2020. *How might English metro mayors adapt post-coronavirus?.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/how-might-english-metro-mayors-adapt-post-coronavi/>

Schnall, S., 2020. *Weak ties: how casual social encounters contribute to well-being, and are good for business.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/weak-ties-how-casual-social-encounters-contribute-/>

The Bennett Institute, 2020. *Between Two Unions.*
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/between-two-unions/>

References

The Bennett Institute, 2020. *The Many Dimensions of Well-Being*.

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/measuring-wellbeing/>

The Bennett Institute, 2020. *The Townscapes Project*.

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/townscapes-project/>

The Bennett Institute, 2020. *The Wealth Economy: Social and Natural Capital*.

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/wealth-economy-social-and-natural-capital/>

Zenghelis, D. et al., 2020. *Valuing Wealth, Building Prosperity*.

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/valuing-wealth-building-prosperity/>

Zenghelis, D. et al., 2019. *Wealth Economy Project: Natural and Social Capital*.

<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/measuring-wealth-delivering-prosperity/>