

Participation and community on Bradford's traditionally white estates

Findings
Informing change

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This research shows how residents on two traditionally white estates understand their communities. It explores how they participate within them and with agencies and other bodies, with the emphasis on residents' own views. It considers why, given the partial achievements and commitment to improving the lives of the most excluded social groups, government has been unable to generate sustainable change in such settings.

Key points

- Many residents felt regarded as 'the lowest of the low', with society moralising and blaming their behaviour for their problems. In turn, as 'white' estates have opened up to minority ethnic groups and other newcomers, these 'others' can become the focus of residents' frustrations.
- Many residents participated to improve their estates, often leading to strain on their lives and misunderstanding of their motives. They need support for their activities and to combat such prejudices.
- Senior managers and agencies have unintentionally perpetuated problems through tokenistic consultations, not respecting residents' knowledge and thinking they know what is best for communities.
- These attitudes have angered and demoralised residents trying to improve conditions, in turn inhibiting participation. Policy-makers' proposals have not resonated with the reality of residents' lives nor built on their capabilities.
- The problems facing estate residents originated in policy shifts they had no control over, which diminished social housing stock and its status.
- The research concludes that residents need to be treated with respect in order to treat others the same way. Residents clearly understand their estates' problems better than anyone and must be part of the solution, working with agencies and other bodies to improve life on the estates.

The research

By Jenny Pearce and E.J. Milne,
Department of Peace Studies,
University of Bradford

Background

In some locations in Britain where the population has remained largely white, discrimination is based on class. As minority ethnic groups and other newcomers move into these areas, the complexity of the nature of poverty and the negative social interactions it fuels becomes evident. Ethnic dimensions mark 'otherness' in places where the rest of society sees all residents as 'others'.

The research focused on two estates which have become socially fragmented internally and stigmatised by wider society. The problems facing estate residents originated in the 1980s, with policy shifts and structural changes over which they had no control. One result of these changes was a diminishing of social housing stock and its status. The study asked how people view their communities, who tries to improve them and how residents can change their estates and transform their lives and aspirations.

Study locations

Bradford comprises the city itself and outlying towns such as Keighley. Wealthy neighbourhoods contrast with areas of low economic activity and high deprivation, particularly Bradford and Keighley's inner-city areas. The high deprivation levels of parts of Bradford, including the estates studied, are tied up with the area's recent history, particularly since de-industrialisation. The council's 1984 report, *The Changing Face of Bradford*, acknowledged that: "There seems little doubt that the poverty, isolation and unemployment in many areas of Bradford creates undercurrents of depression and stress, which saps people's energy, taking the heart out of their lives".

The team worked with two estates: Braithwaite and Guardhouse on Keighley's western outskirts, and Scholemoor in inner-city Bradford. Braithwaite and Guardhouse comprises 2,500 inter-war residences, with a mix of housing association and privately owned accommodation, since some tenants exercised their right to buy. It is in the Keighley West ward, where 96 per cent of residents are 'White British' (2001 Census), compared with 76 per cent in Keighley as a whole; unemployment in the ward was 6.4 per cent in 2001, with 39.6 per cent of working-age residents having no qualifications. In contrast, the small, post-war Scholemoor estate is in Bradford's Great Horton ward, two miles from the city centre. Sub-sections of Census data accessed by the research team, which covered the

estate itself, showed that Scholemoor houses around 1,500 people in 500 residences, with a mix of housing association and privately owned accommodation. The 2001 Census showed residents' ethnic make-up as 65.5 per cent 'White British' and 29 per cent 'Asian or Asian British'. This has shifted with the arrival of Slovakian and Slovakian-Roma families. In 2001 the estate's unemployment rate was 31.5 per cent, and 53.4 per cent of working-age residents had no qualifications.

Estate residents and sense of community

'Community' still had meaning on both estates but was now having to be renewed to counter trends which have led people to 'lock their doors'. The estates' physical appearance was vital to morale and residents' self-esteem. Failure to tell incomers about issues such as gardens, fences and rubbish has led them to become scapegoats for residents' frustrations. Residents were very sensitive to disrespect towards them: even workmen carrying out repairs on the estates could upset people if they were careless about their work and rude. This reflected residents' strong sense that the outside world saw them as the 'lowest of the low'.

Fear, insecurity and erosion of community

Fear and insecurity were serious problems for estate residents, and took multiple forms. Although generated by a minority, these problems impacted on all residents. Social life suffered when fear meant 'no go' areas within estates and times not to be on the streets. Speeding motorbikes created worries as much as theft and vandalism. Taboo subjects of domestic violence and sexual abuse, though not publicly acknowledged, created serious trauma and mental health issues. Some male attitudes towards women were sexist and demeaning, impacting on women's health and well-being.

The world beyond the estates has less to fear than estate residents themselves from these problems, but negative moralising from outside can blame estate residents for social ills, hampering the search for solutions. Residents therefore often turned to each other rather than the outside world for help, and sometimes sought their own retribution for wrongs.

Prejudices and resentments

Many estate residents had strong prejudices and resentments, echoing society and the media's view of them as 'other' – i.e. 'different' and 'lower'. Prejudice and resentment could be expressed towards people from other community centres and organisations, those

living in different ‘territories’ on the estate, those with mental health issues, ‘problem families’ or newcomers. Tensions were highest on the smaller estate, which already had a significant proportion of British Asian households and more recently Slovakian and Slovakian-Roma families and some asylum seekers. Conflicts flared occasionally and could take violent form. These left lingering bad feeling, which could make resentments more entrenched, leading to further incidents.

There was little attempt to facilitate understanding, communication or interaction on the estates, even though some people within all communities would welcome such initiatives. In the absence of face-to-face contact, people saw each other as groups rather than individuals, so it was easy to blame ‘the Slovaks’ for one incident, or ‘white families’ for kids who threw stones. On the larger estate, which was still overwhelmingly white, the British National Party had stirred up expressions of overt racism and appeared to be still doing so with some younger residents. However, neither estate had a significant shift towards organised racism, but rather a disconnection from all forms of politics and decision-making. Residents’ sense of powerlessness and worthlessness was compounded by lack of efforts to explain why new people were moving onto the estate and who they were.

External agencies’ role

Many agencies were working to improve the estates, but without sufficient coordination or a unified agenda, nor enough understanding of what it means to be a resident. Although agencies were dedicated and committed to change, they failed to communicate with the broader community about their activities, preferring consultations with limited participation and what many residents felt was a pre-set agenda.

Community associations and facilities for young people

These were very important to residents. Young people’s boredom generated some of the greatest frustration and anxiety on the estates. Residents wanted an active youth service and police who aimed to engage with youth rather than just admonishing and punishing them. The community centres and their services were highly valued, but required more resources and support for the many volunteers involved.

Meaningful participation

Residents have participated over many years in activities to improve the estates, often without pay or recognition of financial costs to themselves.

Their own communities have often sidelined such activists because of what they do, and managers and agencies wishing to be seen to have ‘consulted’ have treated them in a tokenistic way. Agencies have often not recognised the amount of time and effort these residents invest in their communities, and have sometimes even taken the credit themselves or disregarded such activities. Activists have become overburdened and have often suffered antagonism, with their motives misinterpreted. Outstanding individuals have become spokespeople, voicing residents’ views to agencies, but this may also have empowered them over others and does not guarantee that they will be taken seriously.

Many residents have become very disillusioned about the possible gains from participation in community activity, and feel they lack the skills to participate and have nothing to offer. They might interpret consultation as a sham where residents can only make nominal change because council and agency staff have already decided what is needed. Senior managers have sometimes thought that they know what is best for the communities.

Conclusion

Residents need to feel they are treated with respect in order to treat others the same way. Given the background of residents’ lives, it is unlikely this will happen without helping people to analyse their feelings towards newcomers and those who are ‘different’. Efforts to challenge prejudice of all kinds are needed, with support for those tackling prejudice on the estates.

Agency workers need to understand the complex social situation on the estates, the frustrations generated and how to communicate better with residents living very difficult lives. Funders should encourage cooperation and communication among estate residents, enable them to build their own agenda for change, and discourage dependence on agencies or a few individuals to solve all the estate’s problems.

Funding also needs to be geared to encouraging community associations to promote wider participation, not just deliver services. Funders and agencies need to realise how the agendas they impose on community organisations may hinder outreach and engagement by community workers and activists. Associations and community centres can be important focal points for building a sense of belonging and interacting among residents. However, funders need to be sensitive to their history and careful not to create new organisational structures that can act as barriers and inadvertently generate divisions on the estates.

The way forward for sustainable change is not simply to suggest that residents always know best. However, they

clearly understand their estates' problems better than anyone and must be part of the solution, working with agencies and other bodies to improve life on the estates. Participation needs support and nurturing, so that more people feel able and willing to help, giving them a sense of dignity and power that can make change sustainable.

Policy and practice implications

The researchers suggest that:

- Policy-makers and politicians take into account the origins of the problems facing estate residents and the broader social, economic and political context, which residents cannot control or easily influence. Inequality and its impact on mental health and well-being are serious obstacles to sustainable change, rather than inadequate services and high levels of deprivation as such. Blaming estate residents for Britain's social ills will not enable residents to bring about the changes many of them aspire to.
- Agency workers and council staff need further training to understand residents and the stresses in their lives – and to be seen to understand – in order to reverse decades of residents feeling left out.
- There could be incentives to service deliverers to invest time in building rapport and trust with residents. Frontline workers could be encouraged to gain the abilities required to build these relationships and to respect local residents.
- Local residents could receive help to support new families coming onto estates, to introduce them to the customs and practices of estate life, and to give existing residents a chance to understand incomers' cultural backgrounds. This might include language classes for newcomers, and literacy support for local residents in their own communities.
- There should be no tokenistic participation or consultation where decisions are already made and residents have no real chance of effecting change or challenging proposals. Residents know that most council, agency and other 'consultations' are public relations exercises to allow officials to tick

boxes in evaluation processes. They know that any challenge, discussion or participation in these events will seldom be taken on board and used to change policy or action. If agencies want residents to take part, they need to listen, engage in proper dialogue and, if necessary, redesign policy and take new decisions based on what residents have said.

- Belief in people's capacity to contribute to solving their own problems is essential, including listening to residents' complaints as well as their ideas and solutions. Explanations should be given when these ideas are not feasible, but should be taken seriously when they are.
- Activists committed to their communities need to be strengthened and supported, so that these 'agents for change' can be genuine catalysts and encouragers of wider resident participation, rather than concentrating influence in their own hands.

About the project

The research was carried out intensively over 18 months in 2008–9. Estate residents, four community researchers and agency workers were involved throughout. Visual research methods included community mapping, photography, visual focus groups and video. The team held many informal conversations with residents and local agencies, police, councillors and council officers, and worked closely with community associations. In April 2008 an open meeting, 'Bowered?', was held at the Scholemoor community centre.

However, being visible in places that people passed daily was a better way of reaching those who shied away from community centres and public meetings. Even so, certain groups, particularly working-age men, figured less. Residents' views were summarised in two leaflets distributed on the estates, to encourage ongoing conversations and be a talking point for those working to improve life on the estates. A final workshop discussed the findings and generated conversations between residents and Bradford decision-makers.

For further information

The full report, **Participation and community on Bradford's traditionally white estates: a community research project** by Jenny Pearce and E.J. Milne, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk