

## Challenging images: housing estates, stigma and regeneration

Many of the UK's worst housing estates do not simply endure material disadvantage but also suffer from poor reputations. Viewed as 'problem places' home to 'problem people', such a reputation can reinforce an estate's difficulties. A report by Annette Hastings and Jo Dean at the University of Glasgow examines three stigmatised estates undergoing regeneration programmes and explores how regeneration initiatives can address image problems. The study found:

- f** Despite substantive change on the three estates, a poor local image persists. An estate's reputation does not automatically improve as the estate improves.
- f** Stigma impoverishes all areas of residents' lives. Residents believe that they are economically disadvantaged and receive lower quality services as a result of stigma. There is also a considerable emotional impact from living in a stigmatised area.
- f** A variety of agencies contribute to the continuing problem image of the estates by their actions. Regeneration initiatives currently tend not to make agencies aware of the impact of their behaviour on an estate's image or offer strategies for change which benefit both the estate and the agency.
- f** It is inappropriate to talk of a single image of an estate; rather there are several 'fractured images' with identifiable groups of residents and non-residents holding different opinions on the estate and its residents. Different groups will respond to different approaches from image managers.
- f** The researchers conclude that:
  - A poor image can lessen other benefits of regeneration programmes and should be proactively addressed by regeneration initiatives. There should be an awareness of the 'image impacts' of the full range of activities undertaken in estates, and the need for a senior 'image manager' is indicated.
  - Image management will not be effective unless it is accompanied by changes on the ground. The timing and tone of image management strategies also need to match the regeneration process.

## Background

Improving the image of disadvantaged areas is increasingly recognised as an important part of the regeneration process but there has been little previous evaluation of the usefulness of 'image management' for stigmatised estates. Current thinking about tenure diversity and balanced communities requires estates to attract and retain young, employed households, with potential residents making a positive choice to live in an area rather than seeing it as a last resort. This research aimed to explore whether estates undergoing substantial regeneration investment were able to turn around the local image and, if so, what were the most effective strategies for doing so.

## Multiple images

Each estate has received substantial regeneration investments in recent years. Key features include the demolition of problematic housing forms, tenure diversification, landscaping and successful initiatives to reduce crime and employment. Yet the stigma attached to the three estates persists.

While each estate suffers from the popular perceptions of social housing generally, they each have their own particular local reputations, for example, for drugs, car crime or youth disorder. Often the estate's image is rooted in many years of stigma; perhaps because the area was built for slum clearance and has never lost that association. Yet different sections of the population also emphasise different aspects of the estate and its residents. There is not one unified image of an estate; rather there are several different images.

Residents are very conscious of the estate's image. The research identified three groups of residents: committed stayers, potential leavers, and probable leavers. The committed residents reject the area's reputation and see it as a personal slur. In contrast, potential and probable leavers argue that the area's reputation is largely deserved and can only be addressed by changing the behaviour and attitudes of other residents. All three groups identified a number of ways in which the image of the estate affects their own lives. The weight of their evidence points to lives which are impoverished by stigma:

"No matter where you go, if you mention where you come from, you're classed as muck."

Non-residents are also conscious of the estate's image. Again, three groups were identified: budding incomers; doubtful incomers; and improbable incomers. Budding

and doubtful incomers both believe there has been substantial change in the area over recent years, with doubtful incomers believing it is too soon to trust in the area's regeneration. For these groups the poor reputation is no longer deserved or is exaggerated. In contrast, improbable incomers believe that the estate's reputation is accurate:

"A lot of it is falling apart. The houses are falling apart again, the roofs have been burnt off or nicked or mucked about with. ... They spent millions doing it all up and ... it's just as bad as ever."

## Building images: a framework

There are a number of private and public sector agencies, such as estate agents, local employers, schools and cleansing services, whose behaviour affects an estate's image. Their actions can be categorised as:

- *responding to images* - activities and behaviour which are simple reactions to an estate's image, for example, postcode discrimination by employers or the underselling of owner-occupied property by estate agents. Deliberate challenges to images are not included in this heading;
- *shaping images* - activities which contribute to the nature of images created or sustained, positively or negatively. These are likely to be unconscious rather than deliberate, and so any contribution is inadvertent. Examples include the messages sent out by design of the built environment or the quality of shopping facilities within the estate;
- *challenging images* - activities intended to influence, manage or challenge perceptions of the estate. Challenging images can both be strategic or *ad hoc* and may address either individual images, or the general background noise of a problem reputation. Examples include marketing and PR activities by regeneration initiatives or strategies to draw non-residents onto the estate.

Most agencies, in both the private and public sectors, can be seen as *responding* to and *shaping* images. In comparison, few resources are devoted to managing perceptions of the estate. A key finding is that these agencies should be included in strategies to challenge images.

## Challenging images: an approach

While the process of regeneration of itself does not substantially challenge a negative image, it is an essential prior component of tackling a poor

reputation. Regeneration initiatives have the potential to affect how the estate is perceived both through their own regeneration activities and through harnessing the energies of public and private agencies for the estate's future. This process – including marketing the estate, media management, and an awareness of the image impacts of all activities – can be thought of as 'image management'.

The study did not identify any single best model of image management. However, it did identify a variety of possible methods for developing local image management strategies. These include who should take the primary role, how to involve other agencies, how to connect with residents and potential residents and some modifications to regeneration practice.

### **The image manager**

The study suggests that one individual should be responsible for image management in a neighbourhood. This person need not be located within an existing regeneration initiative, although this is likely to be the most appropriate structure in many areas. In order to influence local agencies and be able to draw attention to the effects of both the regeneration process and other factors on the estate's image, the image manager will need to have a recognised status. The Social Exclusion Unit's recent proposals on Neighbourhood Management offer a potentially effective vehicle for delivering this.

### **Encouraging stakeholders**

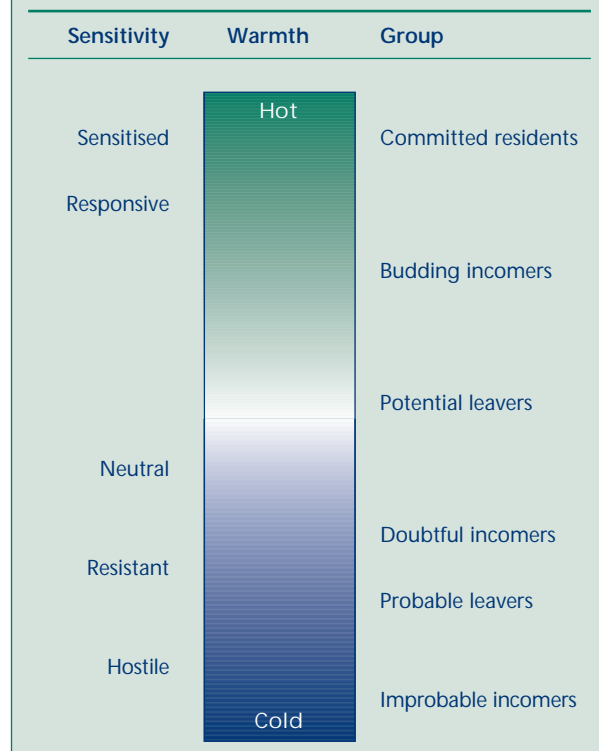
The image manager needs to persuade other agencies to change their attitude and behaviour towards the estate. The study identified two possible strategies, which are probably most effectively used in conjunction:

- The *altruistic strategy* alerts agencies to the damage they are causing to the regeneration process (in which they may be substantial investors) and to the lives of residents. At the very least, agencies should be encouraged to learn more about the estate and its regeneration, so that they are no longer responding to outdated perceptions.
- The *self interest strategy* motivates agencies to challenge images of the estate by showing them how sustaining a negative image may be damaging to their interests. The focus here is on how agencies can benefit from an improved image through increased profits or effectiveness.

### **Reaching residents and non-residents**

There is also a need to communicate with the local population in order to retain existing residents and to attract households from neighbouring areas. Image managers need to be aware that different sections of the young employed population may hold different perceptions of the estate. In order to challenge images effectively, managers need to carefully identify and target their audiences, according to whether they are more or less receptive to messages about the estate. Different groups of residents and non-residents vary in their warmth towards the estate, and in their likely responsiveness to image management (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sensitivity to image management: a thermometer



Different groups will respond to different messages and a strategy that doesn't take account of such differences may backfire. Image managers may need to nurture existing residents and to support those who move to the estate rather than simply focus on attracting incomers.

### **Modifying regeneration practice**

A focus on image management has implications for more traditional aspects of regeneration practice. Non-residents, including local employers, were typically more aware of prominent demolition work than of how the estate was being rebuilt. Few were

aware of the social and economic components to regeneration. This suggests that a variety of strategies to make non-residents more aware of change is needed. These might include efforts to increase the visibility of change, through 'corridor regeneration' (tackling high-profile areas – such as commuting routes - first), through media and advertising, and through encouraging non-residents to visit the estates through leisure or training and employment opportunities.

However, the needs of existing residents should not be overlooked. There is evidence that existing mechanisms for communicating with residents, particularly dissatisfied residents, are inadequate and image managers should consider carefully the success of their approach to this. Residents need to be made aware of the agenda and timetable for change and any decisions to focus action on those sites which are most visible to non-residents should be made with residents' involvement.

### Conclusions

The existence of neighbourhoods with persistent problem reputations has been recognised for a number of years. For too long, it has been assumed either that these reputations will disappear in the wake of a package of regeneration measures or conversely that poor image is an intractable problem.

This research strongly challenges these assumptions. It suggests that image management can be successful and that direct measures must be taken to address the problem. Stigma blights people's lives and its persistence is a drag on regeneration. Unless it is tackled, people will continue to move out of stigmatised areas, and new residents will be discouraged from moving in. Employers, estate agents and other key agencies will continue to undervalue people or property from such neighbourhoods and the long-term sustainability of the regeneration effort will be imperilled.

Although problem reputations have strong historical roots and are difficult to shift, the findings from this study suggest that something can, and therefore should, be done. The suggestions for action contained in the full report cut across almost the entire regeneration agenda.

### About the study

This report is based on research in three stigmatised housing estates in Central Scotland, the North East of England, and the West Midlands. The estates were selected because their long-standing poor reputation had been identified as an issue for regeneration to address. Each has had substantial investment in the fabric of the estate and in addressing economic and social problems.

The research consisted of focus groups with estate residents and non-residents totalling more than 200 participants. Additionally there were interviews with key actors in local regeneration initiatives, with local employers and with representatives of local media. Fieldwork was conducted between May 1999 and February 2000.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Challenging images: Housing estates, stigma and regeneration** by Jo Dean and Annette Hastings, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 289 6, price £12.95).