

A new approach to assessing community strengths

Work in inner city Bradford piloted a practical approach to assessing the capacity of communities to take lead roles in regeneration and local action. The 'community strengths assessment' approach focuses particularly on local community and voluntary groups. It looks at how they are organised, their aims and needs, existing support and what support they might need in future. The approach involves comprehensive local surveys which provide detailed information leading to recommendations for action. Independent consultants assisted staff from Bradford Council in developing the approach. Its key features are:

-  **Community strengths assessments focus on community and voluntary groups not individuals. Whilst individuals have a part to play, this approach sees effective community involvement and leadership as being built primarily through the collective activity of local community and voluntary groups.**
-  **The assessment contains two main elements – level of community organisation and level of support. In combination, these help build a comprehensive and detailed picture of community capacity, and highlight gaps in both activity and infrastructure that can be acted on through new initiatives and planning.**
-  **The approach provides a framework for planning capacity building. It incorporates a highly participative style of working, involving and working with local groups rather than imposing a plan drawn up by outside agencies.**
-  **The approach focuses on what communities have to offer and contribute to the renewal process rather than just on problems and the indicators of deprivation. It values groups' skills and talents and specifically asks about achievements.**
-  **Community strengths assessments can be useful for:**
 - planning support for community groups and community enterprises, such as training, advice, funding and practical resources;
 - providing a baseline description for programmes concerned with joint working and community involvement;
 - establishing local neighbourhood and community-based projects.
-  **In addition to informing regeneration programmes and neighbourhood renewal, the approach can also be used with communities of interest and identity across a whole district or borough, such as disabled people's groups. Community strengths assessments can feed into local community planning, district-wide strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships.**

Background

The 'community strengths assessment' approach was developed by Bradford Council and COGS, a community development consultancy, working jointly with many local projects and groups in Bradford. The research work to devise the new approach focused on Bradford's inner city New Deal for Communities area, as well as involving two other neighbourhoods. In the New Deal for Communities area it involved asking twenty-five grassroots community groups about their needs, problems, resources and hopes for the future.

The survey painted a detailed picture of the level of community organisation, showing an area with many active and committed groups. However, these were often experiencing isolation and a lack of access to training, advice and secure funding. Organisations based or working in the area providing support to community groups were also surveyed. It showed that a wide range of help was available but crucially not being accessed enough by local groups.

The findings were reviewed and main conclusions agreed at an open meeting involving over forty local groups and voluntary organisations, as well as agencies and Bradford Council. Using the 'community strengths framework' outlined below, groups decided their area was at 'Level Two' and went on to make specific recommendations for developing the levels of support and community organisation to a higher level.

What community strengths assessments involve

This is a highly participative approach – the rationale behind the approach means that the community strengths assessment would only ever be carried out with the explicit backing of local groups. This involves consultation through local networks and forums of grassroots groups.

The process developed in Bradford includes the following stages and elements:

- **A survey of community and voluntary groups.** This asks about: how groups are organised, their memberships, aims, plans, what training and advice they receive, funding and resources, equal opportunities issues, links with partnerships and networks. This builds up a picture of the level of community organisation in the area. In order to do this, a comprehensive list of local groups was developed through extensive outreach work. All groups on the list were then invited to be surveyed, either through personal visit or through postal questionnaire.
- **A survey of organisations providing support.** This asks about resources, funding, training, information, advice, facilities, equipment and so on that organisations such as Primary Care Trusts, council departments and larger voluntary agencies provide to local community and voluntary groups. This builds up a picture of the level of support in the area. Again, through outreach work, a list was developed of all known 'support organisations' based in or working in the area. All such organisations were then sent a questionnaire through the post.
- **Analysis.** The information gathered from the two surveys is analysed and draft findings identified. The findings from the two surveys are combined to identify the key gaps in the area's level of community organisation and level of support.
- **Consultation.** Groups and agencies are invited to participate in workshops and open meetings to discuss the draft findings. The assessment approach includes a 'community strengths framework' to help inform recommendations for future action. This provides five levels of community organisation to help groups identify their existing level of community capacity and what further support is needed. At one extreme, in Level One would be an area with groups low on confidence, skills and links, few groups with paid staff and little active involvement in training or equal opportunities initiatives. In contrast, Level Five would show a well-developed community sector, securely funded with practical support organised in relation to local needs. The aim of having five levels is to provide flexibility in describing an area and to encourage creative thinking to move up between levels.
- **Plans for action** are drawn up, involving local agencies, the local authority and partnerships. Recommendations agreed locally can feed into an action plan for the area; if needed, progress can be reviewed.

In some areas, communities may be poorly organised and need basic community development support to help get things moving. Other areas may already have many well-established community groups and voluntary organisations, but need more specialist help so that people can be more involved in running local projects and in managing regeneration initiatives.

In the pilot study, the community strengths assessment was given backing from the community

representatives involved in the New Deal for Communities Board. The work was co-ordinated by staff from Bradford Council's Community Development Policy Unit, working jointly with COGS. The outreach and survey work was carried out by a locally based community project. The final report was approved by the New Deal for Communities sub-group on community, youth and education and is used to assist planning new initiatives in the area.

The main features of this approach

Compared to many community profiles, the method developed for assessing community strengths contains a number of innovative features:

- **Community strengths assessments are mainly about community and voluntary groups, and not particularly about individuals.**

Community strengths profiles are primarily about the collective activities of community and voluntary groups. The needs, skills and role of individuals will obviously contribute to the community development and regeneration initiatives in the area. The focus in this approach, however, is on the needs and potential role of community groups and organisations, with individuals' needs addressed within this context. In other words, in community strengths assessments, building effective community involvement and leadership is seen as being primarily identified through the collective activity of local community and voluntary groups.

- **The assessment contains two main elements – level of community organisation and level of support.**

The approach includes both these elements to establish a clear baseline of community capacity. An area may have a reasonable degree of community organisation but lack effective support for it to develop further. Equally the surveys may reveal a low level of community organisation despite an apparently high level of support, which would indicate the support infrastructure is not addressing local needs effectively. The community strengths framework can be used to establish a broad assessment of the levels of strength different areas are at, in terms of these two key elements. In combination, these two elements will help to build a comprehensive and detailed picture of community capacity, and highlight gaps in both activity and infrastructure that can be acted on through new initiatives and planning.

- **The framework provides a model for planning capacity building.**

The community strengths assessment provides a straightforward way to identify the level of community capacity and practical ideas on how to move between levels. Groups can be involved in planning how their area could be better organised and better supported. Due to the highly participative style of working, it ensures this happens in a 'bottom-up' manner, involving and working with local groups rather than imposing a plan drawn up by outside agencies.

- **A positive approach.**

The approach also emphasises the strengths of communities – often the picture painted of neighbourhoods focuses exclusively on problems and indicators of deprivation rather than what communities have to offer and contribute to the renewal process. The surveys highlight what is already there in terms of local community organisations and what the potential is for the way forward. It values the skills and talents groups have and specifically asks about achievements.

Using community strengths assessments

Regeneration

Much is talked about community involvement in both neighbourhood renewal and European funded programmes and about the need to build the capacity of communities for them to fully participate. In order to provide proper support for this process, a clearly defined starting-point or baseline description is needed. The community strengths assessment can provide this baseline picture in considerable detail.

Tackling social exclusion

Community strengths assessments could provide an important tool for communities to describe their own area and, along with other information, present their own case for action and new developments.

The survey work can help to identify excluded groups in neighbourhoods and ask them about their needs. The approach specifically involves outreach work to ensure marginalised groups are consulted and involved. Community strengths assessments can also be carried out with specific groups across a whole district or borough rather than in just one neighbourhood. This may, for example, assess the position of disabled people's groups or groups from a particular minority ethnic community where people live across a larger geographical area.

Community planning

Part One of the Local Government Act 2000 placed local authorities under a duty to prepare a community strategy for promoting the social, environmental and economic well-being of their areas. Community strategies aim to identify local actions that will improve the quality of life for all sections of the community, based on a long-term vision. Local Strategic Partnerships will need to be pro-active in ensuring communities are involved in the planning process and that the capacity for effective involvement and partnership working is assessed. To achieve lasting impact, this will need to be based on the reality of the baseline starting point for communities in each district.

Improved joint working

In order to tackle inequalities and improve services, local authorities and other public agencies increasingly want to work jointly with local communities. For local authorities, initiatives such as Best Value, Modernising Local Government and Local Agenda 21 all call for increased consultation and involvement. Equally, many health service organisations are looking to the voluntary and community sector to work jointly with them in achieving nationally set targets concerning health inequalities. Many funding bodies will want to know what the potential is for joint working and how geared up local community groups are to take on new projects and initiatives. Community strengths assessments can help to identify the starting point for effective joint working.

Conclusion

The key feature of the approach is that such assessments can provide a systematic description of the baseline of community capacity, by focusing on the needs and strengths of community and voluntary groups. Such information is crucial for communities to get involved effectively in projects, partnerships and local initiatives.

Finding out about the level of community strengths will be useful in any area, not just those areas involved in regeneration programmes and neighbourhood renewal. Community strengths assessments can also be carried out with interest- and identity-based groups across a whole district or borough, such as disabled people's groups. This will be useful for local community planning or for informing the development of district-wide strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships.

About the project

The three pilots were carried out in different parts of Bradford in 2000. These were Horton Grange, Allerton and Lower Grange and the New Deal for Communities area. In particular, the experience gained from the work carried out in the New Deal for Communities area informed the development of the method. An early version of the community groups survey questionnaire was first designed by the Community Development Foundation for use in the Sandwell District, West Midlands and combined with a household survey. The community strengths framework has been developed from an original model developed by COGS for South Yorkshire Objective One (Priority Four) Partnership. All these different sources have contributed to the creation of this new approach. The work was co-ordinated by Steve Skinner, Policy Officer for Community Development in Bradford Council, and Mandy Wilson from COGS.

How to get further information

A handbook arising from the project describes, in clearly laid out steps, how to carry out a community strengths assessment. It is published by the Community Development Foundation

Assessing community strengths: A practical handbook for planning capacity building, by Steve Skinner and Mandy Wilson, is available from the Community Development Foundation, 60 Highbury Road, London N5 2AG, Tel 020 7226 5375 (price £17.95 plus £1.80 p&p, ISBN 1 901974 31 6).