

Neighbourhood images in Teesside

A qualitative assessment of the views of people living in two estates in Teesside reveals that stigma and social exclusion have remained despite expensive regeneration initiatives. Both of the areas studied had a long history of disadvantage and had remained unpopular. The researchers explored residents' perceptions of life on the estates, their views of regeneration and their future hopes and expectations.

- f** Residents on both estates displayed high levels of resilience. There was a strong culture of coping with problems and difficulties. Family and friends were a key source of support and residents emphasised the importance of community.
- f** The arrival of 'strangers' and 'outsiders' was perceived as a pivotal element in the decline of the area and connected with the idea of 'community lost'.
- f** Residents expressed their full support for the idea of involving local people in local decisions although there were suggestions on both estates that decisions were made behind their backs or that involvement was restricted to cliques.
- f** Residents felt stigmatised because they lived in estates with a bad reputation. It was their perception that this stigma led to active discrimination. In particular, they felt excluded from a variety of services and opportunities.
- f** Residents reported a constant feeling of insecurity. The most victimised residents tended to be 'outsiders', who were often the repeated victims of burglary and harassment.
- f** There was a distinct loss of pride resulting from the deterioration of local landmark buildings. The trend of closure and neglect on one estate was interpreted as a clear sign that the area was in terminal decline.
- f** Residents were quite cynical about tenure diversification on their estates and felt in some instances that it had exacerbated the problems.
- f** There was little evidence to suggest that residents felt that the broader socio-economic factors that lead to the marginalisation of estates had been addressed.

Background

The study explored community perspectives on two disadvantaged estates in Teesside. In each, the views of residents who were both active and non-active in community projects were sought. The two study areas were Norton Grange, an outer estate in Stockton-on-Tees, and St Hilda's, an inner-city housing area in Middlesbrough. Both have a long history of being disadvantaged, troubled areas with a series of inter-connected problems. They have remained unpopular and residents have felt stigmatised.

Norton Grange had recently undergone a three-fold regeneration process funded in part through Stockton City Challenge at a cost of £26 million. This included the clearance of almost half of its housing units, modernisation of remaining council stock and increased community resources. The clearance programme focused on areas where crime and nuisance levels were highest, with properties replaced by housing association and private housing. A Community Forum, giving residents access to the decision-making process, was established and community facilities had also been recently developed.

In St Hilda's a £7 million programme of modernisation, demolition and rebuilding took place in the 1980s. This included the construction of around 120 houses, although most of these now stand empty. Various community-based strategies have been implemented under the auspices of the St Hilda's Partnership. They have secured in the region of £2 million from various sources, including £1.3 million from the Single Regeneration Budget.

Residents' perceptions of their neighbourhoods

Three broad themes emerged from interviews and focus groups: crime and harassment, the physical appearance of the areas, and social life and the community.

Crime and harassment

Residents reported a constant feeling of insecurity. The most victimised residents tended to be 'outsiders' who were often repeated victims of burglary and harassment. Some newcomers were exasperated by the apathy shown towards crime and nuisance. However, whilst house burglary and violent crime were generally condemned in both areas, certain crimes were considered more acceptable - certainly in St Hilda's if not Norton Grange. For example, there was some evidence that burglary of businesses, car theft and shoplifting were regarded as fair activities for people coping in a poor area. Drugs were a problem to varying degrees on both estates and the arrival of heroin has contributed significantly to the decline of St. Hilda's over the last five years.

The physical appearance of the area

This was more of a contentious issue in St Hilda's because of the recent increase in empty residential, commercial and public property. There was a distinct loss of pride resulting from the deterioration of local landmark buildings. Perhaps most significant of all is that this trend of closures and neglect, together with the declining population, is interpreted as a clear sign that the local authority's intention is to close down St Hilda's as a residential area.

In Norton Grange, the physical appearance had improved as a result of the regeneration work but certain areas still appeared problematic and the reappearance of boarded-up property was of growing concern to all residents.

Social life and the community

There were mainly positive feelings about the people and community in each area. Residents spoke about having good neighbours and friends, the community and community spirit, being near their family and being actively involved in the community.

Despite population decline over recent years in St Hilda's, there was still a core community which was bound by close and complex kinship and friendship ties. However, there was regret at the exodus of many former members of the community and a feeling that what they had was slipping away, that the estate was being allowed to decline.

In Norton Grange, the active residents stressed the presence of community and this appeared closely associated with their optimistic commitment to making regeneration work.

Stigma and social exclusion

Residents felt stigmatised because they lived in estates with a poor reputation. They believed people living outside the estates thought that they were criminals and that their children were out of control. This unwanted stereotyping was deeply resented. In St Hilda's, residents were pessimistic about these attitudes changing, whereas activists in Norton Grange felt the views of outsiders were dated and would change given time.

Residents on both estates felt they were actively discriminated against because of where they lived. In particular, they felt excluded from the wider population in the following ways:

- a weakening of the right to be protected by the police;
- being denied equal participation in the labour market;
- unequal access to educational opportunity;
- being denied access to credit and services.

Getting by

There was generally a strong culture of coping with problems and difficulties, although ways of doing this varied significantly between the estates and between active and non-active residents. Family and friends were a key source of support, and very strong support networks existed in St Hilda's owing to families being well-established and closely related. In contrast, descriptions of support in Norton Grange were almost exclusively restricted to active residents.

Notions of community

Perceptions about good neighbourhoods appeared closely associated with the concept of 'community' which was used to describe positive attributes about the localities, including people looking out for each other and being there and caring for each other particularly at times of illness and bereavement. Additionally, a general notion of safety, the presence of community facilities and 'things for kids' were seen as important factors underpinning good neighbourhoods.

In discussion with residents, notions of 'golden eras' emerged, that is, what had been good about the areas in the past. A theme of 'community lost' was particularly prominent in St Hilda's. Here, the arrival of 'strangers' and 'outsiders' was perceived as a pivotal element in the decline of the area. These terms were generally applied to people without a strong connection to the area, and particular stereotypes emerged, for instance 'druggies', people without families who didn't mix and 'funny families'. It was suggested that these attitudes were based on a protectiveness towards children rather than upon blatant discrimination.

While 'community lost' was also a theme in Norton Grange, the term was more frequently used by active residents to describe their current objective: the re-establishment of community.

The process and effects of regeneration

Residents tended to express their full support for the idea of involving local people in local decisions; they perceived a greater appreciation of what needed to be done and some suggested that they were morally obliged and/or had a right to be involved. However, there were suggestions that 'cliques' often dominated and excluded the participation of others. In St Hilda's, there was a general view that most decisions were made behind residents' backs and a suggestion that 'outsiders' did not have the same right to influence decisions as more established residents.

Most of those holding positions of authority on the Community Forum in Norton Grange asserted the belief that the residents had a high level of control over the decisions that were made about the estate. They thought the council had been very much in favour of

their participation, although one of the active residents cast doubt upon their actual level of influence.

In Norton Grange, it was impossible to miss the extensive refurbishment of housing. This was viewed positively, as were training courses for local residents. But, whilst active residents had a high level of commitment and remained optimistic for the future, non-active and newer residents were on the whole less confident. Despite this optimism, it was clear that many residents felt the stigma had remained, albeit to a lesser degree.

Most people in St Hilda's were aware of regeneration initiatives, although the private development of housing within the area was thought to have been disastrous. Tensions between newcomers and existing residents were prominent. Some of the privately developed houses had been sold on to a housing association but these were now standing empty. Many of the owner-occupiers were in negative equity.

There was a general feeling that the area was getting worse despite regeneration initiatives. The stigma associated with St Hilda's was entrenched and the situation was thought to be deteriorating.

Expectations and aspirations

In St Hilda's, residents' hopes differed significantly from their expectations, due largely to the continued decline of the area, whereas in Norton Grange, there was more optimism, especially among active residents.

Conclusions

The study highlighted the extreme nature of the problems that residents faced on a daily basis and the extraordinary resilience of residents. There was a high level of commitment to supporting one another and to taking action to improve the social life of the estates.

Unemployment was endemic on both estates, with crime, harassment and victimisation extensively reported. On both estates a most pernicious problem appeared to be the stigma associated with just living there. This had a bearing upon employment opportunities and securing credit, for example. Many residents still felt marginalised and excluded from the decisions made about their locality and this serves to illustrate the difficulties of ensuring inclusion in these settings.

Both of the estates considered in this report were chiefly council estates before the introduction of various regeneration initiatives. At different points in time, the tenure make-up was diversified with a view to creating more balanced communities.

In St Hilda's, the process of diversification has apparently done little to overcome the stigma associated with the locality and its reputation remains poor. This study highlights that certain aspects of the

process of regeneration in the 1980s are thought by local people to have contributed to the decline. In Norton Grange, the massive investment in the stock has clearly had an enormous impact. Nevertheless, there were worrying signs that the new owner-occupiers and many of the housing association tenants wished to disassociate themselves from the council tenants and viewed their part of the estate as separate and different. These findings indicate that tenure diversification is unlikely to represent a panacea for the problems of disadvantaged estates. The story in St Hilda's suggests that there may be grave dangers associated with this option.

There is also little evidence on either estate to suggest that the residents feel that the broader socio-economic factors that lead to marginalisation and social exclusion have been addressed. The long-term sustainability of regeneration should therefore be questioned in both areas.

About the study

This is one of four linked local studies, commissioned as a mini-programme within the JRF Area Regeneration research programme. The others look at East London, Liverpool and Nottingham.

This study was undertaken by Martin Wood of the Northern Consortium of Housing Authorities and Clive Vamplew of Social Policy Research Services. It is based primarily on the results of qualitative research. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with all the principal community activists that were available and with comparable numbers of non-active residents. In addition, interviews and discussions were held with local authority officers and members, community workers and others who were involved on the estates. Focus groups were held with active and non-active residents in separate groups. Some photographic work was undertaken with active residents and this was used to further stimulate discussion in focus group settings. A good deal of more informal observation was also undertaken with different age groups in different settings.

Further information sources, in addition to the more traditional literature search, were documentary and secondary data, and the coverage, during the past ten years, of the two study areas by the local newspapers.

How to get further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood images in Teesside: Regeneration or decline?** by Martin Wood and Clive Vamplew (ISBN 1 902633 29 6), is published for the Foundation by YPS.