

## Neighbourhood images in East London

A study of two estates in East London found a picture of a vibrant and complex community life. The study focused on the views and experiences of local people, their perceptions of neighbourhood, social networks and involvement with the community. The research, by Vicky Cattell and Mel Evans, illustrates both variation and consensus within and between two neighbourhoods in regeneration areas and explores the underlying influences. It found that:

- f** The local neighbourhood remains central to the lives of East Londoners. The friendliness and good humour of local people, their patterns of reciprocal aid and supportive networks strengthen residents' sense of attachment.
- f** Formal organisations involve older age groups more than younger. Past experiences of clubs, trade unions, or campaigns are influential motivators for older residents on both estates. Younger residents are less likely to share these experiences.
- f** The disaffection of young people and their perceptions of powerlessness are causes for concern.
- f** Local resources and facilities are key influences on the neighbourhood's store of 'social capital'. They can help in developing supportive networks and relationships of trust, and encouraging participation.
- f** Social activities and "having a laugh" are important to East Londoners. Residents want community facilities to consolidate this aspect of their identity.
- f** Residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood and degrees of attachment to it vary. One understanding of the 'good neighbourhood' is based on the interaction of similar people: another embraces co-operation between different groups.
- f** Past, recent and future regeneration initiatives have influenced perceptions of the neighbourhood and the forms that community life takes. As well as strengthening communities within neighbourhoods, regeneration activities have also caused some divisions.
- f** The researchers conclude that cohesive and vibrant neighbourhoods require: opportunities and facilities for both localised socialising and wider social cohesion; organisations which encourage effective participation through training and prioritise the involvement of newcomers; the involvement of young people in regeneration; and a holistic and flexible approach to regeneration.

## Background

This research focuses on two East End estates: Keir Hardie in Newham and Trowbridge in Hackney, boroughs which are amongst the most deprived in England. Both neighbourhoods have recent experience of regeneration activities: in Trowbridge, housing regeneration has been radical; on the Keir Hardie estate, work has been small-scale and selective. Both estates are physically isolated and located in areas of industrial decline. They have high proportions of children, pensioner households, single parents, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, unemployed people, and residents living in poverty.

## Images of the neighbourhood

Residents of Keir Hardie resent the poor image outsiders have of their neighbourhood and its exclusion from what they see as the better-resourced part of the borough. Trowbridge residents, however, appreciate being viewed as distinct from Hackney, which they see as having a worse reputation. Neighbourhood images are dynamic. Past and present regeneration initiatives had clearly influenced perceptions of and identity with the neighbourhood as well as patterns of neighbourliness, residents' social networks and participation in local life. Community is regenerated in different forms and at different times. For example:

- Many residents had moved to Trowbridge in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of slum clearance from Hackney Wick and Bethnal Green, bringing attitudes and ways of living which residents associated with traditional community life.
- Recent housing regeneration on Trowbridge had encouraged neighbourliness and shared responsibility for children, and helped develop relationships of trust and perceptions of safety. However, some public spaces where young people used to gather had been lost. Now, every corner or low wall to sit on is in front of someone's house and conflict with older people is more likely (see below).
- Awareness of future regeneration work affected residents' attitudes towards what constitutes a good neighbourhood. Residents welcomed proposals for 'sitting out' areas behind tower blocks, hoping they would help bring back 'community spirit'; they also welcomed on-going plans for new community social facilities, such as a community hall, café and sports facilities, seeing them as a potential means to bring together diverse groups.
- As well as strengthening communities within the neighbourhood, involvement in regeneration campaigns has divided the Trowbridge neighbourhood as a whole. Regeneration in adjacent areas had had a negative impact on Keir Hardie residents who had felt left out.

## Variations in perceptions of neighbourhood

Residents had differing degrees of attachment to the community:

### *Communities within neighbourhoods*

Commitment to the neighbourhood was especially strong amongst those who:

- had long-term roots;
- had local extended families;
- had built up local friendship networks;
- saw themselves as being 'East Enders';
- were involved in regeneration campaigns or participated in local organisations;
- lived in 'neighbourly friendly' housing.

### *Divisions*

There were also divisions within the community:

- On Keir Hardie, residents living in small friendly closes spoke warmly of their immediate neighbourhoods, but nevertheless identified problems in surrounding streets.
- Some residents now perceive Trowbridge as being two estates, Trowbridge and Wick Village. Some residents identified with only one of these areas.
- Some residents on both estates see differences between locals and newcomers as a major source of division between residents.
- Middle-aged, elderly and long-term residents were critical of the behaviour and values of some younger residents, newcomers and single parents. Comments focused on parenting skills, noise, and pride in and upkeep of the homes.
- Teenagers contrasted perceptions of their own powerlessness and lack of neighbourhood resources with those they attributed to adults. These feelings were exacerbated by perceptions that elderly residents were "always moaning at them or about them".

Different groups were more likely to coexist happily in areas where the design and layout of housing encouraged neighbourly interaction. Nevertheless, this was not enough to guarantee cohesion in all cases, such as relations between young people and adult residents.

### *Views of a 'good neighbourhood'*

Residents saw neighbourliness, safety, involvement, continuity, caring attitudes and having fun as essential ingredients of a good community, as well as good and equitably distributed resources. Some residents' understanding of 'community' was based on the interaction of similar people; for others, it was based on co-operation between different groups. Pensioners living in close proximity to one another spoke proudly of how they supported each other - "like the old

Bethnal Green" - while one middle-aged resident insisted that a good neighbourhood would be:

"... an estate where everybody was 35 upwards. The community would be a lot better if they put all the problem families together, and all the young families together."

Another expressed a sharply contrasting view, however:

"Unless you get the youngsters involved with the older ones we will not mature ... We harp on about the old times, and how good they were, but we should talk to the youngsters ... There is this dreadful resentment of youth, everyone wants them out of their area."

### Social networks and the importance of neighbourhood

The local neighbourhood, and the people living in it, remained highly important in residents' lives. The majority of those interviewed seldom left the area. Restricted opportunities as well as 'being used to' the neighbourhood were influential, but 'the community' - the people, their friendliness, sense of humour, willingness to 'look out' for each other - was also seen positively as a major resource. Different patterns of networks - made up of family, friends, neighbours, and other contacts - provided a range of benefits, and all contributed to residents' quality of life and their ability to cope. Residents suggested, however, that the loss of job opportunities locally meant there were fewer men on one estate. Those remaining felt they must shoulder an increased burden for "sorting out any trouble ... like drunks on the swings at night".

### Opportunities for effective participation

**The Wick Tenant Management Co-op** is a successful model of estate management and resident participation. Because it is perceived as effective and well-run, discourages vandalism, carries out repairs quickly, has rules about noise and other problems, the Co-op contributes to residents' positive perceptions of the area. These perceptions, in turn, encourage residents to participate actively. Tenancy agreements and effective training of committee members also encourage residents' involvement. Participation is not restricted to long-term residents: the Co-op deliberately seeks to involve newcomers to the estate.

**Older residents** on both estates are more likely to participate in voluntary activity than younger residents. Motivating factors include having a stake in the neighbourhood, a characteristic less common amongst teenagers. Current and past opportunities seem influential in encouraging involvement. Active residents referred to opportunities in their formative years: experience of sports clubs, the scouts, 'playing as a team member' were seen as affecting attitudes. Some were once union activists, others organised social activities at work. Younger residents were less likely to have these experiences on which to draw.

**Young people** did not want more projects where

they felt they were dictated to by adults. They wanted their 'own space' but were rarely consulted on regeneration plans.

There was also a feeling among other residents that **pensioners** - who had successfully campaigned for a pensioners hall - tended to benefit more than other age groups.

**Informal involvement** was as important for the 'social glue' of a community as involvement in formal organisations. 'Bridging ties' provided a link between involvement and non-involvement and were evident in:

- Tenants' or parents' groups which also played a social role for residents.
- Social networks which included active neighbours.
- Relationships of trust. Residents were more likely to get involved in activities where friends and neighbours already did so. Those living in tower blocks - who tended neither to know nor trust their neighbours - were less likely to get involved.

### Community life and community facilities in East London

Residents expressed strong opinions on the need for community social facilities. Those pensioners who had clubs saw them as an essential part of their day-to-day activities. Residents regretted the demise of social and sports clubs for other groups:

"There used to be a social club here before regeneration. I used to love it, you could go for drinks and bingo, and meet your friends. Whether you'd been out at work all week, or at home with the children, you could go to the club and unwind, and have a laugh."

Shops, cafés, youth clubs, sports and social facilities were generally linked with the potential for a better quality of life, but also, in some cases, to a socially cohesive community, to the mixing of dissimilar groups. It was felt that the right facilities were needed to make it happen. One resident insisted:

"We need to bring the community together as one body. We want a drop in centre run by the community for the community. We want it open to every colour, creed and age group, where everyone could go behind the bar and make a cup of tea."

### Conclusions

The researchers conclude that successful regeneration requires a holistic approach. It is not only housing design but a variety of local resources which make a vibrant locality:

- A thriving community life needs appropriate resources, facilities and meeting places. Policies and interventions which can help strike a balance

between the desire of some residents to mix with similar people and the wish of others to broaden social networks might include:

- Interventions which foster the development of supportive networks and at the same time do not exclude newcomers from established patterns. Housing is important, as are organisations which encourage effective participation through training and prioritise the involvement of newcomers.
  - Innovative measures to consult with and involve young people in regeneration activities, and a broadening of the social regeneration agenda to reflect the concerns of the young.
  - A flexible approach to regeneration to include a range of different places for meeting and socialising: examples from the estates included small-scale opportunities for fostering the 'weak ties' so essential to local life – sitting-out areas, cafés, play areas, markets, meeting places for teenagers and a subsidised mini market – and social and sports facilities which can both cater for individual groups and also facilitate mixing between groups.
- While the evidence indicates that scarce resources cultivate disharmony, it also points to the role played by a variety of resources in enhancing social cohesion and adding to a neighbourhood's store of 'social capital'. Local resources are an important source for building and sustaining supportive networks, developing relationships of trust, and encouraging participation. Shops, markets, surgeries, schools, housing offices, social facilities and local jobs affect residential continuity, interacting and socialising with fellow residents and workers; they also help to facilitate identity and pride in the area and can help reduce anti-social behaviour.

### About this study

This study by Vicky Cattell and Mel Evans of the Social Policy Research Centre, Middlesex University, is one of four linked local studies, commissioned as a mini-programme within the JRF Area Regeneration Programme. The others look at Liverpool, Nottingham and Teesside.

The report is based on 97 in-depth semi-structured interviews and eight focus groups with residents. These involved four age groups: young people (teenagers and young adults without children); parents with young children; middle-aged people; and elderly people. The majority were 'ordinary' residents with little involvement in formal organisations. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with professionals working on each estate.

### How to get further information

Further information about this research can be obtained from Dr Vicky Cattell, University College London Medical School, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Tel 0171 387 7050, or Dr Mel Evans, Social Policy Research Centre, Middlesex University, Tel 0181 362 5440.

The full report, **Neighbourhood images in East London: Social capital and social networks on two East London estates** by Vicky Cattell and Mel Evans (ISBN 1 902633 32 6), is published for the Foundation by YPS.