

foundations

Social cohesion and urban inclusion for disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Four research projects in Teesside, London, Liverpool and Nottingham have studied the physical and social qualities of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the interaction between them. They considered the factors affecting social cohesion within neighbourhoods and how this might be strengthened. They looked at what residents themselves felt about their neighbourhoods and the impact on the area of regeneration initiatives. This **Foundations** summarises their findings:

A real sense of community

The neighbourhoods studied do not lack social cohesion. Residents had a strong commitment to their local area irrespective of age, gender and ethnicity. There were strong bonds of reciprocity and mutual aid, particularly among older and more established residents. Informal social networks, and patterns of reciprocal support between family and friends, strengthened people's sense of attachment. But there were also tensions between different groups of residents: particularly between older people and teenagers and between newcomers and established residents. Regeneration initiatives had sometimes reinforced existing divisions.

The physical environment and the loss of resources

The physical environment is important for community morale and social interaction. These disadvantaged neighbourhoods lacked material resources and jobs. Most of the areas studied were physically isolated and in areas of industrial decline. The closure/ deterioration of 'landmark' local buildings had led to a loss of pride in the area's heritage, feelings of powerlessness and a lack of confidence. There was a strong sense of 'community lost' in some areas. Social housing could play an important role in the management of housing allocations and in reducing physical decay.

Bringing the community together

A lack of organised community activities and sufficient community facilities hindered the process of building social bridges between groups within the neighbourhood. Shops, cafés, youth clubs, sports and social facilities were generally linked with the potential for a better quality of life. A community development approach can help to foster supportive networks and relationships of trust. The reinstatement of a local public service presence in disadvantaged areas could also help to rebuild confidence.

Ethnic diversity can benefit cohesion

A number of positives can stem from ethnic diversity, including: a complex web of neighbourhood relationships; stability in areas of generally high turnover through their greater social investment in the neighbourhood; a more outward-looking community because of the wider networks of ethnic minority groups; and the survival of small, specialist shops.

Resident representative structures fail to deliver the control most residents want

Elaborate hierarchical representative structures have not achieved a sense of power or inclusion for less involved residents. Residents wanted to be in control of deciding priorities which professionals would then pursue on their behalf. In particular, they wanted greater priority for everyday concerns relating to local public services relative to "big (regeneration) ideas".

PR for neighbourhoods and links to the wider urban area are vital

Regeneration strategies need to involve image management in order to bring these neighbourhoods into the mainstream. To make them less invisible, more reasons need to be created for outsiders to go into the area and greater resources are needed for residents to take part in the life of the wider area. Better links are required between urban development strategies and area regeneration programmes.

Four projects within the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Area Regeneration Programme studied neighbourhoods in Teesside, London, Liverpool and Nottingham to consider the factors that contribute to social cohesion and a sense of local community within an area. The projects found that even though the neighbourhoods were defined as 'disadvantaged areas', many factors contributed to a strong sense of belonging and to mutual support. However, a lack of material resources, jobs, adequate community involvement in regeneration activities and poor links with the wider urban area undermined local confidence. In other words, many of the problems were those of poverty (in its broadest sense) rather than a lack of social cohesion.

This *Foundations* brings together some of the insights from these projects. It first considers factors that encourage greater social cohesion and how policy and practice can strengthen these. It then considers elements that have had a negative influence and what appropriate policy and practice responses might be.

Social cohesion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

There appears to be a shared sense of belonging and a shared sense of what a 'good' neighbourhood needs which cut across age, gender and ethnic group. When residents are asked about what the 'community' means to them, they talk about the positive qualities of the people around them. To the extent that dense webs of relationships, trust and familiarity are an important dimension of 'social capital', the areas studied have rich resources on which to draw. Residents recognised the physical deprivation of their neighbourhoods but retained a strong sense of resilience, with family and friends providing support and help on a reciprocal basis. It was the people who provided the basis for the strength of the community:

"They're really lovely people around here ... there are a lot of generous people who are very good-hearted ..."

Social networks and interaction

Women are very important in the formal and informal activities that help form relationships across the neighbourhoods, with children often a pivotal element in social networks. Action often mobilises around issues of childcare and schooling. Older women maintain older, established networks of mutual aid and assistance.

Involvement in local projects, such as those relating to children, increases social interaction and there were some examples of local environmental projects, led by the community to improve the physical feel of the area, which were particularly good in this respect.

For social interaction to develop into trust, however, a degree of residential stability is required. In situations of high population turnover, the projects found examples of longer-term residents withdrawing from social interaction.

Bringing the community together

Despite the shared sense of belonging, the disadvantaged neighbourhoods studied exhibited a need for social regeneration and community development. Several divisions existed among people residing in the same neighbourhood: between newer and older residents; between younger and older people; between council tenants and housing association tenants; and between those in newly built houses and those in older homes.

In many cases, there was a recognised need to bring the community together and make it whole. Many people felt that the opportunities to come together were absent; there seemed to be a need for facilitation and facilities. In particular, residents desired:

- Facilities and clubs for young people.
- Community facilities that offered something for everyone, so that different groups might have the chance to share things and meet one another.
- Community-wide activities and festivals that were seen to have a cohesive function.

Residents wanted to see effort and resources put into these social aspects of regeneration as well as into the physical dimensions. In some of the areas residents felt insecure and were concerned about burglary, harassment and problems with drugs. Some middle-aged and long-term residents were critical of the behaviour and values of some young residents. Anti-social behaviour was recognised as a problem for which common approaches needed to be developed.

Ethnic diversity can help cohesion and dynamism

A diverse community, particularly in relation to ethnicity, is often used as an indicator of disorganisation and disunity. There are differences of view among residents on whether diversity or similarity in terms of age, lifecycle or ethnicity is most advantageous to building community cohesion. The research suggests that the prioritisation of cultural or religious links and activities that are city-wide or national can weaken commitment to local groups and area-based interests. The projects - particularly the one in Nottingham - do, however, suggest a number of positives stemming from ethnic diversity:

- A complex web of relationships, activities and focal points within a neighbourhood.
- The stabilising influence of some ethnic minority groups in areas of generally high turnover through their greater social investment in the neighbourhood.
- A more outward-looking community because of the wider networks of ethnic minority groups. Social ties reach outside and are important bridges to the world beyond the neighbourhood.
- The survival of small, specialist shops as a result of the non-mainstream tastes of an ethnically mixed neighbourhood, which bucks the trend of local shop closures found elsewhere.

Dwelling design, estate layout and shops

The social ties that develop from casual social interaction were important to residents' confidence in their community and could form a stepping-stone towards local social involvement. These interactions could be encouraged by layouts that produce pedestrian traffic past people's windows and doors and provide a range of local meeting points. Small-scale landscaping features within estates, and cul-de-sac or square arrangements of dwellings, helped boost interaction among residents. Local shops are also important to encouraging such interaction.

Factors undermining disadvantaged neighbourhoods

A deteriorating physical environment

The neighbourhood environment has important social consequences. One of the most significant factors undermining local confidence was a strong sense of physical deterioration, loss and abandonment by the statutory services. Older, historic buildings are fundamental to residents' sense of place and the loss or decline of such 'landmark' buildings led to an acute feeling of lost heritage, pride, status and identity. Other changes, such as new housing developments, could not overcome the overriding sense that the neighbourhood had lost its heart, the community had lost control, and the local authority had lost interest in

its future. There was a yearning for the collective sense of identity which such older, historically and socially important buildings could provide.

Pessimism was also produced by the (re)appearance of empty houses within a neighbourhood, and the lack of attention to the management of green spaces. Communities could not understand the presence of empty houses whilst local young people wanted accommodation. Although there may be valid reasons for this in the eyes of housing professionals (for example, lack of funds for repairs or lack of appropriate demand within the allocations system), for residents it confirmed that they were fighting a losing battle to save their neighbourhoods. In general, the housing service was often criticised for slow repairs and the slow re-letting of properties.

Most people saw physical, visible change as a central pre-requisite to renewal in their areas. Such change was necessary for community morale, but was also seen as crucial to changing the perception of the area in the minds of other people. There were examples of successful regeneration efforts within the four localities. Thus, recent housing regeneration on the Trowbridge estate in Hackney had encouraged neighbourliness and shared responsibility for children, and helped to develop relationships of trust and perceptions of safety.

A bad reputation

Residents living in estates with a bad reputation felt stigmatised and thought that this led to active discrimination. In the two Teesside estates, residents felt that they were excluded compared with the wider population in that: there had been a weakening of their right to be protected by the police; they were being denied equal participation in the labour market; they had unequal access to educational opportunity; and they were being denied access to credit and services. In general, young people particularly resented the sharp, persistent but often unwarranted labelling that they experienced. In many cases, external people had no idea that positive changes had taken place on estates.

Inadequate consultation and resident involvement in regeneration

Residents wanted to be consulted if this could be shown to make a difference in the decision-making process, but many people did not believe this was the case. Often, residents were of the view that their suggestions were not acted upon, their queries were not answered, and there was no follow-up to what they said within the regeneration process. Residents often felt that their problems had been taken over by regeneration professionals, and that they themselves were exploited in the process, expected to contribute without return.

Many residents of disadvantaged areas were found to be unaware of regeneration activities and impacts, unsatisfied with representative arrangements within regeneration programmes, and sceptical about the ability of regeneration to tackle community priorities. Residents were often ill-informed about regeneration activities and had no idea of the likely time-scales for activities and their effects, suggesting that communication with the inactive residents was poor. Hierarchical involvement in regeneration partnerships through the use of community representatives had not worked in the sense that residents did not feel they had had their say and were well aware that they were not permitted to exercise control over regeneration budgets.

Inadequate prioritisation given to public services within regeneration activities

Residents had concerns about everyday issues of public service, which they felt regeneration had ignored because it tended to focus on big projects. Residents wanted the rationalisation and withdrawal of the local public service presence in their areas reversed. Such public service withdrawal affected not only the local quality of the service in question, but also the confidence in the future of the area on the part of the community and other service providers.

Lack of inclusion in the wider urban area

Joblessness was seen as lying at the root of many social problems in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. While skill shortages are a barrier for many unemployed people, even where there were significant economic developments occurring nearby, residents of disadvantaged areas were often pessimistic about their prospects of even being considered for whatever jobs were to be on offer.

Residents of disadvantaged areas are looking for some confidence that they can access jobs in the wider urban area. This is important for both social and economic reasons, and to give such communities optimism for the future. The regeneration task for disadvantaged neighbourhoods is thus about more than their internal renewal and functioning. It is about their connections with the wider urban society and economy.

The studies found both physical barriers, such as lack of adequate transport, and psychological barriers to reconnecting disadvantaged neighbourhoods to the urban area of which they are part. Better transport links to the rest of the urban area are an essential requirement in this respect. But more fundamental was a need to break down the psychological barriers to integration, both on the part of the residents of disadvantaged areas and of other city dwellers. Appropriate resources to enable residents to take part in more activities further afield were often lacking. The horizons of some residents were therefore limited so that they could not see what the wider urban area had to offer them. Conversely, the neighbourhoods themselves were insufficiently opened up to outsiders so that the wider population could not see what the disadvantaged neighbourhoods might offer them. There were insufficient reasons for people to go into or to pass through the neighbourhoods.

Policy and practice implications of reinforcing a sense of local community

Building social bridges

Neighbourhood regeneration needs to involve an understanding of social problems and divisions within communities and the implementation of community development strategies to resolve tensions and build social bridges between generations and groups.

Housing allocations

Housing allocation policies were seen as inflexible and not helping social support among family and friends. Allocation policies were also seen as unable to provide the younger generation with a stake in the local area, since they were unlikely to be re-housed on need grounds in the near future. Housing management policies therefore need to be adapted to achieve social cohesion objectives. This would involve housing allocation policies focused on community stakeholding and sustainability.

Building on the history and identity of the neighbourhood

Residents can experience a real sense of loss when long-established buildings and local landmarks are pulled down. Local morale could be boosted if efforts are made to keep remaining buildings and find a new purpose for them.

Widening community involvement in regeneration

Most residents felt that they had not had their say in regeneration activities, had no control over what happened and many were ill-informed about what activities were taking place. Serious issues are raised about whether the community can be in control of the regeneration of their areas and whether wider community involvement in decision-making can be achieved.

Consideration needs to be given to whether or not real community-led regeneration can be delivered, i.e. regeneration led by, and answerable to, the community, with partner organisations and professionals working for residents rather than residents helping professionals. This is an entirely different conception of the hierarchical regeneration through residents' representatives that has been experienced in the neighbourhoods to date. This could be replaced or enhanced to achieve greater resident involvement in decision-making through more frequent polling, balloting and open meetings.

Communities could also be offered more freedom and flexibility in what regeneration funds can be spent on. This could involve communities having budgetary control over regeneration funds and flexibility over spending in order to ensure that regeneration meets their priorities.

Developing public services

Public service providers could be required to deliver services to regeneration areas in localised ways if the community desires this as part of a renewal programme.

Building on the social capital of communities

Disadvantaged communities have been found to have social resources which can be used for economic and social advantage. Regeneration agencies should attempt, as a major part of their strategies, to develop and support local private and community businesses which meet local demands and needs. If this could be done through a community-led body it would give local people control over the strategy, having as its main aim the development of community cohesion and inclusion.

How to get further information

This *Foundations* is based on the following research reports of four projects within the Area Regeneration programme. The neighbourhoods studied varied in terms of size, social composition, physical characteristics and policy histories, but all had clear boundaries and were easily identifiable and recognisable to local people.

Joined-up places? Social cohesion and neighbourhood regeneration, by Ray Forrest and Ade Kearns (ISBN 1 902633 33 4), provides an overview of the four projects. Individual reports are also available from each of the projects; although all have common themes, each also looks at particular issues:

- **Neighbourhood images in East London: Social capital and social networks on two East London estates**, Vicky Cattell and Mel Evans (ISBN 1 902633 32 6), focusing on attitudes and perceptions of residents of different ages; and on how available resources and current regeneration policies contribute to a sense of community.
- **Neighbourhood images in Nottingham: Social cohesion and neighbourhood change**, Richard Silburn, Dan Lucas, Robert Page and Lynn Hanna (ISBN 1 902633 31 8), focusing on the effectiveness of earlier initiatives; the extent and strength of informal social networks and community groups and the part they can play in local area regeneration partnerships; and the particular opportunities and difficulties faced by ethnic groups.
- **Neighbourhood images in Liverpool: "It's all down to the people"**, Helen Andersen, Ronnie Munck et al. (ISBN 1 902633 30 X), focusing on the way women, young people and older people perceive their communities; and how a 'bad reputation' can affect an area.
- **Neighbourhood images of Teesside: Regeneration or decline?**, Martin Wood and Clive Vamplew (ISBN 1 902633 29 6), focusing on differences in perceptions and aspirations between active and non-active residents and also new and long-term residents; and the effect of tenure diversification on community activity.

All reports are published for the Foundation by YPS.

They are priced individually at £10.95 (plus £2 postage), or £15 (plus £2 postage) for **Joined-up places?** plus one local study (please state which you require), or £37.50 (plus £5 postage) for all 5 reports ordered together.