

## Unleashing the potential: Bringing residents to the centre of regeneration

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Action on Estates Programme supported 33 studies on over 100 estates to look at how residents could play a major role in estate regeneration. A report summarising the lessons from this unique body of research suggests the following:

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- **Poverty is at the root of the problems faced by many public housing estates today. But, despite a negative public image, there are substantial energies and skills among residents on most estates. These offer a significant resource for regeneration.**
- **Local control of services and meaningful involvement in high-profile partnerships are most likely where residents have established a solid foundation of local activity and organisational experience. It is hard to start from scratch.**
- **The most effective community partners are those who have access to technical aid and professional support. The resources they need may be a small proportion of the total amount spent on regeneration, but they cannot be expected to turn estates around on their own.**
- **Targeted strategic initiatives give an essential kickstart to regeneration. But lasting change requires new approaches to mainstream services, which encourage inter-agency working, local delivery and give residents the opportunity to participate at whatever level they choose.**
- **The new emphasis on partnership is welcome. But it cannot be done on the margins. Genuine partnership will require fundamental and challenging shifts in the ways that partner agencies and authorities operate.**
- **Sustainable regeneration is unlikely unless it creates employment opportunities and community-controlled assets, which can generate income in the long term.**
- **Regenerating estates, and especially tackling poverty and unemployment, requires a strong national and regional policy framework to counter the economic and social exclusion they face. It cannot be left to the market.**

## The Action on Estates Programme

In 1992, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded a research programme to explore ways of developing a more central role for tenants and residents in the physical, economic and social regeneration of their estates. The 33 studies that were supported by this wide-ranging programme bring together experience from over 100 estates across the British Isles covering many different aspects of resident involvement, from caretaking to locally managed services, from job creation to multi-agency partnerships, from resident-led to central government programmes. This unique body of experience offers many examples of successful practice and allows us to pull together the main ingredients that should make up any strategy to involve residents in estate regeneration. It also highlights the pitfalls and the areas where tensions remain and progress is slow. As such it offers an important agenda for ensuring that disadvantaged communities both contribute fully to, and benefit from, regeneration initiatives.

## A comprehensive and strategic approach to regeneration

The Action on Estates studies demonstrate that there are many assets and strengths on public housing estates. But the increasing concentration of poverty and unemployment on these estates, together with poor services and delapidated - sometimes threatening - environments, mean that they also face a complex range of problems. Each single problem might be easy to solve; together they are much more difficult. And they are constantly reinforced by negative press images and stereotyping by outsiders.

In recent years, central government has responded with a comprehensive strategic approach to regeneration, which emphasises 'partnership' and 'community involvement'. The Action on Estates studies welcome this development as a significant advance on previous policy. It offers residents opportunities to take more control over local services and to play a major part in strategic, long-term programmes for their estates.

While the case *for* resident involvement has been accepted, however, there is still much to learn about the *how*. It is clear from the Action on Estates Programme that resident involvement in partnership is not easy. As partners in the most successful initiatives have found, it takes time to change traditional ways of working, to develop real co-operation with other partners, to learn to take a strategic view and, above all, to ensure that residents are real partners in regeneration rather than token players. There are many other pressures facing lead agencies in the regeneration process, as they adjust to financial constraints, changing demand, and local and central government reforms. Commitment to resident involvement can founder on competing policy and performance objectives, lack of understanding or

insecurity amongst staff, or competing claims on resources. There are widely differing interpretations of what involvement means. Nonetheless, the Programme demonstrates that there is a growing body of experience and commitment to build on.

## The ingredients of success

### *Understanding estates*

The studies describe the complex pressures which face many social housing estates. They recommend that regions and authorities develop strategic plans for tackling concentrations of poverty in their area which are firmly linked into wider regeneration initiatives in the area. Within this, each estate is unique and regeneration strategies need to start from a careful assessment of the nature and history of a particular estate, the factors which shape it, and the resources available to it. In particular, every effort should be made to challenge the stereotyping and prejudice from which many estates suffer. While it is important to acknowledge the pressure under which residents live, it is even more important to recognise the assets and potential that local people, local buildings and local firms and services represent.

### *Starting from positives*

Solutions and action plans need to start from residents' own priorities. They are major stakeholders and the studies demonstrate the enormous expertise they can bring, if they are involved as early as possible in the development of plans for the estate. The studies cover initiatives started by residents themselves as well as outside bodies; outside initiatives need to be aware of existing activities in the area - estates are never a blank sheet.

Resident involvement in feasibility studies can often tap a much richer vein of experience, interest and skills than an outside survey. The studies also show how 'Planning for Real' and similar exercises allow people who are not 'joiners' or who lack confidence about speaking in formal meetings to make a full contribution. They show how people can be involved across the whole community - it is particularly important to find ways of involving young people and ethnic minority residents. This all requires time, but ensures that residents are able to make an informed and confident contribution.

### *Developing local capacity*

A healthy and empowered estate will have a range of activities and opportunities which allow individual residents to get involved in the issues of most concern to them and at the level they choose. These activities - from play and youth provision, cultural and social activities and mutual support for lone parents, to clearing and planting out waste ground - make an enormous, but often unsung, contribution to regeneration. Most studies on the Programme emphasise the need to start small: tackling immediate

problems and achievable goals establishes a sense of success.

As they take on more, residents are likely to need outside support. The studies show how training, specialist expertise and dedicated resources can be designed to provide the additional individual and organisational skills residents need. Ideally outside support will be independent and under residents' own control, but there are also examples in the studies where outside agencies, including the local authority, have offered highly valued professional support and advice.

Once again, the studies emphasise the time that is needed to build up confidence, skills and capacity. They argue strongly that residents need this kind of support before special initiatives come along or opportunities to take on service management. Relatively small resources - a small fraction of the total expenditure on services or special programmes - can make a lot of difference to the ability of residents to make a full and informed contribution. The report recommends a 'Community Resource Fund' to ensure that groups have access to such resources. Community-based groups are often organisationally fragile and do not have financial reserves to draw on. Financial procedures and processes need to recognise this and be straightforward and efficient in their administration.

### *Changing services*

The report suggests that new forms of service delivery are needed, which:

- offer a flexible multi-agency response to local definitions of need,
- are locally delivered and determined, and
- allow residents a choice as to the level of their involvement - they will not all wish to manage their own services.

The studies in the Programme describe how changes in service delivery have made a considerable difference to estates. These changes include: decentralised service delivery; participation in estate improvements, service planning and provision; estate agreements prepared jointly between agencies and residents; and a variety of tenant management organisations.

The experience on the study estates suggests that successful joint working - with residents and other agencies - needs commitment throughout partner organisations. Professionals need to be prepared to adapt their ways of working to fit in with residents' priorities. Managers and professionals need training and service systems and cultures need to be transformed.

Expectations of residents must be realistic, especially if they are being asked to take on the management of services which have proved challenging to most professionals. Residents on some estates have found it harder than they expected to move from campaigning and mutual support

activities to managing their own services. They need training, resources adequate to the task (they cannot be regarded as a cheap alternative) and support in maintaining their accountability to the community at large.

Social housing management goes beyond the management of finance and bricks and mortar; it requires close working relationships with other agencies. The studies suggest that this demands new skills and approaches from housing managers, especially those outside the local authority. Some of the studies show how housing associations are beginning to explore an expanded role, which involves them alongside other agencies in social and employment issues. This integrated approach is likely to be increasingly important as a more diverse, but possibly more fragmented, social housing market develops through compulsory competitive tendering and other measures.

### *Tackling the local economy*

Everyone, from residents to central government, agrees that jobs and income are essential to regeneration. Although there is still a long way to go, the experience of the Programme suggests a number of avenues worth pursuing:

- Developing opportunities on estates for jobs in local mainstream services and in housing or other regeneration initiatives. This includes basic training in advance to allow local people to take advantage of local opportunities.
- Continuing to improve access to the mainstream economy, through training, job placement and, most importantly, through easing the transition from benefits to paid work. This requires targeting but must be linked into wider regeneration initiatives if it is to be successful.
- Developing local service organisations in areas where there is an insufficient market for the private sector and where potential customers cannot afford to pay. As examples on the Programme show, such enterprises have the opportunity to move beyond the boundaries of one estate. They can also provide opportunities for training in what one study calls an 'intermediate labour market', which takes people out of the culture of unemployment that is becoming prevalent on the most disadvantaged estates.
- Building on schemes to support and develop existing informal economies on estates - credit unions, self-help, skills exchanges and easing the transition from benefits into paid employment.

### *Sharing power*

The growing emphasis on partnership is welcome. Ultimately, it offers the potential for new forms of local governance, in which significant power is shared with residents and where professionals work for and with communities on an equal basis.

But the Programme demonstrates that this remains a long-term goal. There are still major differences of power, resources, culture and capacity between outside agencies and local residents. Partnership must mean more than giving residents a few seats at an unfamiliar table. It requires a 'reinvention' of government, a shift in culture and an unequivocal lead from the top.

The studies show that a great deal is expected of community representatives. Residents need support in building up robust and independent organisations to back up those who are sitting at the top table. And partners need to respect community views, even when they are in conflict with their own. The most successful partnerships in the Programme have all gone through periods of disagreement, but have emerged the stronger for it.

### *Lasting change*

Most studies welcome the longer timescales that are being built into regeneration programmes, although they suggest that funding periods need to be tied to the achievement of agreed objectives rather than set time limits. They underline the need to plan for 'exit' from the beginning of short-term initiatives.

Prospects for sustainability will be increased by the development of local capacity, both among residents and in locally managed mainstream services. But they also depend crucially on developing community-controlled 'successor' bodies with assets, endowments or attractive opportunities for future investment. The Programme examines the growing number of community regeneration agencies now developing in some areas and recommends national policies which can both encourage these developments and establish a viable legal and financial investment framework for such organisations over the long term.

Ultimately, regeneration cannot be achieved within the confines of one estate. The Programme underlines the need to set action on estates within a wider policy framework, at national and city- or region-wide level, which can counter the economic and social exclusion that confronts areas of social housing. It also stresses the importance of delivering benefits beyond the immediate boundaries of those areas which have been successful in competitive bidding programmes, through replication and through adopting measures piloted in flagship areas in mainstream policy.

### Putting it all together

Estate regeneration needs a comprehensive approach. But each locality is different and the starting point will depend on the opportunities available, the relationships already existing between potential partners, and the level of organisation and capacity among residents. Nonetheless, if real change is to be achieved, each of these steps is dependent on the others.

The Programme demonstrates that successful involvement in service delivery and partnership depends on the confidence and organising skills that are built through smaller-scale local activity. A variety of local organisations which represent different needs and interests in the community will ensure that their contribution to partnerships and to managing local services are informed and accountable. But community activity is not enough on its own. Without the commitment and resources of all the major players, including national government, local resident activity will only have a limited impact on the real pressures facing estates.

### About the study

This overview was prepared by Marilyn Taylor for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation drawing on the 33 studies supported by the Action on Estates Programme and a series of interviews with intermediary bodies from target audiences. Reports are also available from many of the individual studies on the Programme.

### Further information

A separate Policy Options paper (also available from the Foundation) draws out in more detail the implications of the studies for central and local government, housing associations and other partners. The full report, *Unleashing the Potential: Bringing residents to the centre of regeneration* is published by the Foundation. A companion video is also available in either a 35 minute or edited 15 minute version.

(Report only, price £10.50, ISBN 1 85935 014 3;  
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