

Environmental problems and service provision in deprived and more affluent neighbourhoods

Can the nature and scale of the problems in deprived neighbourhoods affect the quality of public service provision? This study, by a team from the University of Glasgow, examined the differences in environmental problems in more and less deprived neighbourhoods and considered the related challenges for 'street scene' environmental services – such as street sweeping and refuse collection. It also explored how service providers do and could respond. The researchers found that:

- A significant gap exists between the environmental amenity of deprived and less deprived neighbourhoods. Some deprived neighbourhoods face environmental challenges that are noticeably more severe, especially with litter, fly-tipping and poorly maintained public spaces.
- Deprived neighbourhoods tend to have characteristics which make them prone to environmental problems. They often have physical features, such as high-rise buildings and undefended open space, which make them hard to look after. They also tend to be more densely populated than average, making them more susceptible to environmental wear and tear.
- Gaps in amenity may also reflect variations in service standards and unintentional bias against deprived neighbourhoods in resource allocation.
- The ability of both residents and environmental operatives to respond to neighbourhood environmental problems can be undermined by the scale of the challenge. However, both residents and operatives can be re-energised by service improvements, setting in train increased vigilance and behaviour that reinforces better outcomes.
- Local authorities take various approaches to delivering street scene services in residential neighbourhoods, from the provision of standardised, uniform services to a range of reactive and proactive enhancements in areas of need. Around half of those councils surveyed for this study carried out some proactive, strategic form of targeting, but the researchers found that providers rarely targeted additional services to neighbourhoods explicitly *because* they were deprived.
- The researchers suggest that:
 - service planning and resource allocation need to take more account of neighbourhood deprivation; central Government should support local government here;
 - efforts to encourage a more responsible attitude among residents towards the neighbourhood environment will be important in order to support lasting change.



Background

Concern has grown that levels of deprivation in a neighbourhood can undermine the quality of services and that poor services contribute to a widening gap in the situations experienced by deprived and more affluent neighbourhoods. The Government has introduced a range of regeneration initiatives, including the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. These aim to support the work of mainstream services trying to improve outcomes for local residents in deprived neighbourhoods. However, while there has been increasing recognition that a significant gulf may exist between the environmental quality of deprived and less deprived neighbourhoods, limited evidence is available on reasons for this. Little detailed research has been conducted on how and why high levels of deprivation can affect the quality of neighbourhood services.

This research sought to examine whether poor neighbourhoods are dirtier than their more affluent counterparts – “where there’s muck there’s no brass” – and, if so, how environmental problems can create challenges for effective service delivery. The researchers aimed to discover how local authorities were delivering their environmental services in order to tackle the problems of deprived neighbourhoods, and to assess their different approaches.

The ‘environmental gap’ between more and less deprived neighbourhoods

The researchers discovered a gap between the environmental amenity of the more and the less deprived neighbourhoods included in the study. The poor neighbourhoods had more environmental problems. They also had a greater range of problems, the most severe being graffiti, litter, fly-tipping of bulky items of waste, and poorly maintained public and open spaces.

The reasons for this gap appear to relate to:

- *Distinctive demographic profiles.* Deprived neighbourhoods usually have higher population densities and higher rates of economic inactivity. More people are therefore present during the day, giving rise to more rubbish and wear and tear. Higher densities of children and young people also put pressure on the environment.
“There’s whole families not working and people around the whole time. It leads to heavy footfall. Where I live, it’s empty by day, when everyone leaves in their cars.” (Senior environmental service manager)
- *Built forms being more difficult to manage than in other residential areas.* For example, large open spaces, high housing densities and undefended front gardens were common in the deprived area case studies, but largely absent from other communities.
- *A perception that deprived neighbourhoods are often seen as ‘fair game’ for other people’s rubbish.* Residents interviewed in many of the deprived neighbourhoods alleged that some ‘incivilities’ were caused by outsiders, such as fly-tipping and dog fouling.
- *A propensity to have higher proportions of vulnerable households who are less able to manage their neighbourhood environment.* Service providers – from

front-line workers to senior policy-makers – often blamed environmental problems on low levels of social responsibility among residents, but this research suggests this is only a small part of the story.

These distinctive features clearly interact with each other, with the result that residents of deprived neighbourhoods – individually or collectively – tend to have less control over their environment than residents of more affluent locations.

Interviewees also felt that changes across society, such as the rise of consumerism and individualism, had reduced the extent to which people were generally willing and able to put effort into their local environment.

“In my young days, my mum would ask her neighbour ‘Is your broom broke?’ if she wasn’t keeping her place clean. People don’t do that nowadays.” (Neighbourhood warden, deprived neighbourhood)

Such changes appear to have had most impact on neighbourhoods which were already vulnerable to problems, particularly those where anti-social behaviour was perceived to be a problem. In particular, changing relationships between adults and young people, with young people less likely to fear an adult’s admonishment, may affect environmental amenity.

Living and working in problem environments

In the case studies, residents and front-line workers behaved differently towards the environment in neighbourhoods with severe problems. Sometimes even the most motivated and responsible residents had been worn down.

“I used to be out cleaning ...I used to go out and lift up (rubbish) and I thought ... ‘What the hell am I doing? I’m far too old for this’. I don’t touch it now.” (An older resident, deprived neighbourhood)

Nevertheless, residents could be energised when problems began to be addressed. In one neighbourhood, which had undergone comprehensive regeneration, open competition had broken out between neighbours over who could have the nicest garden. But even in improving neighbourhoods, not everyone became socially responsible overnight.

An important finding was that residents of neighbourhoods with few problems could be fiercely protective of their environmental quality. They were vigilant in their attempts to control public space and were willing and able complainants. Sometimes this could affect service levels.

“Those areas where there are higher expectations, coupled with the ability to communicate through a councillor, get more spent on them.” (An environmental service manager)

The standard and nature of services could also be different in more deprived neighbourhoods. The volume and persistence of rubbish and litter could make it difficult for environmental operatives to keep on top of problems. They often felt powerless and worked to reduced standards. Separate cleansing operatives commented:

“It will stay a dump no matter what we do.”

“There’s that much rubbish we just tend to walk past it.”

The researchers also found that fear, threats and violence could reduce standards of work, particularly in the most troubled neighbourhoods. In such places, operatives might work in teams, rather than alone, or on a mornings-only basis. This could mean that work was left undone, to the detriment of the neighbourhood.

However, in neighbourhoods where problems were being tackled, operatives’ motivations sometimes improved, as they found their jobs easier. They might even go beyond the job specified “just to keep a lid on things”. Crucially, operatives were aware that residents’ expectations had improved, as were their managers.

“Before the regeneration, maybe we could get away with things a bit. There’s no chance now.” (A local manager, environmental services department)

Likewise, operatives working in neighbourhoods with few environmental challenges felt better able to do their work effectively and were sometimes willing to go beyond their remits. However, in this context, operatives were motivated as much by the knowledge that shoddy work could result in a complaint from the public as they were by a drive to ensure the highest standards of cleanliness.

Thus, the research revealed how residents’ and service providers’ ways of coping with different neighbourhood challenges can exacerbate the problems of some areas and potentially further polarise poor and more affluent neighbourhoods.

Closing the environmental gap: the policy and practice response

The study also explored how councils were responding to local problems and delivering their core environmental services such as street cleaning and refuse collection. A survey of 49 local authorities across the UK identified

four different approaches to providing neighbourhood environmental services. Each approach attempted to balance the needs of deprived and other neighbourhoods in different ways. And each emphasised seeking equality of service inputs or equality of outcomes to different degrees (see Figure 1). About half of the local authorities interviewed were carrying out some form of targeting to address perceived environmental problems, but this was not always focused on deprived areas.

In-depth research was conducted in four local authorities – each exemplifying one of the approaches – in order to explore different ways of tackling the environmental gap. This found that:

- The *standardised* approach provides universal levels of services, such as street cleaning and refuse collection, to all residential neighbourhoods. This model can address the needs of most neighbourhoods in local authorities where resource levels are sufficient to ensure that all places can receive a high standard of service. It is unlikely to be appropriate in authorities where deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods are very different from each other, as problems tend to be greater in the poorest areas.
- The *hot-spotting* approach augments standardised services on a responsive, flexible basis in order to deal with specific environmental problems, such as excess litter. It may be necessary where there are barriers to developing strategic approaches to providing differential services on a regular basis. The model may suit areas where there are political objections to overt targeting or little scope to achieve it, perhaps because deprivation is widespread. However, where resource levels are insufficient to address needs fully, hot-spotting can become a form of ‘firefighting’ rather than a means to resolve problems.
- The *tacit targeting* approach allows services to be routinely programmed according to service needs – for example, more regular street cleaning in neighbourhoods prone to litter. The model focuses on

Figure 1: Local authority approaches to service delivery

Approach to service provision	Definition of approach	Focus on neighbourhood deprivation	Emphasis on inputs or outcomes	Number of local authorities
Standardisation	No service variation between neighbourhood types	None	More emphasis on equality of inputs than other approaches	16 (33% of total)
Hot-spotting	Standardised service with reactive supplementary services to tackle specific problems as they arise	None, but deprived places are likely to need services more frequently than elsewhere, so may benefit from hot-spotting	Emphasis on inputs as well as outcomes	8 (16%)
Tacit targeting	Service levels vary according to need for service. Dirty places routinely receive additional service levels in a proactive, strategic way	Focus on environmental problems wherever they occur. Deprived neighbourhoods usually receive more services as a result of their higher needs	Outcome focused	17 (35%)
Formal targeting	Service levels vary according to deprivation. Deprived neighbourhoods routinely receive additional service levels in a proactive, strategic way	Explicit focus. Services are enhanced specifically to compensate for deprivation.	Outcome focused	8 (16%)

environmental problems rather than on deprivation, but because of the relationship between the two, it can be a way of targeting additional resources to deprived neighbourhoods by stealth and avoiding the political controversy which explicit, formal targeting of these areas can engender. However, its lack of explicitness can mean that it is local front-line staff and managers, rather than senior staff or councillors, who must negotiate between the competing demands of neighbourhoods with different problems and expectations. In situations where overall resources are constrained, or where there are more neighbourhoods that require high service levels than neighbourhoods that do not, service providers can find it difficult to balance competing needs.

- The *formal targeting* approach explicitly recognises that deprived neighbourhoods will routinely require higher service levels such as more frequent street cleaning or bulky waste collection. Where there is political and community 'buy-in' to the idea, service providers can be empowered by this approach to attempt to reduce the environmental gap between more and less deprived neighbourhoods. However, success will depend on whether resource levels are sufficient, so that enhancements in deprived neighbourhoods are not at the expense of less deprived communities.

While targeting is important, other management approaches could also lead to better outcomes across neighbourhoods. Some local authorities were improving service co-ordination and synchronisation, for example, by sequencing street cleaning to follow rubbish collection. Regeneration efforts that focused on physical changes could also help to improve deprived neighbourhoods through, for example, developing clearer arrangements for the maintenance of public spaces.

Neighbourhood management was being used to target environmental amenity in some areas; warden schemes were also popular. Many local authorities also emphasised the importance of encouraging residents of all types of neighbourhood to develop a more socially responsible attitude towards their neighbourhood environments. They had developed high-profile information and education campaigns alongside the use of enforcement powers.

The researchers suggest that the most effective approaches are likely to combine education and enforcement alongside activities which enable residents to take more control over their environment – perhaps through making it easier for residents to police each other's behaviour.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that the environmental gap between deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods will only be reduced if local authorities are supported in this endeavour by central Government, both politically and financially. A clear message of the research is that enhancing services in deprived neighbourhoods will only be politically acceptable when this does not jeopardise the amenity of other communities.

The researchers therefore suggest that special regeneration funding, such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund or resources channelled through the New Deal for Communities, can play an important role in kick-starting improvements in deprived neighbourhoods, where it is available. But funding these initiatives from core programmes will be important to ensure sustained benefits. The researchers also suggest, therefore, that significant, long-term compensation for the nature and intensity of deprivation should be made available at both local authority and neighbourhood level, in order that local services can make a positive contribution to overcoming the severe problems of many deprived communities.

About the project

The researchers surveyed by telephone 49 chief officers in local authority environmental service departments across the UK. They also conducted detailed case studies of policy and practice in environmental service provision in four local authorities with significant levels of deprivation. Each case study involved work in three neighbourhoods within the authority – two deprived and one less deprived – as well as focus groups with residents and front-line environmental operatives, interviews with senior council staff and observation on the ground.

For further information

The full report, **Cleaning up neighbourhoods: Environmental problems and service provision in deprived neighbourhoods** by Annette Hastings, John Flint, Carol McKenzie and Carl Mills, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 780 4, price £12.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 86134 816 9).

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