

Representing neighbourhood environmental concerns within Local Strategic Partnerships

Despite considerable policy focus on the renewal of Britain's poorest neighbourhoods, the dirty and neglected appearance of many deprived areas continues to plague local residents, often appearing at the top of their list of local concerns. Research by Dr Karen Lucas and her team at the University of Westminster's Centre for Sustainable Development examined the extent to which two Local Strategic Partnerships have been able to bring the local environment to the forefront in their Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies. The study found that:

-  Residents in poor neighbourhoods have repeatedly raised concerns about the condition of their local environments in consultation exercises. Anti-social behaviour, busy roads, inadequate and irregular street cleaning and rubbish collection are of particular concern.
-  Local policy-makers and practitioners working in neighbourhood renewal areas recognise that they need to find effective solutions to local environmental concerns. Failure to respond to these doorstep issues fuels local people's beliefs that both local and national government are unable to deliver policies which embrace local needs and concerns.
-  Efforts can be hampered by a lack of local knowledge. Better evidence is needed of the incidence, severity and distribution of environmental 'bads' and 'goods', together with clear national guidance on citizens' rights and local and national agencies' responsibilities.
-  The researchers suggest that Local Strategic Partnerships would benefit from guidance on how to build 'environment' into existing structures. They should develop more transparent and accountable local delivery mechanisms. This would be greatly assisted by a nationally co-ordinated website that could collate and disseminate good practice initiatives.

Background

Research evidence suggests that deprived communities are more likely to suffer from the worst environments. This in turn suggests that government policies to improve environmental performance in the UK would do well to target them. Local Strategic Partnerships are the overarching co-ordinating framework for the renewal of these areas but may be failing to adequately address their local environmental concerns.

Recent moves suggest a growing government commitment to improving local environments. The Local Government Act 2000 requires local authorities to promote policies that balance economic, social and environmental wellbeing. In 2002, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published a five-year 'Living Spaces' strategy, setting out an ambitious agenda for improving public space and local environmental quality. The *Sustainable Communities Plan* (2003) identifies a £1 billion increase in local authorities' budgets over the next three years to fund environmental improvements, and the 2003 Anti-social Behaviour Act gives local authorities new powers and flexibilities to address local environmental damage.

Nevertheless, the dirty and neglected appearance of deprived neighbourhoods continues to plague local residents, often appearing at the top of their list of concerns.

What is the problem and why does it matter?

Anti-social behaviour amongst young people and the impact of this on the local area was by far the highest priority issue raised by participants in all six neighbourhoods. The problem was described as young people 'hanging about with nothing to do'; people believed that tackling this would allow other issues to be resolved more effectively. This was closely followed by poor service delivery across a variety of sectors, with an emphasis on rubbish collection, street cleaning and litter. Very specific concerns were also raised about what were perceived to be long-standing 'environmental hazards' or 'ills'. For example:

"The worst thing about health around here is the stink that comes from the sewage... it comes right into the house. You get it a lot, especially in the summer. You can't open your windows at night."
(Local resident, Wolverhampton)

Residents reported that the negative feelings they have towards their immediate local environments make them feel hopeless and worthless:

"If I felt important to the people that mattered, as important as people in other areas, ... then these things wouldn't be a problem... I don't feel like I'm important to the government or to the council. I feel overlooked... There's no sense of anything for the children here. You just feel like you're a nobody."
(Local resident, Wolverhampton)

What can be done?

The research showed that no one was entirely sure who is responsible for addressing these problems, the legal rights of residents in relation to these issues or where they might go to find out such things. The official rights and responsibilities and some ideas from local residents relating to key topics are summarised below.

Access to environmental information

Rights and responsibilities. Under the Environmental Regulations Act 1992, the public has a right of access to the environmental information held by public authorities and certain other bodies.

Ideas from local residents. Information should be more readily available in appropriate places (e.g. the local shop, doctor's surgery, post office). There should be more informal consultation events to disseminate information.

Addressing anti-social behaviour

Rights and responsibilities. The 2003 Anti-social Behaviour Act provides local authorities and other local agencies with new powers and flexibilities to address anti-social behaviour without having to go to court.

Ideas from local residents. Residents emphasised the need to provide young people with activities to reduce boredom and keep them from 'hanging around' on the streets. Ideas included play centres in local school buildings, providing a youth-run facility, and using a disused railway for a 'scrambler' track.

Rubbish collection, street cleaning and litter

Rights and responsibilities. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 is the main legislation in relation to waste collection and disposal, street cleaning, and other issues of public cleanliness such as dog fouling.

Ideas from local residents. A range of ideas including increased education for children, bins which provided incentives to encourage younger children not to drop litter, making local businesses more responsible for litter, and a freephone number for reporting syringes and other, less dangerous, rubbish problems.

Improving the physical fabric of the area

Rights and responsibilities. The Environmental Protection Act states that the local authority must provide a service to collect other rubbish from homes, such as old sofas, fridges and garden waste, but that a charge may be made for this. Section 43 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act gives local authorities and police civilians a new power to issue fixed penalty notices for minor graffiti and fly-posting offences.

Ideas from local residents. The main ideas from local residents for improving the physical fabric of their environment concerned the removal of large items of rubbish for free, housing improvements, addressing safety and security concerns, and better local services and amenities.

Addressing environmental hazards

Rights and responsibilities. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 established a system of 'Integrated Pollution Control' to address local noise and other environmental nuisances and to prevent and control pollution from industry; this is being replaced by a new regime to ensure that operators use the best techniques available to them to control pollution to land, air and water from their activities.

Ideas from local residents. Local residents living in close proximity to hazardous activities expressed the opinion that their area would always remain an unattractive place to live unless these 'environmental bads' are addressed. It was recognised that such problems are largely out of the control of the local authority or any other local agencies and would require national government intervention.

Helping communities to improve their own environments

Rights and responsibilities. The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Aarhus Convention) and the new EC Directive create a requirement to consult the public in the drawing up of plans.

Ideas from local residents. Ideas included local area clean-up projects and setting up local enterprises from the environment (e.g. recycling broken glass into jewellery) to bring the local community together, and in particular to involve young people.

The response of the Local Strategic Partnerships

Officials of the LSPs' Boards reported that the local environmental concerns raised by residents in the

focus groups were not new to them, but rather 'opened a different window in the same room'. They felt that difficulties lay not in coming to an 'idealised shared vision' but rather in bridging the gap between policy rhetoric and the changes in delivery needed to achieve visible and sustained environmental improvements in these areas. Both case study areas recognised that better formal and informal mechanisms are needed to ensure that service providers are more accountable to communities.

Building 'environment' into the delivery structures of the LSP

Both areas believe that they are able to respond much more effectively to local environmental concerns through their neighbourhood renewal strategies because the 'environment' has been built into the key structures and delivery mechanisms guiding the Local Strategic Partnership.

New environmental delivery mechanisms

Both areas have put a variety of new environmental delivery mechanisms in place over the last 12-18 months and are either already actively responding to the concerns raised by residents or are at the planning stage of delivery, with more projects planned over the next two to three years.

Barriers to delivery on environmental improvements

Officials felt that there were no real barriers to delivering environmental improvements in neighbourhood renewal areas, if these are prioritised by local people; the money is available to pay for them. The big issue is how to roll out these activities in communities which do not qualify for neighbourhood renewal funding but have similarly degraded environments.

Information and communication

Residents and officers alike felt they needed more readily available information about people's environmental rights and the responsibilities of the various delivery agencies. The Local Strategic Partnerships advised that the provision of such information is outside their area of expertise and capabilities.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, the researcher team have made the following recommendations.

Building local environmental concerns into policy practice

Transparent and accountable structures and processes are needed to build local environmental concerns into

all areas of Local Strategic Partnership delivery. These are required at four key stages:

- when problems are being identified and solutions generated;
- when these are being transferred and translated into policy;
- when policies are being monitored, to ensure that impact is visible and sustained; and
- when structures are being set up, to ensure that service delivery is properly accountable to local people.

New environmental delivery mechanisms

A variety of new environmental delivery mechanisms have been put in place in each of the neighbourhoods by both LSPs, directly addressing the majority of the concerns raised by residents. These initiatives, together with those being implemented elsewhere, should be collated and made available on a national website, facilitating transfer of knowledge. LSPs' performance on local environmental issues should become an additional key theme in the five-year evaluation by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Department for Transport, in recognition of the importance of this issue to local communities.

Addressing the gap between policy and action

The 'gap' between local policy intention and the actual delivery of visible improvements on the ground is a major source of frustration for local residents; many have been living in these areas a long time and feel they have already waited long enough to have their concerns addressed. Appropriate and timely information about what is planned, disseminated through a range of far-reaching formal and informal communication networks, can help to overcome such problems.

Dissemination and communication

More generally, local people do not know what type and level of environmental clean-up service they are entitled to, or where to go to get information on local environmental issues. This makes it difficult for them to assess whether they have a right to expect better services. Making environmental information publicly available and easily accessible is essential for promoting sustainable development. It means that local people are able to participate more effectively in the decision-making processes that affect their local environments. Openness also promotes greater public accountability in the agencies that are responsible for delivering on the local environmental issues.

Clearer national guidance

Clearer national guidance is needed on:

- what constitutes a local environmental problem;
- which agency is responsible for addressing which problem;
- how to approach the relevant agencies, what evidence is required, how this can be presented, and who might be called upon to help prepare this evidence;
- what actions local people can take where there is agency failure; and
- the legal courses of redress and how to pursue these.

About the project

The research was undertaken between May 2003 and April 2004 in two case study LSPs (Tameside and Wolverhampton). It involved two-stage focus groups with local residents in six neighbourhood renewal areas, and resident representations to the LSPs responsible for the renewal of these areas. This was followed by a further round of interviews, discussions and information gathering with key stakeholders in local policy delivery and those responsible for the wider environmental policy agenda (including a workshop with 'experts' in environmental policy). Finally, the researchers carried out follow-up interviews with a key officer from each LSP to determine subsequent actions at the local neighbourhood level.

How to get further information

The full report, **Prioritising local environmental concerns: Where there's a will there's a way** by Karen Lucas, Sara Fuller, Anthony Psaila and Diana Thrush, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Reconciling Environmental and Social Concerns series (ISBN 1 85935 263 4, price £14.95).