

From Estate Action to Estate Agreement

A three-year monitoring study of an Estate Action project on Bell Farm estate in York found that a programme of regeneration and physical improvement had brought about an improvement in resident satisfaction, service delivery and crime. An Estate Agreement between the residents and local service providers has been developed in order to sustain this improvement. Ian Cole and Yvonne Smith of Sheffield Hallam University found:

f Resident satisfaction with living on the estate had improved from 57% in 1989 to 86% in 1994, following a programme of dwelling and environmental improvements and changes in service provision, coupled with ongoing consultation and direct involvement.

f The high level of unemployment on Bell Farm - around 40% among economically active males - overshadowed every other issue and increased in importance as other problems (crime, poor environment) eased.

f A combination of measures was used to tackle crime - a local police presence, modernisation and security-conscious environmental improvements. Some residents still felt at risk, but this stemmed from general anxiety about rising crime levels.

f The constant process of consultation and review meant that new initiatives kept pace with residents' interests and concerns, rather than running ahead of grass-roots opinion. There was a high level of satisfaction with local authority management of the estate, and no interest in direct resident control as an alternative. Few wanted a future role in management.

f The researchers conclude that:

- The Estate Agreement retained the momentum of resident participation without placing undue demands on them. It is a method adaptable to smaller estates, and offers flexibility in terms of inter-service involvement.
- Estate Agreements are suited to the emerging 'contract culture' in local services, and help residents to become conversant in skills of contract scrutiny, appraisal and audit. Ongoing community development measures are essential to ensure the residents retain a critical edge in their appraisal of service conditions and standards.

The Bell Farm Project

Bell Farm is a small public sector housing estate in York of some 400 properties. Prior to the Estate Action project, houses on Bell Farm had been in a poor state of repair, with heating systems needing replacement, few amenities and a long-standing reputation as an unpopular, crime-ridden neighbourhood. However, these problems were not as prevalent as on many severely deprived inner city or peripheral estates. Local unemployment was high, but there were few overt signs of social or racial tension, and the general atmosphere was of neglect rather than of a neighbourhood suffering severe local malaise.

The Bell Farm Project was based on the assumption that property and physical improvements could better act as a catalyst for change in the reputation of the estate and overall perceptions if complemented by a flexible approach to community involvement.

The programme of improvements on the Bell Farm estate in York was distinctive in its emphasis on an open-ended and flexible brief towards resident involvement and the future management of the estate. It did not seek to apply a particular model or approach. Indeed, the only pre-ordained formula behind the programme was to be wary of all formulas - to avoid 'off-the-peg' models of participation and estate management, and to work closely with residents to identify the most appropriate form of intervention and long-term arrangements. Given that the estate was small, any tenant involvement arrangements would have to survive short-term Estate Action funding and not overstretch the capacity of a small number of active participants from the estate.

The key components of the project included:

- a commitment to ensure that all initiatives and proposals were discussed and agreed by the local Residents' Association before they were adopted;
- the creation of a project team of officers to react to residents' priorities and drive the scheme forward;
- the establishment of a Bell Farm Steering Committee with representation from a range of services to reinforce inter-agency input and cross-departmental collaboration;
- the employment of community development consultants on an 'as and when needed' basis to carry out specific tasks in terms of environmental improvements, resident management options and the promotion of sustainable forms of participation;
- the completion of a dwelling modernisation programme funded by Estate Action according to a 'menu' approach, allowing wide scope for resident choice in selecting improvements;
- a strategy of environmental improvements, in which priorities were shaped by a Community Planning Week and an Action Plan, also covering employment initiatives, facilities for children, crime and security, subsequently pursued by small resident-run action teams;

- the adoption of a community employment project to maximise opportunities for residents to train or retrain, and to promote a more positive image of the estate to local employers;
- an attempt to improve local press coverage of the estate by a campaign to keep local journalists more thoroughly aware of the transformation of the area.

The impact of the project

It was possible to compare the results of an estate survey undertaken prior to the project in 1989 with a similar survey carried out by the research team in 1994. A comparison of the results indicated:

- an increase in those satisfied about living on Bell Farm from 57% to 86%;
- a decline in those who would be interested in transferring off the estate from 27% to 11%;
- an increase in satisfaction with residents' own homes from 75% to 93%;
- an increase in those finding that properties were in good condition from 34% to 91%;
- an overall satisfaction rating of 92% with the modernisation programme, 65% with estate management advice and 65% with the repairs service;
- 92% felt they had been given the opportunity to comment on proposals for the estate;
- 72% felt that Bell Farm was now a more attractive place to live than estates elsewhere in York;
- 55% felt that crime levels had decreased, and 49% felt that vandalism had decreased since the project, with few residents thinking either had increased;
- only 7% felt there was, in general, more crime on Bell Farm than on other estates, compared to 37% of respondents five years earlier;
- 65% felt that the press did not give an accurate picture of life on the estate.

In terms of housing performance indicators, the estate demonstrated that the situation had improved in terms of lower repair costs, reduced re-letting times, lower transfer requests, and a smaller number of outstanding repairs. There were now no unlettable empty properties.

Viewed as an exercise in the physical improvement of dwellings and the environment, the project was successfully executed. A more tantalising question was the extent to which the physical refurbishment had an ancillary effect on residents - by extending their opportunities for longer-term involvement, changing the image of the area, and instilling a new sense of self-belief and confidence about the future. This raised issues about the sustainability and overall control of the estate.

Resident involvement

The project was launched on the basis of devising options in partnership with residents, rather than presenting any pre-emptive solutions. The Residents' Association was at the heart of all initiatives

introduced on the estate. Continual efforts were made to involve residents in the project - from street meetings to parties, open days and residents' meetings. The response was good when the issues concerned the immediate changes being made to their houses or street; there was less interest in more strategic options for the estate as a whole. As one resident said,

"People tend to go if they have got a grievance to air themselves - otherwise they don't."

Most residents were quite content to allow a small number of those active in the Residents' Association to keep the project moving. While many felt there should be wider involvement, they were often not interested or able to make such a contribution themselves.

As resident participation in the Action Plan evolved, it became increasingly clear that only a small minority of residents were interested in taking on management - still less ownership - of the properties after modernisation. There were two main reasons - a generally high level of satisfaction with the current housing service provided by the council, and a concern about the demands on the time, commitment and energy required of a few local people in the more forthright role for management. As one resident put it:

"It might be a brilliant idea, but who is going to manage it? Because I do not think people are sufficiently interested. Again it will probably be just the same few."

However, very strong support was given by residents to the idea of adapting the notion of a 'customer contract' for the estate as a way of ensuring their continuing influence over service levels and standards. This steered a middle way between a fully fledged form of management - such as an Estate Management Board or tenant co-operative - and simply reverting back to the position before the project by handing total control back to the local authority and other agencies involved in service provision.

The Bell Farm Estate Agreement

The Estate Agreement was a way of formalising resident influence over local services by means of a partnership with local agencies. This was done through the publication of a booklet - initially covering eleven services on the estate - which gave basic information, listed contact points and set minimum standards of performance over aspects of service delivery. Monthly meetings are held with residents to monitor progress, and an annual review updates and revises priorities for action. The aims of the Agreement include:

- developing day-to-day contact between residents and service providers at estate level;
- extending residents' understanding of service levels and standards, and involving them in discussions about future initiatives and commitments;

- providing a framework for regular monitoring of service delivery;
- protecting and enhancing the recent investment in the properties and facilities on the estate;
- helping to build a stronger, more cohesive community;
- where necessary, seeking improvements in service provision on the estate.

The Estate Agreement is not a new idea - versions have been introduced in local authorities such as Manchester, Camden and Lancaster - and York City Council itself had developed the idea of customer contracts for its services. The Bell Farm agreement differs from some other contracts in terms of:

- its broad scope - extending to services other than housing, and to agencies outside local authorities, such as the police;
- its formality - via an Estate Agreement Monitoring Group with full resident representation;
- the reliance on a framework for partnership, rather than through legal sanctions or requirements.

The Estate Agreement on Bell Farm is in its early stages, but the model does offer potential for sustaining a degree of resident commitment and control after short-term regeneration, in bringing together different agencies involved in service delivery to particular neighbourhoods and in providing appropriate 'exit strategies' once the formal project stage has finished.

There are, however, also risks with this approach :

- the dangers of an over-bureaucratic emphasis, with residents swamped by reams of paper, bedazzled by ill-digested performance indicators and exhausted from a constant succession of monitoring meetings;
- the risk of 'active' residents becoming detached from the rest of the residents, who may not be familiar with techniques of control by contract;
- the lack of sanction and leverage if service standards deteriorate, or are breached;
- a potentially poor response from outside contractors in the future who are less constrained by forms of accountability currently embedded in local government services.

On the other hand, the Estate Agreement approach has certain strengths:

- it is adaptable to estates of different size and types, and can be 'customised' to meet specific priorities or circumstances;
- it is premised on a realistic assessment of likely resident input, rather than inflated aspirations about the time and energy that can be given to involvement;
- it enshrines the multi-service approach in a more durable format;

- it is not necessarily dependent on additional investment in a neighbourhood to trigger participation;
- it offers flexibility in terms of changing the scope and scale of inter-service involvement - for example, it could embrace new bodies such as a local Single Regeneration Budget agency.

In particular, the Estate Agreement approach is well adapted in principle to the development of local services on a contractual basis - as exemplified by the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering for housing management services. It opens up possibilities for contract scrutiny as a means of influencing local service provision. However, the responsiveness of local service providers to such a system, and their willingness to become involved in such partnerships, is more difficult to predict.

The future

The Estate Agreement idea does not confront the underlying issues of inequality, polarisation and poverty which lead to the problems faced by estates like Bell Farm in many of our towns and cities. It is not a substitute for basic financial investment in housing, nor a panacea in the growing armoury of regeneration initiatives. But it can help residents secure a degree of continuing influence over local service provision, which will become increasingly complex and fragmented in its mode of delivery in the future.

The 1994 survey of Bell Farm residents had uncovered considerable optimism for the future, with over half the residents thinking their estate would be a better place to live in five years' time than it is now, and only 6% thinking it would be worse. The climate was right for the Estate Agreement idea to take root, and perhaps to offer an enduring legacy to the three years of improvement and physical investment in the neighbourhood. It might provide the means for more residents to share the experience of an active member of the Residents' Association, who had made the full journey from Estate Action to Estate Agreement:

"When we first moved up here and you mentioned you lived on Bell Farm, you were looked at as though you had just been trodden on. It has now made me realise I am worth a lot more. It's given me the ability to go and do other things off the estate that will benefit me and my family."

About the study

The project was based on a partnership between local residents, York City Council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The partnership was resourced by a successful Estate Action bid, and by supplementary funding from the City Council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The project set out to tackle physical goals and a range of social and economic issues, coupled with a commitment to ongoing resident involvement.

Further information

A full report on the research project, From Estate Action to Estate Agreement by Ian Cole and Yvonne Smith, is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £11.95).

Related Findings

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- 4** Community participation and empowerment: putting theory into practice (Aug 94)
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For further information on these and other Findings, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publication queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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