

## Creating sustainable neighbourhood and estate regeneration

Most initiatives to regenerate run-down estates and neighbourhoods are planned as short- or fixed-life programmes. Focusing on an area for a few years is expected to produce a catalytic effect leading to self-sustaining development. But many of the areas on which short-life programmes currently focus were the subject of earlier short-life initiatives, suggesting that improvements were not sustained. Recent research by GFA Consulting reviewed how short-life estate and neighbourhood initiatives planned for their own demise.

- Although programme managers were unanimous that the neighbourhoods and estates on which the regeneration programmes focus are characterised by multiple deprivation, in practice the various agencies concerned rarely take a joint approach to tackling problems.
- Although little detailed empirical evidence is available, the chance of short-life programme achievements surviving seems in part to depend on an effective 'exit strategy' being planned and built into all activities from the very start.
- In virtually all cases reviewed for the study, managers of short-life programmes (City Challenge, Task Forces, Estate Action) wanted to leave behind semi-permanent successor bodies.
- Precisely because of the transience of the short-life initiative, nearly all programme managers felt that sustainability cannot be achieved without ensuring that the local community is involved and able to carry forward any initiatives.
- The researchers conclude that sustaining the achievements of short-life initiatives and designing effective exit strategies would be assisted by:
  - introducing the possibility of tapered funding;
  - determining the end of short-life programmes according to the achievement of predetermined criteria rather than immutable timetables;
  - allowing sufficient time to build proper consultation into the development of both initial strategy planning and of exit strategies.

## The policy context

The last 30 years have witnessed a variety of programmes to tackle inner-city or estate-based deprivations, with a wide range of priorities and objectives, but within this diversity, there have been two enduring features:

- a relatively tight geographical focus, either on specific estates or small areas and neighbourhoods;
- *temporary* interventions, through fixed- or short-life programmes.

Initiatives like City Challenge, Task Forces and more recently the Single Regeneration Budget are based on the assumption that short-term public interventions can suffice to stimulate the recovery process so that depressed neighbourhoods or estates will require no further 'special' public expenditure. Hence, all stress the importance of 'pump-priming' private investment and 'bending' main public programmes to meet the needs of disadvantaged areas more effectively.

## What is sustainability?

An implicit - and often explicit - objective of the short-life programme is to secure *lasting* social and/or economic change in disadvantaged areas. A key element of effective programme design is a clear statement of objectives and the identification of indicators by which their achievements can be measured but - since the pursuit of sustainability is usually taken as given - it is rarely felt necessary to define it, or to determine how it might be recognised or measured. There has also been little empirical investigation of how far the achievements of short-life programmes survive, or why.

The results of this study suggest a connection between the rigour of the initial problem diagnosis, the quality of the programme design, and the effectiveness and durability of results. This is hardly surprising: before you can be confident about the right solution, you need to know you are tackling the right problem. Yet - despite a growing consensus about the characteristics (and indeed causes) of neighbourhood and estate-based deprivation - there is no shortage of programmes with a misconceived or partial view of the issues. From the projects and programmes on whose experience this research is based, the critical issues which programme design needs to reflect include:

- **multiple deprivation:** programme managers were unanimous that deprived areas suffered from a

multiplicity of problems - however, there was less evidence in practice of multi-agency approaches being taken to tackle these.

- **unemployment and poverty:** since large-scale unemployment and benefit dependency are almost defining characteristics of areas and estates on which short-life programmes focus, increasing the numbers in work seems a prerequisite for sustainability - but tackling unemployment is the area where comprehensive regeneration programmes have experienced most difficulties.

- **relationship to housing:** poverty and unemployment are not the fault of housing, but their concentration on particular estates and neighbourhoods is a result of housing policy and the housing market. The issues are complex, and need further research, but generating sustainable change seems to require addressing patterns of tenure, and lettings and allocations policies.

- **change in external agencies:** although programmes typically focus on particular estates and neighbourhoods, problems often reflect failures in external services and their ability to reach disadvantaged communities - so sustaining regenerative processes requires external as well as internal change.

## 'Exit strategies'

The evaluators of the first Inner City Task Force to close, in Handsworth, criticised the closure as premature, but said the effects "... would not have been so damaging had there been an effective exit strategy in place, but there was not". A local resident interviewed by the evaluators described the Task Force as a "... plaster on a cut wound. Removing the plaster too quickly could hinder the process of healing". Other Task Forces attempted to absorb the lessons of Handsworth, and there is now a requirement for City Challenge, SRB programmes and other short-life initiatives formally to develop 'exit' or 'forward strategies' dealing with how the programme will withdraw from the area.

The research examined the exit strategy plans and experiences of a variety of Task Forces, City Challenge partnerships and estate-based initiatives in England and Scotland. A number of common themes emerged:

- the process of designing exit strategies cannot start too early - 'exit consciousness', as it is described by Bradford City Challenge, must suffuse everything a short-life programme undertakes;

- as well as exit strategy there needs to be a 'closure strategy', in which the management of the withdrawal is handled sensitively - many programme managers stressed the importance of tapered rather than abrupt withdrawal. This is not possible in City Challenge and is difficult with SRB;
- there need to be exit strategies for individual projects within the programme as well as for the programme as a whole. This may require the development of detailed project business plans, and wherever possible identifying 'foster homes' amongst local agencies likely to be around in the longer term and therefore able to offer continuing support;
- mainstream service deliverers and programme managers need to be more sensitive to the *specific* requirements of residents;
- overwhelmingly, the importance of successor organisations: virtually all the managers of short-life initiatives reviewed for the study wanted to establish a semi-permanent organisation as the focus of continual regeneration.

### Conclusions and lessons

The paucity of rigorous empirical research, conducted over time, about the durability of short-life programme achievements, necessarily makes these conclusions tentative. However, some of the critical lessons to emerge from the study include:

- much in practice depends on the overall effectiveness of programme design and management, key ingredients of which include:
  - a rigorous analysis of the estate or area, covering not just problems but existing services, to identify gaps needing to be addressed
  - a quantified baseline study, to provide the basis for target-setting and monitoring
  - clear and measurable objectives, relating directly to the initial analysis
  - project development and appraisal mechanisms which link objectives to specific actions
  - rigorous management and monitoring throughout the programme;

- a clear recognition of the multiple character of disadvantage. There is some evidence that if key elements are not addressed, the durability of other achievements may be compromised; this implies that multi-agency coalitions are essential;
- implementing effective, multi-dimensional programmes in difficult areas is staff-intensive - however, there are currently severe limitations on staffing in most programmes;
- it is preferable to decide the withdrawal of short-life initiatives by the achievement of predetermined criteria, rather than some arbitrarily fixed time-period;
- one of the truisms of urban and estate regeneration is there is no quick fix: the near-unanimity with which the managers of short-life initiatives seek to leave behind permanent successor bodies is overwhelming endorsement of that;
- precisely because the short-life programmes are transient, an apparently fundamental precondition of sustainability is a community-based approach which stresses capacity building and empowerment.

### Further research

There has been little detailed research to examine the legacy of short-life programmes after their departure, so much of what is presumed about sustainability and how to achieve it is based on hypothesis and faith. Some possible areas where further research would pay dividends include the following:

- is the durability of physical improvements really compromised if other non-physical regeneration objectives are not addressed?
- how far have the achievements of short-life initiatives which have departed survived, and what accounts for different rates of survival? It would be possible, for example, to revisit a number of closed Task Forces to compare the current picture with what they left in place on their withdrawal.
- how in practice could the strategic co-ordination between the various agencies whose co-operation is needed be improved? How could a strategic, city-wide framework be related to a competition for resources?

- how could capacity building activities be more effectively built into short-life programmes? Are there lessons of relevance to the British situation in the experience of the American Community Development Corporations?

#### About the study

GFA Consulting interviewed the managers of a number of Task Forces, City Challenge partnerships and estate initiatives about their plans for withdrawal. They also carried out an extensive review of academic literature, and evaluations studies on the sustainability of estate and neighbourhood short-life programmes.

#### Further information

The full report, *Made to Last: Creating sustainable neighbourhood and estate regeneration* by Geoff Fordham, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

#### Related *Findings*

The following *Housing Findings* look at related issues:

- 97 Estate regeneration at Meadowell (Oct 93)
- 100 Urban regeneration: UK and German problems and approaches (Dec 93)
- 105 Community involvement in City Challenge (Jan 94)
- 106 The purchase and management of leasehold flats by residents (Jan 94)
- 107 Multi-agency working on difficult-to-manage estates (Feb 94)
- 132 Tenant involvement in estate regeneration (Nov 94)
- 133 The feasibility of 'Residents' Democracy' (Nov 94)

The following *Housing Summaries* are also relevant:

- 4 Community participation and empowerment: putting theory into practice (Aug 94)
- 5 Lessons from Hulme (Sept 94)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publications queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



Published by the  
Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead, 40 Water End  
York YO3 6LP  
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072  
ISSN 1356-3408

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which funds programmes of research and innovative development in the fields of housing, social care and social policy. It supports projects of potential value to policy-makers, decision-takers and practitioners. It publishes the findings rapidly and widely so that they can inform current debate and practice.