

Lessons from Bell Farm Estate, York

A short study by William Roe examined the various practical steps that made a regeneration project on York's Bell Farm estate a success. Resident activists and professionals who played a key role were asked to assess what had worked and what hadn't. A generally positive picture emerged of a flexible process that placed residents at the centre of regeneration.

- A pilot scheme dealing with modernisation on a small part of the estate allowed all the parties, including the Residents Association, to learn the ropes before the time came to make decisions about the whole estate.
- A local action week, 'Planning our Future', organised jointly by the Residents Association, the City's Housing Department and external advisers, established a culture of partnership and mutual respect which served the whole project well.
- The estate-wide home modernisation programme allowed residents to choose from a range of home improvement options and to select from a panel of contractors. The success of the programme was significant in creating positive feelings amongst residents about the regeneration programme as a whole.
- The brief for environmental improvements was not constrained at the outset by pre-set ideas, limits or standards. Residents were offered several possibilities, individually and collectively, to inject ideas and comment on options to develop a true sense of ownership.
- The personal enthusiasm and commitment of key personnel was critical in overcoming barriers and difficulties. Equally important was the ability to draw in other local authority, statutory and voluntary agencies. The commitment of the Residents Association and of York's Housing Department was crucial. However, there have been problems replacing members who leave the Residents Association. This became even more difficult once home and environmental improvements were completed.
- The way in which options for the long-term management of the estate were developed and considered allowed an innovative model to be chosen which is enthusiastically embraced by several service providers and residents alike.

Estate profile

Bell Farm is a pre-war housing estate in York consisting of 364 semi-detached family homes. Bell Farm had the reputation as being one of the most unpopular estates in the city, and despite a shortage of affordable rented housing in York was unable to attract or retain its population. Levels of crime and unemployment were high. However, the council and a core of long-term residents were determined that both the physical characteristics and reputation of the estate should be improved.

In response to an Estate Action bid in 1990 which was based on a very comprehensive survey of residents in 1989, the DoE invited the City Council to work up a detailed scheme for the area's improvement. Following discussion with the Residents Association, it was decided that the project should begin in a neighbourhood of 54 houses (Kirkham Avenue), allowing lessons to be learned there before final decisions were made about the whole estate.

A combined technical appraisal and customer satisfaction survey was carried out to determine what works were needed to improve houses in this area. The success of revitalisation would, it was thought, depend more on changing customer perceptions of their homes than objective physical improvements.

Three key strands to the proposals emerged.

- **physical improvements** to tackle disrepair and to restore the area in a way that allowed customer choice and full involvement in the design process
- **management improvements**, to increase tenant participation and a more effective estate management service
- **economic revival**, intended to identify and utilise existing skills in the area, provide training and improve access to jobs.

In August 1991 a successful submission for £6 million was made for Estate Action funding to regenerate Bell Farm.

The Bell Farm project

The Bell Farm Estate Action Project was launched in April 1992. It had a number of distinctive organisational features, including the inter-departmental and inter-agency nature of the project and the involvement of external consultants. The project management structure was therefore more complex than is often found in modernisation or improvement schemes, consisting of:

The project team, including the project manager, housing management and community development staff from the City Council Housing Department and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The team provided day-to-day liaison with the Residents Association, supervised contractors, and offered support to advisers and consultants. It met every second week to set aims and targets, timetable forward plans, monitor

progress, scrutinise budgets, review new ideas and act on emerging problems.

The Bell Farm Residents Association providing the link between outside professionals and residents, and centrally involved in all decisions and activities.

The Steering Group meeting every six weeks to ensure that the holistic nature of the project was achieved in practice.

Techniques for community involvement *Modernisation programme*

Properties were modernised in line with York City Council's Tenants Choice scheme; residents had a choice of internal improvements and were also each given £500 to spend on fixtures or enhancements of their choice. In addition, improvements on Bell Farm included an energy efficiency package, safety and security measures and external works. A monthly newsletter was produced throughout the modernisation period and 'surgery' sessions held at a showhouse. Customer satisfaction surveys were carried out before and after modernisation. The Housing Department's Community Adviser convened monthly meetings with the Residents Association, the Estate Manager and local councillors to review progress and deal with new suggestions.

The showhouse

A showhouse on the estate became key to the project's success, acting as the Project Office, a point of contact for residents and a base for the police and the estate handy-person.

'Planning our Future' week

Soon after the Project launch a Community Planning Week was organised. The aim was to maximise the level of community involvement and support; to attract the broadest possible range of ideas and contributions; to promote the Residents Association and deepen the sense of partnership; and to ensure that residents' own priorities were heard, understood and used to help shape future plans.

In addition to the consultants' original ideas (promotion, launch, surveys, children's project and climax event), the Residents Association suggested a 'walkabout' and an 'Any Questions' panel, when residents could meet and question officials from key agencies.

The week culminated in an Open Day focusing on possibilities and opportunities. Building on this and feedback from other events, a long list of issues was identified and prioritised. The key ones to emerge concerned youth and play, housing and service delivery, employment, training and family income, environment, recreation and social issues, crime, health and welfare. The success of the week could be judged from the number of residents who took part, the sense of common purpose engendered and the growth of awareness, experience and

confidence of the Residents Association.

However, 'Planning our Future' week made great demands on the Residents Association (as well as on the many agencies which contributed to it). There have been problems, as yet not satisfactorily resolved, in replacing members who leave the Residents Association. Attracting new members became even more difficult once home and environmental improvements were completed.

Estate Action Plan and Action Teams

Following 'Planning our Future' week an Action Plan for improvements was prepared. Three Action Teams were set up for housing, employment and youth and play. Involving both residents and professionals, Teams reported back to the Residents Association.

The Action Teams only lasted nine months but had a number of lessons for long-term management. The work involved was too much for many residents; relationships between the Action Teams and the Residents Association became entangled, with confusion about roles and responsibilities; decision-making became excessively complex and slow. As a result, a different approach was developed: the Residents Association held monthly meetings, which focused on three issues for one hour each. These discussions normally led to decisions on follow-up action and the allocation of responsibility.

Tackling crime

The Action Plan called for an increased police presence on the estate, improved security and action over burglaries and alleged drug dealing. The police were highly responsive to proposals from the community. Changes of police personnel were made, community police officers appointed and a positive relationship established with the Residents Association. The local community police officer commanded widespread support in the community, including from younger people. The police have been active advocates of the Bell Farm approach where they have seen burglaries in particular cut from epidemic proportions to a minimal level.

Tackling unemployment

A skills survey of the area revealed a rate of economic inactivity of 41 per cent compared with seven per cent for York as a whole. It also revealed an urgent need for better access to training, particularly basic numeracy, literacy and IT skills.

The survey led to the formation of a Skills Register, used to 'market' Bell Farm residents to employers and training providers. In addition, an outreach community employment worker was appointed. She used direct face-to-face methods to inform residents about training opportunities. Within 18 months she had helped 70 residents get onto courses or work experience, assisted 40 people into full or part-time employment, developed an active caseload of 100 people, developed important links with other job and training providers, and created a

significantly different attitude on the estate about opportunities for training and work.

Developing an Estate Agreement

Bell Farm residents explored the benefits and weaknesses of a number of long-term management models. The feedback showed that residents were generally pleased with the service offered by the City Council Housing Department. However, the imminent arrival of compulsory competitive tendering in housing services caused some anxieties and led to a discussion of ways in which service levels and quality could be assured.

There was little support for the community taking on responsibilities such as allocations, repair management or settling disputes. However, there was considerable support for an estate agreement for the provision of a broad range of public services, with the Residents Association playing a leading role. A way of doing this was to extend the customer contract model already piloted by York City Council, which specified individual service levels to the customer.

Developing an agreement took 15 months, with the Residents Association playing an active part throughout. The concept is that of a partnership between residents and service providers covering eight service areas; housing, police, economic development, leisure services, environmental services, adventure playground, community education and social services.

The Estate Agreement is intended to:

- strengthen partnership between residents and service providers;
- develop day-to-day contact between individual residents and the people who actually deliver the services;
- build better understanding among service providers;
- facilitate resident appreciation of levels of service and allow them to have an input to setting future levels;
- identify specific service improvements;
- provide a regular framework for monitoring service delivery;
- protect and promote the investment made in Bell Farm in recent years;
- help build a stronger community;
- act as an 'exit strategy' for the Estate Action project.

Detailed problems associated are now discussed at monthly meetings with the Residents Association. Services are considered in a rota, with some attending regularly and others more occasionally. A short written report is produced by each service every three months and submitted to a specially formed Estate Agreement Monitoring Group. The Group consists of senior representatives of all services, an equivalent number of residents representatives and a ward councillor. Its role is to keep the Agreement under review, to consider ideas about service improvements

and to make minor alterations to service agreements by consensus.

Early reaction from residents has identified a number of potential benefits. The Agreement provides residents with a clear system through which they can participate in the management of the area. The Agreement recognises the role of the Residents Association, while at the same time allowing every resident to deal directly with service providers and meet them at regular monitoring meetings.

Conclusion

The course of the project saw a positive change in residents' views of living on the estate (Table 1). Several service providers — particularly housing, police and economic development — have been significantly influenced by their work on the project and are planning to adopt some of the techniques more widely. The Residents Association, on behalf of the people of Bell Farm, have in partnership with the project team, a range of other agencies and a handful of consultants, achieved a remarkable turnaround of the estate in the past 5 years.

Table 1: Changes in residents' attitudes

	1989	1994
Satisfaction with living on Bell Farm	57%	86%
Satisfaction with own home	75%	93%
Agree home is in good condition	34%	91%
Demand for a transfer	27%	11%
Consider your views on management of estate have been taken into account	n/a	91%
Agree crime is single most important problem on Bell Farm	45%	28%
Think there is more crime in Bell Farm than elsewhere in York	37%	7%
Think there is less crime in Bell Farm than elsewhere in York	4%	53%
Think crime is about the same in Bell Farm as elsewhere in York	54%	28%

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. This evaluation was carried out by William Roe, an independent consultant.

Further information

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

Related Findings

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For further information on these and other Findings, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



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