

## Neighbourhood images in Nottingham

The adjacent Nottingham inner-city neighbourhoods of Hyson Green and Forest Fields are areas of long-standing multiple disadvantage and have a negative image in the city. However, research reveals that local residents take considerable pride in their area. They point to many positive features, which could contribute to policies of area regeneration. The research team found that.

- f** Convenience for the city centre and excellent public transport are much appreciated. But the social character of the district is just as important. Residents saw the complex ethnic and social mix positively and described it approvingly as 'diverse', 'vibrant', 'easy-going' and 'classless'.
- f** Informal social networks are strong, particularly on those streets where moderate population turnover enables such contacts to develop and mature. Women, particularly those with children, are often key players in such networks.
- f** There are strong family and community ties among the large Kashmiri population, usually linked to a local mosque. Both language barriers and cultural constraints make for more limited involvement in wider community groupings. This is especially true for Kashmiri women.
- f** There are differences of view within the African-Caribbean population about involvement in broadly-based social groupings which they feel might not recognise or give sufficient weight to African-Caribbean concerns.
- f** Earlier regeneration programmes are regarded locally with some scepticism, which is often extended to every part of the work of the local authorities. At the same time, there is a widespread desire for greater community participation in the policy process.
- f** A local Partnership Council provides an opportunity for such involvement to local residents, business interests, and the voluntary sector, but the processes are slow and have not yet yielded the quick and visible outcomes many hoped for.
- f** While there is considerable emphasis on the capacity-building needed if grass-roots involvement is to be effective, local authority officers and others seem to have less understanding of the associated changes that are required in their own ways of working.

### Characteristics of the two areas

Forest Fields and Hyson Green are adjacent inner-city neighbourhoods about a mile to the north of Nottingham city centre. Both neighbourhoods have for many years suffered from long-term multiple disadvantage. The traditional manufacturing economic base has shrunk through relocation and closure, and high levels of long-term unemployment have greatly increased poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, both neighbourhoods suffer from a persistent negative image. They are widely, but unfairly, thought of as districts with especially severe problems of crime, drug abuse and prostitution.

Despite this, there is considerable local pride, and the negative image is rejected, particularly among residents of long-standing. Most residents are attached to the area, and want to go on living there. In particular, they like the convenience of living close to the city centre with easy access to its many facilities. The public transport system is excellent, and although the local shopping facilities have declined in recent years, as the edge-of-town superstores have attracted custom away from the High Street, the local shops are much more plentiful and varied than is the case in many outlying estates and suburbs.

Both Hyson Green and Forest Fields are ethnically and socially mixed. There are many residents of African-Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani origin, although the majority of these are British-born. There has been a large Kashmiri population in Forest Fields for several decades. There is also a small but important middle-class population who live in or near the neighbourhood as a matter of positive choice. Residents comment favourably on the diversity of the district; it is thought of as a tolerant, easy-going place to live. Many call it a 'classless' environment. Although there is considerable resentment of persistent institutional racism among the ethnic groups, this is often seen as one part of a more widespread prejudice against the entire neighbourhood and all those who live in it. Older people recall a time when overt street racism was a common feature, but this seems to have diminished, and local race relations are generally good.

### Social networks

There are strong social networks, both formal and informal, which link people in a great variety of groupings and associations. Terraced housing and

high population densities encourage street-life and extensive contacts with neighbours and near-neighbours. Informal networks are weaker on those streets where population turnover is most marked, where social interaction has not had time to evolve and mature, and where some at least of the newcomers may be reluctant residents, driven by circumstances to seek relatively cheap housing.

Women are often the key players in the more informal street-networks. There is a pattern of self-help and mutual aid with child-care, and a shared concern about such wider issues as road-safety, environmental degradation, and security from crime.

### Community action

There are a great many community groups and voluntary organisations, often based at one or another of the local community and neighbourhood centres, or local places of worship. Residents groups - which focus on such shared local concerns as housing conditions, road safety and traffic control, or security from crime - are more likely to recruit a broad cross-section of the local population and to be ethnically mixed, than those groups with a wider recreational or cultural purpose which tend to have a more defined membership.

All the ethnic groups have their own voluntary groups, addressing their specific interests and concerns. These groups frequently operate on a city-wide rather than a neighbourhood basis, and their centres may be located in other parts of the city. Where this is so, it takes out of the immediate neighbourhood some of the energy and drive of the most committed and active members of the ethnic groups. But by the same token, where the centre happens to be located within the research neighbourhoods then they attract into the district active supporters from elsewhere. In any event, such wider associations build bridges between the research neighbourhoods and the rest of Nottingham.

Within the Kashmiri population, close ties of family and clan merge with wider social networks which are often based around the mosque. Among many of the older generation there are still language barriers which inhibit broader social participation, while there are strong cultural traditions which limit the extent to which Kashmiri women, particularly married women, are able to take an active part in the work of broader social and community groups.

There is a continuing debate within the African-Caribbean population about whether their interests can be properly understood and addressed in open-membership organisations. There is a feeling that these will probably be dominated by white members, with their own concerns. For some, this implies the need for separate, independent African-Caribbean groups. But others argue that only by becoming involved in broader mainstream groups can the particular needs of this, or any other specific group within the population, be externally registered. Moreover, there are many issues where concern is shared by everyone, regardless of ethnicity, and where a shared approach should be more productive. This is an important debate, but meanwhile it has the potential to create some tension both within the African-Caribbean community and beyond.

It is clear that all sections of the community, without exception, are working through a process of long-term cultural change and transition. This is often difficult and gives rise to tensions and strains, particularly between the generations. But the transition is helping to forge a more effective ethnically and culturally diverse social structure. The transition is as yet incomplete, but the younger generation, whether European, Asian or African-Caribbean, feel the need most acutely for it to continue.

Only a minority of the population actively involve themselves in the work of community groups and voluntary organisations. The bulk of the work of such groups falls on relatively few shoulders, and the people concerned are frequently active in several different settings and organisations simultaneously. Productive collaboration between groups and organisations is sometimes made more difficult by personal rivalries, personality clashes, or disagreements about policy or strategy.

Some voluntary organisations seek funding, to enable them to maintain an office and employ a small staff. In recent years the funding environment has been intensely competitive, and groups have been forced to see each other as rivals for access to scarce resources. This has made sensible collaboration between otherwise like-minded groups considerably more difficult. A more helpful funding environment could encourage a shared and co-operative relationship between local organisations.

## Attitudes to regeneration programmes

There is considerable local scepticism about earlier regeneration programmes. At street-level, they are widely thought of as having been ineffective, or at best cosmetic, imposed from outside with little consultation or involvement of local people. But local authority officers and other professionals have learned lessons from and drawn on the experience of earlier initiatives, not least in acknowledging the need for greater community involvement in regeneration strategies.

There is a positive response to the creation of more active partnerships to address local problems, although this welcome is qualified by deep suspicion about the sincerity and commitment of the public authorities to genuine partnership where some power is devolved.

A Partnership Council has been established. It covers both research neighbourhoods and a number of other adjacent neighbourhoods as well. The Council acts as an umbrella organisation to bring together local residents, community and voluntary organisations, local business interests and public-sector personnel. The Council was given the task of determining the distribution of European Union Urban Funds. This gave it an immediate and clear purpose, but it has proved to be a long-winded and bureaucratic process which has tried the patience of many grass-roots partners who hoped for speedier and more visible outcomes.

Attitudes towards the Partnership Council vary. There is some resentment among members of long-standing local voluntary organisations. They have never had the benefit of the significant public funding which has enabled the Partnership Council to equip and staff an office, and which, they feel, has usurped their own valuable role as representing local interests. Similarly some elected representatives argue that they themselves have both a democratic mandate, and a publicly accountable responsibility that is not the case with a largely self-selected body such as the Partnership Council. Nonetheless, the Partnership Council has created a framework which has the potential for enabling more open and participatory policy-making processes, and has involved many hitherto uninvolved individuals in its work. It has also brought together individuals and interest groups who would not normally interact with one another.

The encouragement of local partnerships, as a means of empowerment of individuals and communities, is a central part of both European and UK Government thinking. But the remit and boundaries of local partnerships is unclear. People may engage in the process with very different assumptions and expectations, with scope for considerable misunderstanding and disenchantment.

It is widely acknowledged that inexperienced partners need help to develop capacities and skills that will enable them to make a more effective contribution. But the challenge of partnership may be even greater for those who have become accustomed to the exercise of power and influence in a more directive and prescriptive tradition. This is both especially true, and especially difficult for local authority officers and elected representatives, who may be key players in several different local partnership organisations simultaneously. Such key players have to balance the ebb and flow of local argument and suggestion with their responsibilities to the wider community they are elected or appointed to serve, and they function within a highly competitive, deadline-driven and 'managed' regional, national and European environment.

### About the study

This is one of four linked local studies, commissioned as a mini-programme within the JRF Area Regeneration research programme. The others look at East London, Liverpool and Teesside. The research was qualitative in character, and was based on semi-structured interviews and small group discussions with local residents, community activists, and local authority officers and elected representatives.

The research was carried out by Richard Silburn an independent research consultant with the 50-50 Partnership, Dan Lucas and Lynn Hanna, part-time Research Officers within the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham, and Dr Robert Page, now Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of Leicester.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood images in Nottingham: Social cohesion and neighbourhood change** by Richard Silburn, Dan Lucas, Robert Page and Lynn Hanna (ISBN 1 902633 31 8), is published for the Foundation by YPS.