Including young people in urban regeneration

As the difficulties faced by young people living within disadvantaged communities have become increasingly apparent, youth issues have gained prominence within area-based regeneration initiatives. This study, by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Annette Hastings and Keith Kintrea of the University of Glasgow, investigated the extent to which urban regeneration projects have met the needs of young people aged 16 to 24 years old, and how young people have become involved as active participants in these initiatives. They found:

- Young people and adult decision-makers had divergent priorities within regeneration initiatives. For example, adults tended to emphasise the educational and training needs of young people, whereas young people were more interested in changing adult perceptions of them.

- Most youth-orientated regeneration projects targeted 14- to 19-year-olds, and young people over 20 were often viewed as a ‘lost cause’. There appeared to be fairly effective targeting of the most disadvantaged young people within these communities.

- Youth forums were the most common mechanism used to facilitate youth involvement in regeneration initiatives, but there was a range of difficulties with the way these forums operated, including: lacking a sense of purpose; not being integrated into decision-making structures; and lack of accountability.

- The impact of youth involvement on regeneration strategies and projects was minor and limited to youth-specific issues. However, youth involvement had a very positive impact on some adults’ perceptions of young people and their capacity to participate in decision-making.

The case studies suggest that:

- The level of support needed to secure and sustain youth involvement is greater than that needed for equivalent adult structures. Substantial resources are required for effective youth participation, and in particular the provision of dedicated workers seems crucial.

- Youth involvement projects should be scheduled early in the life of an initiative, as, generally, young people require more time than adults to develop the necessary skills to become effective participants in the decision-making process.
Background
Youth issues have gained prominence within area-based regeneration initiatives since the early 1990s. This has been the result of growing concerns about the disadvantages faced by these young people in relation both to adults in their own communities and to young people living in more affluent areas, and also about the impact that their activities can have on the quality of life for other members of the community. Projects have been developed aimed at meeting young people’s needs, as well as promoting youth involvement in the regeneration process, as young people have traditionally been absent from community participation structures. This research therefore sought to examine:

- the extent to which young people’s needs have been addressed by area-based regeneration initiatives;
- the nature and effectiveness of young people’s participation in the decision-making processes and structures of these initiatives.

Youth projects and priorities
There was some divergence in the priorities which young people and adult decision-makers had for youth within regeneration initiatives.

Both adults and young people stressed the need for employment and leisure opportunities for young people.

Adults also emphasised young people’s education, training and self-development needs, and were concerned to provide them with alternatives to anti-social behaviour and to secure their involvement in the regeneration process. Young people were more concerned with stopping police harassment and changing adult perceptions of their age group.

There was a wide range of projects aimed at young people within regeneration programmes. Economic projects which sought to link young people with existing job and training opportunities were almost universal. Education projects were also very common, but these often focused on the educational attainment of schoolchildren. A notable omission was projects designed to increase young people’s access to further and higher education. Projects which focused on ‘quality of life’ issues, such as housing or health, were often either absent or very small-scale, although there was some attention given to the provision of leisure facilities for young people. The most significant gap in these youth-orientated regeneration programmes, given young people’s own self-defined needs, was projects which address young people’s relationship with the police.

In most cases, projects seem to have fairly effectively targeted the more disadvantaged and ‘disaffected’ young people within these communities. Whilst many youth-orientated projects were aimed at young people up to 25 years old, in practice they were generally working with a narrower age range of between 14 and 19 years. Young people in their twenties who still had problems often seemed to be considered ‘a lost cause’.

Youth involvement
Youth involvement in urban regeneration initiatives has largely been promoted by professionals and politicians rather than community activists. The explicit rationale for youth involvement was usually to give young people a ‘voice’ in the regeneration process. However, objectives relating to the self-development of young people and the sustainability of regeneration were also apparent. Community representatives were often supportive of youth involvement on the basis that young people were ‘the next generation’ of community leaders.

There was a range of mechanisms for involving young people in regeneration initiatives, but by far the most common structure for securing their participation was youth forums (see below). Other methods of involvement included:

- consultation techniques, e.g. youth surveys, youth conferences and focus group discussions;
- joint management initiatives, e.g. youth involvement in the management of specific projects, or youth delegates on partnership boards and community forums;
- youth controlled projects, e.g. young people were given delegated power over a project or budget, or developed a project on their own initiative.

All of these mechanisms had both strengths and weaknesses, and youth involvement seemed to be most effectively achieved by a combination of methods, so that young people had a range of channels through which to influence the regeneration process.

Youth forums
A youth forum is a structure for youth involvement which is separate from, and usually parallel to, adult representative structures. Youth forums ranged from formal, high-profile structures with relatively generous funding, to loose groupings of young people with no independent resources. They also related to widely differing scales of area. Typically, around ten to fifteen young people were regularly involved in the activities of a youth forum.

Youth forums provided a visible structure to facilitate ongoing participation by young people in the regeneration process. Also, young people, particularly the youngest age groups, preferred parallel youth structures to direct involvement in adult community groups. However, in practice there were
significant problems experienced with youth forums. They often:

- lacked a sense of purpose;
- were not well integrated with the decision-making structures of the regeneration initiative;
- lacked a democratic and open structure, and were not accountable to the area’s young people as a whole;
- were perceived as a token group of young people used to legitimise adult decisions.

Some of these problems are attributable to the relatively new and experimental status of youth forums in regeneration. Youth forums worked most effectively where they had a clear agenda and specific set of objectives, and where there was an opportunity for participants to have fun as well as to attend meetings. Leisure activities were often used as a ‘hook’ to draw young people into participatory mechanisms. A narrow geographical focus may also be an asset. It is important for arrangements to be made for youth forums to feed their views regularly into the local regeneration initiative.

The membership of youth forums did generally reflect the local population of young people as regards factors such as race, gender and social background. This was mainly due to the anti-discrimination ethic of youth workers. Youth workers also emphasised the importance of attracting ‘cool kids’, i.e. those who enjoy peer group respect, into forums in order to give the forum credibility with other young people.

There is a danger, however, that youth forums will become the only means to consult with young people in some areas.

Support for youth involvement

The intensity of support required to facilitate youth involvement was far greater than for equivalent adult structures. There was a need for dedicated workers who were responsible for supporting youth involvement within the initiative. These additional support needs stemmed from a number of factors. For example, young people were generally less confident and experienced in formal settings than adults. There were also difficulties relating to the cynicism and disaffection of some young people, although these were less significant barriers to participation than anticipated.

Building the skills young people need to participate took far longer than for adults. This was mainly because youth representatives were normally ‘starting from scratch’ with no previous involvement in community activism. Thus youth involvement projects must be scheduled early in a regeneration initiative if they are to have any hope of making a worthwhile contribution. Short-term initiatives may experience difficulties in securing any meaningful youth involvement.

There was also a faster turnover of members in youth groups as compared with adult community groups. This created sustainability problems for these groups, and had resource implications due to the high level of support required to enable each young person to become fully involved.

There was a broad consensus that training was crucial to effective youth involvement. However, most youth representatives had received very limited or no training. This was either because this aspect of involvement had not been fully thought through, or because insufficient resources were available. The most appropriate form of training appears to be active, problem-solving approaches, rather than traditional, classroom-based styles of teaching.

The impact of youth involvement

The overall impact of youth involvement on regeneration projects and programmes has been very minor so far. It has also been limited to youth-specific issues rather than matters affecting the community as a whole. Young people have been able to make very little impression on the overall strategies and structures of initiatives, and there were few examples of them changing existing projects or exercising operational control over these projects. There was some evidence of youth influence over the development of new projects, for example participation in the development of plans for new youth centres. Some young people were involved in developing their own projects, but these were mainly of a non-strategic nature, such as dance events or youth clubs.

However, youth participation initiatives clearly had a very positive impact on the individual young people involved. They gained significant benefits from their involvement, such as increased self-confidence, self-esteem and skills, and opportunities for travel, activities and work.

Youth involvement also had a very positive impact on the perceptions of councillors, officials and community activists about young people and their capacity to participate in decision-making. It was less clear whether the views of the community at large had been affected by youth participation projects.

Conclusion

Youth involvement required substantial resources to succeed, but in most areas very limited funds were allocated to youth participation initiatives. Successful youth involvement also required the enthusiastic backing and commitment of adults involved in regeneration initiatives. While most adults accepted the validity of involving young people in regeneration, many had yet to translate this into an understanding of how best to achieve meaningful youth involvement. In particular, there was a general lack of awareness about the changes that adults may have to make to some of their working practices.
language and behaviour in order to engage with young people. Thus adults as well as young people need training to secure effective youth participation.

**Implications for policy**

Regeneration initiatives should encompass the needs expressed by young people and recognise the full range of the problems they face. Youth-focused regeneration initiatives should be integrated as far as possible with other parts of a regeneration strategy and with mainstream services. There are strong signs that the Government has moved young people’s needs up the agenda in its further support for youth-focused regeneration schemes in SRB4, in the New Deal, and in its attention to education, all of which heighten the need to ensure effective co-ordination.

**Implications for practice**

Regeneration practitioners and decision-makers need to maximise the impact of youth-focused initiatives by ensuring good links to mainstream youth programmes. They should clarify the purpose of developing youth involvement and ensure that participation projects are scheduled early in initiatives or, if possible, before they begin. Effective youth participation requires a dedicated worker, resources and that adult decision makers are prepared to listen to young people.

Youth workers or dedicated support staff may need to learn more about both regeneration and community participation in order to link youth participation into wide community and regeneration processes, and to help them to develop more accountable structures for youth involvement. They should recognise that youth forums are not the only answer to participation and that a range of mechanisms will be more effective. It is crucial to challenge inter-generational barriers by promoting projects which bring young people and adults together to discuss issues affecting their community.

Community organisations need to prioritise the needs of young people as young people and not only as ‘future citizens’. They should try to build structures which link the generations and consider how their attitudes, procedures and language can inhibit youth participation.

Young people need to learn from other young people how to get organised. They also need to think about how their language and behaviour might build barriers between them and adults.

**About the study**

The research involved detailed case studies of twelve urban regeneration initiatives across the UK, with six of these studied in greater depth in a second, more intensive round of fieldwork. These regeneration initiatives included high-profile Government sponsored initiatives, for example SRB and City Challenge, and bottom-up, community-based initiatives, such as Community Development Trusts. In total, over 200 people were interviewed in the course of the research, including more than 80 young people. These interviewees included both young people who were involved with their local regeneration initiative, and young people who were not.

**How to get further information**
