









## The Groundwork movement: its role in neighbourhood renewal

The Groundwork movement began with the establishment of the first local Trust in 1981. Now there are almost 50 Trusts across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. All undertake community-based, comprehensive regeneration work, often in the most deprived communities. A study of Groundwork's role in neighbourhood renewal has shown how intensive, patient and above all long-term activity, rooted in the needs and aspirations of local communities, can help rebuild confidence, trust and lay the foundations for renewal. The study found that:

-  Groundwork has successfully intervened to stimulate a wide range of projects in the most difficult neighbourhoods, where other agencies are reluctant to go.
-  Its local involvement has frequently exerted significant influence over the practices of mainstream agencies.
-  Groundwork invariably works with and through local communities, and in all cases local community organisations had been strengthened by Groundwork's presence.
-  However, the study also detected a lack of administrative rigour in some cases, and a reluctance to undertake detailed monitoring.
-  Some local Trusts were reluctant to 'market' the organisation, and thus are not disseminating their experience sufficiently widely.
-  Extensive capacity building is a precondition if residents in long-neglected communities are to exert real influence over regeneration programmes.
-  For Groundwork, as for other neighbourhood renewal agencies, keeping pace with the development of the neighbourhood renewal agenda – which is already leading to staff shortages in some crucial areas – requires substantial investment in staff development (and retention), to ensure an adequate supply of skills is available.
-  The researchers conclude that the extent of deprivation on many estates means that significant change cannot be achieved except in the very long term and while housing policy concentrates the most vulnerable in particular neighbourhoods high levels of continuing support will be necessary.

## Background

Since the early eighties Groundwork Trusts have been operating throughout much of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, helping local people develop projects to protect and improve the environment. In the last few years, however, the range of Trusts' activities has broadened to embrace much of the new neighbourhood renewal agenda. This study, largely based on a detailed examination of eight case study Trusts, explored Groundwork's contribution to neighbourhood renewal, focusing in particular on how far its local interventions are 'sustainable'.

## Groundwork's role in neighbourhood renewal

In most cases, Trusts chose the most difficult terrain, unlike other agencies that consider capacity and opportunity as well as need. Focusing on the neediest areas demands long-term commitment and complicates the task of testing for sustainability.

Generally, Trusts engage local communities in determining local priorities, though these can be dictated by funding or the skills in the Groundwork team. Initial actions are frequently environmental and, although important in themselves, are often a way of engaging in broader community development. Wider strategy development, working with residents and local agencies to determine broader priorities, rarely happens without a lengthy period of capacity building. Groundwork's activities are diverse, focusing on 'people, places and prosperity'. Although Trusts emphasise the need to act as a catalyst for others' activities, the study found few examples where Groundwork had moved from an area: their *role* may change, but they remain a presence.

All Groundwork activities stress the importance of maximising community involvement, reflecting the need to rebuild capacity where local confidence and self-esteem have been destroyed. The evaluation found Groundwork committed to working with communities long-term, in line with current policy guidance.

The study also found examples of programmes which cross policy agendas. Groundwork is particularly effective in helping create a holistic approach to area regeneration, through encouraging a variety of agencies to deliver from the same community centre, or integrating different policy agendas.

There are inherent difficulties in measuring the impact of regeneration interventions, but some specific to Groundwork. Trusts are reluctant (or unable) to gather much data. All the Trusts are clear that sustainable improvement is exceptionally difficult given the scale of available resources. Nevertheless, the evaluation found:

- *Project activity*: There is an impressive range of project activity, which generally would not have happened without Groundwork's involvement.
- *Enhancing the value of others' activities*: There are numerous examples where its distinctive contributions have been developed alongside other

programmes.

- *Creating neighbourhood partnerships*: Groundwork typically brings in other partners and helps build partnership.
- *Stronger communities*: community organisations and their capacity to influence decisions were stronger because of Groundwork's presence.
- *Finance raised for future activities*: Trusts are effective at getting funding and in identifying potential future sources.
- *Improved confidence and self-esteem*: Groundwork programmes increased confidence within neighbourhoods.
- *Changed behaviour by partners*: critically, Groundwork's influence over other agencies extends beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

## Groundwork's role within partnerships

All those working close to Groundwork projects were clear that partnership working is essential to effective and sustainable regeneration programmes. The study found an emphasis on involving the local community, which itself has ramifications for partnership working more widely. There was also an acceptance that Trusts cannot do everything, and that change requires different agencies to embrace common goals in a framework largely set by local needs and aspirations. The scale of multi-agency involvement in Groundwork activity is striking, and includes most local government departments, TECs, further education colleges, transport operators, the police, local businesses, charities, housing associations, English Partnerships, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), the Benefits Agency, and community and voluntary groups. Groundwork's contribution to partnership development is perceived positively, based on a number of considerations:

- Groundwork is seen as able to 'get things off the ground' more quickly and more effectively than most other agencies, most of the time.
- This is often rooted in partners' experiences of Trusts being able to raise funding resources, with little apparent difficulty.
- Its attitude to project development is popular, seen as more risk-taking than other organisations.
- Because of the way Trusts relate to local communities: as a senior local government officer said: "Groundwork does what we should be doing".

There are variations in Groundwork's ability to deal effectively with the private sector. There are long-standing relationships with some large companies, but not all Trusts know how to make best use of private sector expertise. One Trust chair (from the private sector) thought the organisation's culture and even language are "impenetrable to the business community".

Partnership working raises a number of important considerations for Groundwork. Effective partnership working requires complex inter-personal skills. Many local staff have or are acquiring such skills. But for

many staff Groundwork is a training opportunity and a stepping stone to other things. As a result invaluable expertise is being lost to the organisation.

There are major differences, depending on the locality, in the nature of the partnership task facing local Trusts. In some places Groundwork can play a significant and often lead role where there are few 'competitors'. But it is self-evidently more difficult where there are many players and extensive regeneration experience. This may affect where Groundwork gets a seat on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which is crucial if it is to exert sustained influence on other players.

The study found the following characteristics helped Trusts engage with partners:

- an openness to new ideas and initiatives; Groundwork Manchester successfully tendered to undertake environmental and physical development work for the local NDC partnership;
- direct experience of local projects and programmes;
- an ability to engage with a wide range of organisations and individuals;
- stamina and persistence.

### Strategic development, leadership and innovation

The national policy framework within which Groundwork operates is changing. Devolution has given new powers to elected institutions in Northern Ireland and Wales. There is a 'regional dimension' to governance in England, through the RDAs and the prospect of regional elected assemblies. Local authorities are increasingly shifting from direct delivery to an enabling role. Third sector agencies, like registered social landlords and community development trusts, are increasingly involved in regeneration work. Alongside other organisations, Groundwork has played a role in the development of many of these policies:

- there were two Groundwork representatives on the advisory Task Force for the New Deal;
- Groundwork organised consultation events for the Social Exclusion Unit on the draft neighbourhood renewal strategy, aimed at local communities;
- it has influenced the DfEE in relation to the 'Intermediate Labour Market', which has now become much more widespread.

In Wales and Northern Ireland, Groundwork has successfully established itself at the heart of the policy-making process. Groundwork Wales has established a role as mouthpiece for the Welsh trusts in lobbying the Assembly, and taking a seat on key advisory committees. In Northern Ireland the approach has been similar, and Groundwork Northern Ireland has raised its profile to influence policy development. This has involved meetings with each major party leader, attendance at recent party conferences, and regular visits to Stormont. It also led an alliance of key public agencies in a successful bid to

the New Opportunities Fund

But there is further work to be done. Both Groundwork UK and individual Trusts are aware of the need to engage with RDAs but the extent to which they have yet done so varies. It is anticipated that in the near future every region in England will have a regional resource, designed to ensure that Groundwork is embedded within the regional framework of institutions.

Trusts are widely involved in local regeneration partnerships where the key actor is usually the local authorities, which are strongly represented on the Trust Boards. In some areas the desire of local authorities to retain their traditional controlling role has made the establishment, let alone the operation, of individual Trusts difficult. Nevertheless, generally where it has a presence Groundwork is well received in the regeneration sphere. There is potential for interaction between what Trusts are doing locally and strategic issues which the new LSPs will be addressing. Groundwork cannot necessarily expect a seat at what are likely to prove crowded LSP tables, but they could potentially play a useful role as intermediary between the LSP and disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The study reveals substantial influence over many aspects of national policy, particularly in view of the relatively modest resources at Groundwork's disposal - as one senior interviewee said, Groundwork is good at punching above its weight.

### Conclusion

The researchers summarise Groundwork's strengths and weaknesses as follows:

#### Strengths

- Capacity to develop trust in neglected communities;
- Demonstrable staff commitment;
- Local flexibility and independence of action;
- An organisation that gets on with things;
- Capacity to raise funds;
- Understands the policy process and how to influence policy-makers;
- A co-operative rather than competitive ethos;
- Ability to join it all up locally;
- Willingness to go to those neighbourhoods others won't.

#### Weaknesses

- Lack of administrative rigour;
- Relative inattention to monitoring;
- Inadequate attention to equal opportunity issues;
- Insufficient attention to marketing and publicity, especially locally;
- Some difficulties in recruiting but more importantly retaining staff;
- Uneven links to the private sector.

The neighbourhood renewal strategy offers major opportunities to Groundwork, but there are threats:

- Other organisations are looking for ways to address the neighbourhood renewal agenda and thus

occupy Groundwork's 'territory' (though the scale of the national strategy is vast and cannot be tackled by any single organisation);

- Demands for staff will be substantial, and opportunities elsewhere could attract existing Groundwork staff;
- Changes in funding regimes could affect Groundwork's ability to continue with some of its current activities.

### **Lessons and recommendations**

#### *Policy-makers and funders*

- Rebuilding neighbourhoods long neglected is a long term process;
- Lengthy lead-in times are needed to equip communities to engage in strategy development;
- Even where there has been community development and capacity building, vulnerable communities need support in the long term;
- These processes impose limits on the speed with which impacts on programme outcomes can be achieved;
- Much of Groundwork's activity shows the need to tackle small pockets of deprivation in otherwise affluent districts;
- Groundwork's experience of community-based neighbourhood renewal could be of great value as the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit develops the Skills and Knowledge Strategy;
- Similarly the experience could be of value to Local Strategic Partnerships, even where Groundwork is not a member.

#### *Local authorities and other local partners*

- Local authorities could make greater use of Groundwork's capacity and reputation as 'neutral intermediary';
- The environment is a powerful tool through which to engage disenchanted communities;
- A flexible approach, free of bureaucratic constraints, is essential if disaffected communities are to be re-engaged;
- Quick fixes will not work: all those involved in renewing disadvantaged communities have to commit for the long term.

#### *Groundwork*

The study's messages for Groundwork are extremely positive: interviewees (from partners agencies and local residents alike) were almost unanimously enthusiastic about the quality and effectiveness of Groundwork activities. Nevertheless, they did suggest some room for improvement:

- Some – internally as well as externally – felt there was scope for greater consistency of standards;
- Trusts should start planning for the loss of SRB funding;

- Where Groundwork overlaps with the 88 neighbourhood renewal target districts Trusts need to develop local strategies to maximise influence, even where they are not full members of LSPs;
- Greater effort should go into publicising the scope of Groundwork activities – by local trusts as well as Groundwork UK;
- Groundwork must ensure it maintains internal capacity by:
  - matching staff specifications to the new agenda;
  - enabling staff to keep abreast of the policy changes;
  - increasing the proportion of local people employed in neighbourhood renewal;
  - clarifying the circumstances where a long-term presence in a neighbourhood is required.

### **About the project**

The study was undertaken by GFA Consulting and the Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The study mainly involved a detailed examination of projects in eight case study trusts.

### **How to get further information**

The full report, **The Groundwork movement: Its role in neighbourhood renewal** by Geoff Fordham and Paul Lawless, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 034 2, price £12.95).