

## Being taken seriously by power-holders: a summary

**This is one of four papers presenting learning and practical guidance from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhood Programme (2002–6). Each paper is based on a theme that was important to several communities. The programme worked with 20 neighbourhoods in England, Scotland and Wales, bringing them together into a learning network and providing extra resources. These included a small funding pot, support from experienced independent facilitators, networking opportunities and access to information.**

Some neighbourhoods need regeneration; all neighbourhoods need good governance. How can residents be taken seriously and be involved at the earliest stages of decision-making? How can they work effectively with key officers and local councillors? How can they avoid being enmeshed in too many partnerships? The experiences of the neighbourhoods taking part in the joint project on power-holders indicated that:

- Real community empowerment occurs when formal power-holders genuinely listen to residents' views. A first step is to change the local authority's organisational culture so resident involvement is valued. An enhanced role for officers is part of this process. Residents need to be skilled in dealing with existing power structures.
- Trust takes time to develop and 'learning by doing' needs persistence but the rewards are enjoyed by all participants.
- Local partnerships that include too many interests can become unwieldy and ineffective.
- Staff turnover can disrupt carefully forged relationships. Restricting access to information by tenuous confidentiality claims limits local participation.
- Short-term projects addressing centrally determined goals seldom work well. Seeking funding for clear local goals is more effective than relying on partnerships driven by central programmes.
- Positive relations between voluntary and community groups help resolve local differences. When local groups disagree, power-holders lose confidence and a 'divide and rule' mentality develops.
- 'Natural neighbourhoods' ought to be the foundation of local democracy. When sensible boundaries are in place, neighbourhood management is a useful way to achieve better local governance.



## Background

Community and neighbourhood are the twin themes underpinning what, at first glance, may seem a significant shift in urban policy. Neighbourhoods are now considered the crossroads of action; the point where services can be delivered in a connected way to the benefit of residents who, it is held, must be actively involved in ensuring the good governance of the neighbourhoods in which they live.

But are the formal power-holders taking residents seriously? Is there agreement that effective governance is 'reach down' and 'build up' in equal measure? Genuine participation and good leadership are two sides of the same coin. This joint project within the JRF Neighbourhood Programme has sought to explore the sense that, in many areas, local authority and professional cultures still remain a considerable barrier to community empowerment.

Five neighbourhoods agreed to lead this joint project. They represented a good geographical spread and experience of different policies and programmes. The report is based on fieldwork and key informant interviews in each of these areas. In all the five neighbourhoods, partner organisations helped set up a three-day field visit that added to the richness of the information collected. The facilitators produced a policy-briefing paper outlining the policy context of the study and raising some of the issues around, and the barriers to, power sharing that had emerged elsewhere. Finally, the full study, *Hello, is anyone listening?*, analysed the findings and drew out the key themes and important messages that contributed to the task of achieving effective local governance. These were divided into three sections for the attention of:

- local authorities and other power-holding organisations;
- local partnerships; and
- community organisations.

## The project neighbourhoods

This section provides a brief description of the five principal neighbourhoods that offered specific examples of practical experience to the joint project.

**Boothtown** is on the north east of Halifax in West Yorkshire, with a population of 6,000. Boothtown's community action programme was the result of an acrimonious meeting between residents and council officials on the issue of street lighting and youth vandalism. The head of the local primary school and other residents recognised that a more constructive relationship was needed, so in 2002 the Boothtown Partnership was established by a small group of determined volunteers to improve the area and respond to the perceived neglect of the council and other service providers.

**Greater Pilton** is an area of five neighbourhoods on the north edge of Edinburgh. It is one of Edinburgh's three major peripheral estates. Its houses range from 1930s tenements, through 1960s deck access and high-rise, to recent social-housing and owner-occupation developments. Greater Pilton's population is 27,000 making it the largest area in the Foundation's programme. Over the past ten years many community and voluntary groups have been learning to work together in the Pilton Partnership. The partnership has developed a successful fund-raising strategy but finds the big line departments of the Edinburgh City Council are still not especially well connected one to another and some are not particularly sensitive to the need to work with local communities.

**Norfolk Park** is an inner-city, local-authority estate in Sheffield originally built in the 1960s and with 3,000 properties. It has suffered a significant decline in popularity, leading to substantial regeneration plans involving a major remodelling of the estate. The Norfolk Park Community Forum was established in the mid 1990s. It achieved positive local publicity for its plan to take the lead in ensuring that the views of the local community were central to the regeneration programme. However, the physical clearance and rebuilding programme quickly dominated the plan of action and the demands of private developers over-rode community interests. The dislocation caused by the loss of population, many choosing not to return, has made the work of the Forum more difficult.

Boscombe is an attractive seaside neighbourhood on the Dorset coast adjacent to Bournemouth. It has its own individual identity with a pedestrianised shopping area and local facilities. In common with other seaside neighbourhoods, Boscombe has endured a significant problem of drugs and prostitution, the result of the conversion of some hotels into bed and breakfast hostels or multiple-occupation flats and rooms. **Boscombe Working Community Partnership** was formed in 2001 to steer the subsequent regeneration programmes, including Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Rounds 4 and 6. The partnership has supported the Boscombe Arts Festival, the establishment of a Credit Union, youth work, employment and skills programmes for those in recovery, new business grants and other environmental programmes.

The Barne Barton Community Action Group was established in 1995 as part of a reaction to the economic problems created by the reduction of Navy influence in Plymouth and Devonport. Ministry of Defence houses were sold to housing associations and the Barne Barton estate, with a population of 5,000, was troubled by high unemployment and a lack of shops and facilities. The action group became a Community Action Trust in 2000. In 2003, its name was changed to the **Tamar Development Trust (TDT)**. Plymouth Council concentrated its allocation of the Neighbourhood

Renewal Fund towards the support of community organisations and the TDT was one of those that gained some resources from the programme.

### Promising practice identified through the joint project

The five detailed case studies have revealed that it takes time to achieve a positive working partnership. In Boscombe the process took two years. While remembering that building trust takes time, it is also important to recognise the need for some sense of urgency. Without this, councillors, officers and community representatives may all lose confidence in the process.

In most neighbourhood action programmes, residents become involved in a number of partnerships. This can lead to heavy demands being made on a limited number of people. In Boscombe, the initial partnership was so large, in a worthy attempt to be inclusive, that it quickly became unwieldy and lost any capacity for action.

Partnerships can exclude as well as include. In Norfolk Park, the Community Forum felt too little information was available in a simple form, that the decision-making processes were often expressed in technical terms, and that the experiences of residents were marginalised. In Boscombe and Plymouth as well as in Norfolk Park, there was a need for a clearer strategy to enable all the participants to agree unambiguously on a plan of action.

Rapid turnover of council staff affected all neighbourhoods to some degree and was a particular problem in Norfolk Park. Here, changes involved both new members of staff and changing responsibilities of existing staff, leading to confusion about who was doing what. With more structured handovers and clear briefings, unavoidable changes have a lesser negative impact. In addition, it was seen to be better not to rely too much on good personal relationships, which inevitably suffer when staffing changes take place. Progress was better maintained under a structured system.

Private sector participation was uncommon. In Pilton, the local economic development agency withdrew from all partnerships, arguing that staff resources were insufficient for it to operate at a neighbourhood level. In Boscombe, the Regional Development Agency found it difficult to relate fully to the community and neighbourhood aspects of the Single Regeneration Budget programme. In Norfolk Park, the private housebuilders began to dominate the partnership, causing resentment amongst the residents who argued that these participants would walk away from the neighbourhood when the physical redevelopment was completed.

Residents in Boscombe extended their interests beyond community safety and environmental concerns to the consideration of education, transport and the local planning system. This suggests that the expertise of residents can

inform wider strategic issues and should not be limited to the 'clean, safe and green' slogan. Housing was a major issue in Norfolk Park and was also important in Boscombe, Plymouth and Pilton. Good practice involved connecting housing investment with programmes of social enterprise.

All neighbourhoods found it a negative experience to work in an environment of 'top down' funding, available for a limited period and surrounded by bureaucracy. Genuine engagement with formal power-holders was as much about achieving lasting organisational change and reviewing processes as it was about particular projects. Better value for money locally could be expected from more modest, sustained funding streams, available to residents to back good ideas and administered with a light touch rather than lengthy application forms and excessive paperwork. Where administrative boundaries best matched the natural contours of the neighbourhood, neighbourhood management was emerging as a promising way of changing the ways things are done, by moving beyond the operation of disconnected sets of projects and services.

It was heartening to see that it was possible to be taken seriously by power-holders. Pilton, however, had found that getting local councillors on side did not necessarily mean the whole council apparatus was engaged. In Boscombe, a three-sided squabble for power over the SRB4 programme between the Regional Development Agency, the council and community interests caused substantial early problems. Later, initiatives involving three different government departments responsible for three different programmes proved a tough knot to untangle. Residents in Norfolk Park felt they were isolated from the decision-making process.

Boothtown, in contrast, demonstrates that progress can be made. The Boothtown Partnership has developed a positive relationship with Calderdale Council. It is instructive to see how this has evolved. Firstly, the Boothtown Partnership deliberately excludes party politics from its meetings. Secondly, the council chief executive has created a 'community engagement working group' of senior officers working across departments. The council's area-based approach gives front-line officers the authority to work with the Boothtown Partnership and a number have become enthusiastic supporters of this new approach. Finally, the council and the Boothtown Partnership spread this ethos of engagement to other service providers. The overall regeneration vehicle, Action Halifax Ltd, supports the Boothtown Partnership, which has a seat on the Action Halifax Board and responsibilities as appraisers for some funding applications.

Boothtown's general attitude of 'finding out as you go along and never taking no for an answer' has resulted in the council seeing a very clear benefit from taking it seriously. Boothtown's sport and community facility, developed through a determined business-like approach from the community representatives, has impressed the

council. Boothtown has a successful track record and can be seen as a genuine partner whose opinions are listened to. The next test will be the extent to which Calderdale Council will be willing to open out their organisation to deliver similar changes in other neighbourhoods.

### Learning points for formal power-holders

- The foundations of neighbourhood empowerment are to be found in the modernisation of local government. Changing organisational cultures and attitudes is critical to progress and this particularly requires strong leadership from the top of the council. It requires positive links with local councillors and with front-line officers of the relevant service providers. If an honest, proactive, three-way partnership can be established, then significant progress can be made.
- Neighbourhood empowerment unlocks innovation. Far from being threatening, the process of listening to and valuing the contribution of residents is an energising experience for numbers of public sector workers. Building joint capacity is important for officers, councillors and residents. Working together at this level is a process that encourages cross-department working in other areas, building effective communication and connections.
- Residents can be trusted with resources, both financial and in terms of access to information. Modest sums, available with minimum bureaucracy, to support new ideas from residents are worthwhile investments, representing better value for money than many substantial 'top down' programmes. Funding needs to be sustained over time: the experience of residents is too often that budget lines of two or three years are just beginning to have an impact when the resources come to an end.

### Signposts to further information

There are many web sites to guide groups wishing to explore the issue of engaging with power-holders. In addition to the JRF's ([www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)) these include:

- [www.renewal.net](http://www.renewal.net)

This is the online guide initially launched by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to provide information about what works in neighbourhood renewal. The site includes 'how to' guides, case studies, research papers

and project summaries. Be careful to note the date of postings on the site as some case studies are old and have not been updated.

- [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

The Audit Commission's site offering a wealth of material including a wide range of inspection reports giving fascinating detail of the performance of local authorities, housing associations and other service providers. The Audit Commission produces these evidence-based reports to help drive improvement in public services.

- [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

The website of the Improvement and Development Agency, which delivers in-depth improvement news and examples of good practice from councils across England and Wales.

- [www.urbanforum.org.uk](http://www.urbanforum.org.uk)

This will give you information about the Urban Forum, which exists to influence national urban policy to bring about change for local communities.

- [www.scr.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.scr.communitiesscotland.gov.uk)

This is the website of the Scottish Centre for Regeneration, a part of Communities Scotland, which holds events to build knowledge and skills for representatives of community organisations.

- [www.scdc.org.uk](http://www.scdc.org.uk)

This site gives access to information on the Scottish Community Development Centre, which fosters capacity building, leadership and partnership skills and 'training for trainers' in community development. It also publishes the useful *Journal of Community Work and Development*.

- *Guide Neighbourhoods* is a set of valuable examples of residents' organisations that have succeeded in working with power-holders in developing community initiatives. More information can be found at [www.togetherwecan.org.uk](http://www.togetherwecan.org.uk) or go to [www.togetherwecan.info/guide\\_neighbourhoods](http://www.togetherwecan.info/guide_neighbourhoods)

- [www.dta.org.uk](http://www.dta.org.uk)

This provides information on development trusts, which are organisations that help combine community-led action with business expertise and enterprise

- The full study from this joint project, *Hello, is anyone listening?*, is available from John Low at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, e-mail [john.low@jrf.org.uk](mailto:john.low@jrf.org.uk)