

## An evaluation of a community development worker project

In early 1997, the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust appointed a community development worker to engage the energies of residents to find solutions to local social and economic problems. The community development work was evaluated over the following two to three years. Findings from this evaluation will be of interest to other social landlords going down the 'Housing Plus' route. They show:

- f** The worker's effectiveness was greatly enhanced by her control of a budget and autonomy in decision-making at the local level and by the fact that she did not work on her own but supported and advised other workers, both from other agencies and from the Housing Trust.
  
- f** The community development work began to produce results very quickly. This was important for the credibility of both the worker and the concept of community development as a way of solving problems.
  
- f** The evaluation identified the following lessons for practice:
  - Unless the objectives, values and expectations of community development are clear, there may be false expectations or tensions between community service and more traditional housing management. It also needs to be made clear how far the landlord is willing to devolve power.
  - Successful community development needs full and active support from the landlord. This may require structural change but cultural change within the organisation is even more important.
  - High quality 'democratic practice' to aid community involvement requires active organisational support, devolved budgets/decision-making and developing a habit of 'challenge' among both staff and residents.
  - Work needs to go at a pace that residents feel comfortable with.
  - New structures and projects can divert attention away from day-to-day services unless the main, ongoing concerns of residents are explicitly kept high on the agenda.
  - There is a need to work with other agencies in order to tackle problems together and avoid duplication.
  - Local people need proper support to ensure they can participate fully.
  - New developments can be fragile and need ongoing support if they are to be sustained.

## Background

Policies such as partnership working, Best Value and tenant compacts have underlined the need for agencies to work more closely with their communities and with each other. Housing associations are being seen both as multiple-purpose agencies aiming to meet the full needs of their residents (the 'Housing Plus' agenda) and as 'not-for-profit' commercial organisations. There are no clear guidelines from the Housing Corporation on how this wider role should be developed or monitored. Traditional housing managers have not generally been equipped with the skills to work in this more collaborative way. In addition, with increasing pressure to meet performance targets, they have inevitably become preoccupied with issues such as 'voids' and rent arrears, often at the expense of good relationships with residents and communities. As a consequence, Housing Plus activities are developing piecemeal and often without strategic clarity.

This study evaluates how the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust approached community development as the means of bringing about change both within the community and within the organisation.

## The JRHT approach

The study evaluated community development work undertaken in the Trust's York estates. The largest area, New Earswick Village (1,100 properties), was founded in 1904 and intended to be a 'self-managed community'. Facilities such as a swimming pool and community hall (the 'Folk Hall') were provided, and the residents elected a 'Village Council' to which the Hall was leased and which sent representatives to the New Earswick Management Committee and the Trust's Housing Committee. Other newer estates are much smaller (Woodlands: 126 properties; Victoria-Geldof: 133 properties) and have developed very differently. In particular, Victoria-Geldof has large numbers of families with young children, reflecting local authority nominations policy, but few facilities for young people.

The Trust had already appointed a family advice worker, welfare benefits staff and an energy advice worker. In 1996, research in New Earswick showed that the Village Council was ineffective and that 'outsiders' used the Folk Hall more than local residents. A determined effort was needed to re-engage the community and to encourage it to use the local facilities. Tensions between 'old' and 'new' residents led younger families, women and young people to feel unwelcome. Problems with vandalism and substance sniffing symbolised a generalised concern about 'young people'.

Following analysis of the main issues to be tackled, the community development approach adopted in

1997 contained five main strands. These were:

- working with and through existing groups, helping them to change when necessary;
- supporting and initiating new groups and activities, looking in particular at the need to involve women, young people and children;
- developing networks with workers within the Trust and in other agencies;
- supporting Trust workers to develop new relationships with other agencies (the City Council, police etc);
- focusing on particular geographical areas so as to achieve synergy between different actions (the main work was in New Earswick).

The underlying philosophy was to develop:

"A 'bottom-up' approach that will empower and enable participation, combined with a 'top-down' approach that will challenge present structures, processes and procedures and support changes that will make these more 'user friendly' and consequently easier to work with and more attractive to people to become involved with." (Community development worker)

The work divided into two main areas:

- empowering and supporting collective action by residents to improve their lives and their environment;
- challenging and supporting the Trust to re-shape its internal and external roles.

The evaluation identified and involved a variety of stakeholders from the outset. These included: members of existing and embryo community groups; the community development worker; Housing Trust staff at all levels and from different departments; the City Council and the Parish Council; police; and voluntary organisations for employment training. As well as assessing the project's effectiveness, the evaluation process also fed into action on the ground.

## How successful was the initiative?

In the course of the evaluation, the different stakeholders said how they would judge the project's success after two years. The criteria covered:

- 'process' (e.g. groups having the ability to sort out their own problems, the Trust thinking through the impact of new activities);
- 'outputs' (e.g. the existence of new groups and activities; a youth project 'up and buzzing'; more people using the Folk Hall);
- and 'outcomes' (e.g. residents more enthusiastic and self-confident; more resident influence on Trust decisions; fewer acts of 'mischief').

The main characteristics of the *processes* were:

- encouraging people to do things;
- inspiring residents' confidence in their own ability to promote change;
- 'pulling everything together' (resident);
- being politically sensitive and acting as a catalyst for change (council worker);
- turning a vision into a practical process;
- bringing the Trust along with the development worker (JRF worker);
- demonstrating that the new way of working has a 'pay-back', for individuals, communities and staff (community development worker).

The community development work also began to produce results very quickly. This was important for the credibility of the project, reinforcing local residents' and workers' trust in the worker and in the concept of community development as a problem-solving device.

By the end of the first two years, new groups had been established (play groups, youth groups, and a complex and difficult multi-agency project, the 'Sleeper Path' project for training and developing young people), the Folk Hall had been remodelled, and the Village Council had been replaced. Two new bodies to represent the different needs of residents were established (see below). Elsewhere, the 'Foxwood Neighbourhood Agreement' (including the Trust's Woodlands estate) was fostered by the City of York Council and supported by the Trust and Foundation. This brought together negotiations between residents and local service delivery agencies, setting a series of standards for the main activities affecting the quality of life of local people. Building on an earlier agreement in Bell Farm estate, York, this is a potentially useful model for future neighbourhood working, though may not be universally appropriate.

The evaluation identified two key factors behind the initiative's success:

- The community development worker's control of a budget (£10,000 over two years) and her autonomy in decision-making at the local level made it possible to get things done flexibly, quickly and appropriately. This reinforces other research on decentralisation, which has found devolved decision-making and access to resources are always key factors in success.
- The community development worker was not working on her own. She supported, advised and helped other workers, both from other agencies (e.g. a City Council community worker in Woodlands) and within the Trust. Residents, the Trust and other agencies (especially the City Council) perceived this way of working as being good for the credibility and visibility of the Trust,

and also as producing practical results (agreements about environmental maintenance; working with young people; training and development for employment).

### New residents' bodies

The two new bodies were seen as complementary:

- New Earswick Community Association (NECA) - set up as a charitable organisation - would focus on developing the community to engage local people and help them with their own development.
- New Earswick Residents' Forum (NERF) was to be a non-charitable organisation covering the whole of the New Earswick parish. It was to be a representative body which would help shape services and projects to meet local people's needs. Its membership therefore needed to be well-informed, assertive, willing to take on responsibility, and able to work effectively with the Trust and other local agencies. In practice, the main relationship was with the Trust, which was simultaneously trying to shake loose from the habits of paternalism and 'we know best'.

Both these bodies were quite new when the evaluation ended. They were fragile, needing ongoing support and some 'new faces'. The Trust, which was actively trying to develop a 'partnership' approach, needed to be able to work effectively with these bodies. Many items - including the development of 'Best Value' service standards, consultation about the use of land, arrangements for the greater involvement of residents in decision-making - needed to be discussed and developed. This was a very big and, for the Trust, pressing agenda. There was some danger that the residents' associations could become overwhelmed before they had had a chance to consolidate their sense of role and purpose or to clarify just how much power the Trust was willing to share.

The community development worker and an outside consultant gave a lot of support to these bodies in their first year. However, by late 1999, such intensive support was no longer available. The community development worker was now expected to work on issues affecting the whole of the Trust, not just in York, and would only be able to play a 'hands-off' role in the future. While local residents accepted this, they had some real concerns about future sustainability.

### Lessons for practice

The evaluation brought out eight key issues. These were:

- The need to debate, clarify and agree the objectives, values and expectations of community development. Without this there are dangers of

false expectations or tensions between 'Housing Plus' community-oriented values and traditional values of housing provision and management.

- Successful community development needs full and active support from the landlord. This may require structural change. Even more important is the need for cultural change, focusing particularly on internal and external communication and on the 'hearts and minds' of housing and other operational staff.
- High quality 'democratic practice' - such as elections, clear lines of accountability and widened involvement of communities - requires active organisational support, devolved budgets/decision-making and developing a habit of 'challenge' among both staff and residents.
- A strategy for participation and partnership is essential. This needs to clarify how far the landlord is willing to share and devolve power and to recognise that work can only proceed at a pace that residents are comfortable with, while taking real decisions and getting real results.
- New structures and projects can divert attention away from day-to-day services. It is imperative that the main, ongoing concerns of residents are kept high on the agenda, and that there is, for example, proper consultation on service standards and mechanisms to discuss and change the quality of services.
- Services are highly complex, and so are the needs of residents. Partnerships with other agencies are required in order to tackle problems together and avoid duplication. While different practical arrangements will suit different circumstances, support for community development, ensuring the active and equal participation of local people, will be needed to counterbalance the combined power of service delivery agencies.
- There is a very real issue of fragility and sustainability. A continuing stream of volunteers is needed if the process is not to depend on a few individuals. Community development has a role in identifying and supporting volunteers, and from time to time making direct inputs to encourage people to see the benefits of involvement.
- The evaluation process allows costs, benefits, effectiveness and added value to be examined in a structured and systematic way. The evaluation approach needs to be realistic about what can be quantitatively measured. The qualitative, stakeholder and participative approaches used here did seem particularly appropriate to the long-term,

fragile and somewhat intangible work that is 'community development'.

### About the study

The study was longitudinal, qualitative and participative, involving and feeding back to key stakeholders at each of the two stages. The first stage, in autumn/winter 1997, included briefing meetings, 23 semi-structured interviews, observation of a Village Council meeting, and the study of documentation. An Interim Report was the basis for a workshop to which all interviewees were invited. The second stage, in summer/autumn 1999, involved 27 interviews, many of them with people first interviewed in 1997, and the collection of further documentation. This was followed by a workshop for interviewees in November 1999, to reflect on key issues to be discussed in the final report. Interviewees included Trust and Foundation officers, local residents, and workers from other agencies, including the City of York Council.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Community development: Making a difference in social housing** by Lucy Gaster and Richard Crossley, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 71 7, price £13.95).

Further information on this study is available from: Lucy Gaster, Institute of Local Government Studies, School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, Tel: 0121 414 7491, email: L.M.Gaster@bham.ac.uk, and Richard Crossley, PEP North Ltd, 3rd Floor, City Point, 701 Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RW, Tel: 0161 877 3223, email: Crossley@btinternet.com.

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