



The importance of the neighbourhood

Tackling the implementation gap

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Background

The policy commitment to neighbourhoods in government policy is now well established across England, Scotland and Wales. As part of this agenda, the Minister of Communities and Local Government in England has made a commitment to tackling the ‘two twin challenges’ of (1) improving public services and (2) bridging the gap between citizens and local democracy. This encompasses addressing the ‘power gap’ between citizens and government, reconnecting government to the people. This commitment is expressed in a range of policies designed to promote:

- subsidiarity – devolving decision making, resources and service delivery to the most local level possible;
- integration – ensuring that agencies and services ‘join up’ in a way that makes sense at neighbourhood level;
- governance – engaging local communities (residents) in decision making.

The details of effective joint working – between agencies and communities – can only be worked out at local level. But government policy can create an enabling framework – or it can make the situation worse. This paper pulls out the main messages from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and other research findings to suggest what central government policy can do to make the neighbourhoods agenda really work on the ground. It proposes the following:

Putting neighbourhoods on the map

- Neighbourhoods need to have a real identity for those living there.
- Neighbourhoods need to be linked effectively to wider strategic – and especially economic – agendas, including those for city-regions and sustainable communities.
- The government needs to be clear about how the neighbourhoods agenda fits with the Gershon drive towards economies of scale.
- Resources still need to be targeted on the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But the neighbourhoods agenda needs to be adopted country wide if it is to be reflected across the public sector.

Getting the context right

- Whitehall needs to ‘model’ the Together We Can philosophy and ensure that policies driven from different departments and units do not contradict the neighbourhoods agenda.
- Variation at the neighbourhood level is vital if initiatives are to be relevant to local contexts. But there must be some promotion of common standards. Government Offices need to be given a clearer role, with the authority and skills to drive the neighbourhoods agenda and within that, to address the power gap between citizens and democracy – this should include the resources and tools to make auditing of the neighbourhoods agenda a central part of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).
- New neighbourhood initiatives need to be given time to work with stable funding that will allow communities and authorities to attract good staff and to plan ahead.
- Care needs to be taken not to overburden neighbourhoods with forums, committees and partnerships that are complex and overwhelming in diagrammatic form, never mind in real life.
- Capacity building is needed across all sectors to drive the culture change required to implement the neighbourhoods agenda. The government should work with the Local Government Association (LGA), the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), and other similar bodies to develop and resource a comprehensive programme to achieve this.

Closing the power gap

- The government should consider the provision of Neighbourhood Empowerment Grants along the lines of the current Tenant Empowerment Grant to support community organisations to contribute to the neighbourhoods agenda.
- Neighbourhoods agendas need to ensure that they cater for the diversity of local communities – many marginalised groups are isolated and even ostracised at neighbourhood level.
- The government has invested in support for the voluntary and community sector infrastructure to contribute to service delivery – this needs to be supplemented by investment at national, regional and local level to support the sector’s role in reducing the power gap.
- Independent mediation and conflict resolution will be essential tools if effective joint working is to be achieved across and between neighbourhoods. The government should consider with other potential funders how this can effectively be resourced.
- The ‘freedoms and flexibilities’ afforded to well performing local authorities have been welcomed and this ‘mature relationship’ between central and local government needs to be extended to the voluntary and community sector too.

Introduction

The government now has a track record in supporting local authorities and their partners to carry out neighbourhood renewal and to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. In addition, the phased introduction of LAAs provides an opportunity to work with communities and other stakeholders to create an agreed framework for service delivery and neighbourhood development. Policy is now being developed to devolve more powers and resources to neighbourhood level. Increasingly, the emphasis is on mainstreaming neighbourhood work rather than relying on area-based initiatives.

JRF has invested in research on neighbourhood renewal, community empowerment and user engagement in services over many years. It is building on this research through a policy and practice programme to test out ways of supporting community groups to contribute to the neighbourhoods agenda. This research and practice provides evidence of the relevance and effectiveness of neighbourhood working over the years. Along with other research in this field, it has also identified a range of good practice. Yet it demonstrates that translating policy intention into reality on the ground still presents major challenges.

Why is this? Much of the learning from past initiatives and research has been taken on board in recent policy. The government is exploring models of governance that will promote the neighbourhoods agenda and there are lots of good ideas emerging from the work of policy bodies like the Young Foundation. But however well designed the structures and systems for neighbourhood governance are, there is an ‘implementation gap’ that must be addressed if these structures are to deliver. The task now, therefore, is to find ways of turning principles into practice, not only in a few well-publicised pockets of commitment and ‘best practice’ but across the country and the policy map as a whole. This paper draws on JRF and other research to address some of the key challenges this poses.

Putting neighbourhoods on the map

What is a neighbourhood?

Neighbourhoods need to have a real identity for those living there.

The neighbourhoods agenda is based on the premise that people are most likely to engage with services and policy making at a very local level. This is especially likely in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where people's choices are more likely to be dictated by their immediate surroundings (JRF 1999, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/foundations/4109.asp).

But what is a neighbourhood? There is often a discrepancy between top-down 'administrative' definitions that rely on ward boundaries or other boundaries used for the collection of statistical information and those that residents themselves apply. Residents' perceptions of what constitutes the 'neighbourhood' will usually be based on the location of family and social networks, amenities such as shops and schools, and physical boundaries such as roads or railways. If communities are to engage at neighbourhood level, it follows that they should be involved in defining neighbourhoods.

It follows that local amenities and public space can play an important role in giving people (and those who work with them) a sense of common identity. Policies and resources to support these amenities and to give people a real stake in their design and upkeep need to be part of any neighbourhood policy (Mean and Tims 2005). Participatory design and planning exercises have also demonstrated their potential for engaging the diversity of local communities in creating neighbourhoods that they can identify with.

Housing solutions have a central role in defining neighbourhood. Current interest in mixed communities offers new opportunities in this respect, although there is no guarantee that a mix of tenures will lead to shared networks and common identities. Housing organisations have demonstrated their potential to play a wider neighbourhood management and community development role and policy incentives should be used to encourage this expanded role.

What is a neighbourhood?

Two Scottish localities demonstrate contrasting approaches to 'neighbourhood':

In Aberdeen, residents have been encouraged to determine their own neighbourhoods and the police have reorganised their service districts to reflect these community-defined neighbourhoods.

East Pollockshields Community Planning Partnership currently covers a 'logical' neighbourhood of 8,000 people. However, Glasgow Council's current plans are for a much bigger community planning partnership encompassing 60,000 people.

As the above example shows, a lot of what is being called neighbourhood governance still operates at a district/wider area level. Area-level working can be an important step towards neighbourhood working but should not be confused with it. Many public authorities are not yet set up to engage effectively at neighbourhood level and we therefore see neighbourhood management strategies being developed without the benefit of voluntary and community sector engagement. Even ward-based structures are too big in larger areas and neighbourhood groups find that their very local concerns are swamped. The response of some authorities has been to create 'nested' structures that allow engagement at different levels. These may introduce neighbourhood structures across the authority. Or they may be targeted on disadvantaged

areas. For example, York City Council generally operates at the ward level but has initiated neighbourhood agreements in three deprived areas (Bell Farm, Clifton and Foxwood) (see Cole and Smith 1995; Cole et al. 2000, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/h159.asp and www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/070.asp respectively).

Linking neighbourhoods to the wider area

The neighbourhoods agenda must be reflected at all levels of government.

Deciding what works best at what level is an essential challenge of the double devolution agenda. Subsidiarity has many advantages. But not all neighbourhood problems can be resolved in the neighbourhood – closing the gap requires action at local, regional, national and international level. In addition, decentralisation has costs and does not always lead to better services (Newman 2005). Policy also needs to recognise the inequalities that can result if there is no effective strategic overview of neighbourhood policy. Some neighbourhoods are much better equipped to have influence than others (JRF 2000, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/foundations/d10.asp).

Putting neighbourhoods on the map I

Parish and town councils are currently exciting a lot of policy interest. JRF research welcomes this but suggests that they often operate at the margins of policy with no input at strategic level. It also suggests that inequalities can result, especially where there is a precept or if too much is devolved without a wider strategic overview (Bevan 2003, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/713.asp).

There are a number of levers that can be used to bind different levels of government into the neighbourhoods agenda:

- devolved budgets for local service delivery and community development
- devolved service level agreements with service providers
- devolved monitoring and performance management
- devolved purchasing and contracts with external providers
- ability to put pressure on higher levels of agencies or government through triggers and scrutiny
- requirements for higher levels of government to demonstrate responsiveness to neighbourhood concerns (Social Exclusion Unit 2000).

The concept of a 'Metropolitan Area Agreement', whereby strategies take on a slightly more regional dimension and marry up intended outcomes and indicators across local authority boundaries, could encompass these different levels and also ensure that partners from a broad geographical area are involved in the shaping and design of the agreement.

Putting neighbourhoods on the map II

In Bradford, the Royds Community Organisation was formed by the coming together of three locally identified neighbourhoods. People still identify with the distinctive nature of the three adjacent areas but saw the value of forming a partnership in order to attract funding and to make real change. Royds is now working with other neighbourhood-based groups to help them identify the needs of their communities but also to consider the value of partnering with others.

There may also be occasions when residents see a value in working across neighbourhood boundaries.

This suggests that boundaries should be permeable, depending on context and service, and that there should not only be opportunities for residents to determine their own neighbourhood boundaries but also to join with others to work across boundaries.

Closing the economic gap

Neighbourhoods need to be linked effectively to wider strategic – and especially economic – agendas.

Nowhere is the strategic link between neighbourhoods and wider strategic levels of government more important than in relation to economic policy, especially if the neighbourhoods agenda is to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. Despite economic development across many areas of the UK, there are still many communities untouched by economic growth. Neighbourhoods are increasingly losing their economic function as economic activity is shifting out of the places where people live. Shopping centres, offices and factories are now located in out of town and greenfield sites. The vertical connections that need to be made to link the neighbourhood into the region are too often missing from the frameworks of England's Regional Development Agencies, leading to a separation from, and lack of complementarity with, social regeneration initiatives in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Within the essential strategic framework, the evidence suggests that the closer local policies and programmes are to the labour market the more likely they are to be successful.

Linking residents to jobs

Job search and mentoring projects, alongside vocational training programmes, are most successful for people when they are located in the neighbourhoods with which people identify. Equally, training and work experience must be focused on the immediate needs of local employers or they will not help people to get jobs. In addition, where jobs are further afield, transport links are crucial as are outreach services and links with employers (JRF 2001, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/foundations/d21.asp).

Neighbourhoods or economies of scale?

The government needs to be clear about how the neighbourhoods agenda fits with the Gershon drive towards economies of scale.

At the same time that the government is promoting the neighbourhoods agenda, efficiency considerations are encouraging Primary Care Teams, police forces and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships to merge in the interests of economies of scale and the need to pool information. Several recent studies have picked up this tension and urged the government to be clearer about the ways in which these apparently conflicting policies can be reconciled.

Putting neighbourhoods on the map: actions for government

The proposed National Neighbourhoods Agreement in England should ensure that residents are involved in determining the appropriate boundaries for their neighbourhood, with guidance showing how this has been done effectively in some localities, for example, the Aberdeen model. This could also be required through the community participation outcomes in the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund.

The connections between strategies implemented at different spatial levels need to be closely monitored. This is an important role for Government Offices, working in tandem with Regional Development Agencies. The government also needs to deliver a clear message about how the dual objectives of devolution and economies of scale can be squared.

The economic block of LAAs should be used to ensure that economic development departments and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) economic partnerships demonstrate how they are addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and how they are contributing to vertical integration. Similar targets should also be applied to Regional Development Agencies.

Clearly, the government is responding to requests to clarify, streamline and coordinate programmes and initiatives at the local level through the introduction of LAAs. A regional dimension to these would be welcome alongside a period of stability and embedding of current policy – to give them time to work (McGregor et al. 2003, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/753.asp).

Getting the context right

The benefits of a more integrated approach to the delivery of local services are well documented. Despite the presence of LSPs there are still examples of fragmented service delivery resulting in duplication or failure to provide the services that residents experience. Neighbourhoods are also trying to cope with a proliferation of initiatives and to keep up with the latest policy changes. The presence of too many competing initiatives is not only inefficient; more seriously, it can result in competition between partnerships and other bodies for the lead role in neighbourhoods and for the time and resources of residents.

The government seeks to address this through a National Neighbourhoods Agreement, while at local level, the introduction of LAAs and particularly the 'single pot' agreement approach aims to focus the minds and contributions of all partners on shared outcomes for change rather than the separate compartments created by different funding streams. The proposal for neighbourhood charters, meanwhile, if extended, should achieve coordination at neighbourhood level, allowing agencies and communities to focus on a shared approach and more synchronised methods of delivery.

However, much depends on central government creating the right policy environment to enable this to work and on the incentives, levers and sanctions that are available to overcome the 'implementation gap' that has bedevilled previous policies.

A coordinated lead

Central government needs to ensure that policies driven from different departments and units do not contradict the neighbourhoods agenda.

Successive studies have argued that Whitehall must be well coordinated if it wants services and departments to work effectively together on the ground. Because policy development is segmented, policy makers are often unaware of shared problems across departments, the potential for synergies and joint solutions, or the way in which one department's policies may contradict those of another. Cuts in one budget can also have much wider implications than the service concerned. Research demonstrates that:

National government and its programmes generate a large number of barriers to the development of more effective joint working at the local level through the proliferation of initiatives, different funding and performance monitoring systems, lack of local flexibility and by a lack of central co-ordination. (McGregor et al. 2003, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/753.asp)

Central government policy can unwittingly set up local councils, professionals and communities as competitors rather than allies. A lack of coordination from the centre also means that too many new initiatives are introduced without enough account of what is on the ground already.

At national level, the National Neighbourhoods Agreement must be used to address this and secure commitment across Whitehall. Experience of the National Compact between government and the voluntary and community sectors suggests that this is most likely if champions are appointed at a senior level within each department and Government Office.

Resourcing neighbourhood working: special funds or mainstreaming?

There is a need for specially funded demonstration projects to champion what needs to happen in the mainstream.

Central government investment in centrally funded special programmes has kickstarted change in many neighbourhoods. But the pitfalls of such an approach have also been recognised – hence the current change of emphasis to mainstreaming. Special funds can set up unrealistic expectations; spending the money can become an end in itself rather than the means to an end; special funds can also result in a proliferation of projects which, however worthwhile in themselves, do not add up to a coherent programme for sustainable change. And, once the money dries up, all the gains that have been made can ebb away.

Nonetheless, outside funding does get partners to the table. It can also demonstrate the value of change in a relatively risk-free way. But long-term dedicated support is essential if the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are to benefit from the neighbourhoods agenda in order to champion the neighbourhoods agenda with all partners and ensure that focus is not lost.

To date, experience suggests that most dedicated support has come via short-term special initiatives. When the initiative stops, the support usually does too.

Realistic timescales

Give policies time to work.

The problems of short-term and stop-go initiatives are well documented. Indeed, the common lesson from the interim evaluations of a range of programmes – the New Deal for Communities Programme, Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, Sure Start etc – is that it takes time before the benefits of these new ways of working can be seen and assessed.

Short-termism is a major source of disillusionment in communities. While it is important to ensure that policies keep up to date with learning and new ideas, it is also difficult to recruit and keep quality staff in a financially insecure context. Constant change also makes it difficult to establish the relationships and trust between partners that are essential to the neighbourhoods agenda. It is essential therefore that new policies are given time to work with stable funding that will allow communities and authorities to attract good staff and to plan ahead.

Research has demonstrated the time that is required to set up effective new bodies such as town and parish councils (Bevan 2003, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/713.asp). Neighbourhood working also involves a steep learning curve – it takes time for communities and their partners to understand each other, to learn to trust each other and to build the capacity to work together. If there is too much pressure to deliver early on, the more powerful stakeholders set the direction of travel while other stakeholders get left out. Tight timescales mean that it has been difficult for communities to meaningfully engage in shaping LAAs and there is a danger that they will never get the chance to catch up. If new policy instruments are to overcome the ‘implementation gap’, timescales need to allow for the time and flexibility to engage effectively with the range of local stakeholders. Phasing should be built in to ensure that the short cuts taken now do not preclude full engagement in subsequent years.

However, getting the balance right is difficult. If service delivery agencies and communities are to be encouraged to engage in neighbourhood working for the long term and if momentum is to be maintained, they do need to see visible results. The value of quick wins, especially around clean, green and safe issues, has been demonstrated in most programmes and has been a major step forward in policy.

Achieving double devolution without top-down measures

Government Offices need to be given a clearer role, with the authority and skills to promote the neighbourhoods agenda.

Research on neighbourhood renewal repeatedly underlines the need for capacity building – indeed cultural change – among public sector partners, if the power gap is to be addressed. While progress has undoubtedly been made (Maguire et al, 2006: forthcoming), research suggests that there is still a long way to go. For while devolution is important, community engagement does not necessarily follow. There is still a lot of institutional resistance to community engagement as well as the wider neighbourhoods agenda. While many in the public sector have taken this agenda on board, it is clear that, down the line, the will – and the capacity – to engage communities is still not embedded in institutional cultures. Devolved power therefore sticks at authority level. Where authorities are locked into a culture of ‘we know best’, it is difficult for ‘bottom-up’ action in neighbourhoods to make a real difference. There are still authorities where community

activity is seen as a threat to power and influence rather than an opportunity or asset. Ways need to be found of turning that fear into mutual respect.

Closing the power gap

The JRF Neighbourhood Programme has highlighted the blocks faced by communities in influencing local power holders. Facilitators employed by the Programme to support neighbourhood groups saw it as the main focus of their work – even where they worked on building group capacity, power and influence remained the key issue: “everything stops at the Town Hall”.

The Programme also demonstrated the need for brokerage between partners. This not only made a difference to the way in which power holders viewed communities but also created a change in attitude of individuals and groups in communities. Some projects have been able to let go of a ‘defensive’ attitude and are now establishing sufficient openness and trust to open negotiations (JRF Neighbourhood Programme Evaluation Team 2005, www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=707).

The steps that the government is taking to strengthen the local democratic system are welcome. But addressing the power gap depends on both communities and partners having the will and capacity to work effectively together. This is easier said than done. For example, the government’s proposals for neighbourhood working give a much stronger role to ward councillors. Where councillors are working with communities, each can strengthen the power of the other. But in some communities, ward councillors are seen as the problem not the solution. For them, increased power to councillors will be seen as a step backwards rather than a step forwards.

In the context of devolution, empowerment cannot be legislated from above – many of the levers for change are now no longer available. In any case, there are limits to the extent to which coercion can drive change (Newman 2005). There is still the potential to use LAAs to pursue this agenda, subject to the comments made earlier in this paper. However, changing the culture of participation – especially in those authorities that have resisted this agenda to date – and tackling the implementation gap will require effective incentives, levers and sanctions.

The danger is that, without central government taking some responsibility, citizen engagement will only happen in the ‘best’ authorities. But, in the context of devolution, what role can government play? And what tools should the government be using to ensure that its commitment to community empowerment turns into reality on the ground?

While variation at the neighbourhood level is vital if initiatives are to be sensitive to local needs and patterns of activity, there must be some promotion of common standards and principles. How to achieve this without recourse to top-down measures is the **key** challenge of current policy. Outcome measurement – through mechanisms like the CPA and LAAs – has been one response to this, leaving authorities and other actors free to determine the means so long as the end is achieved. However, the evidence suggests that outcome measures can still be treated as bureaucratic hurdles. In addition, current assessment procedures tend to be dry and uninspiring. More positive ways of building neighbourhood working into the mainstream are needed.

Some tools are already being developed. Neighbourhood agreements or charters, for example, offer the opportunity to move from a lose-lose situation – where paid officers risk losing power and influence, while communities risk being involved in ways that fall short of granting them genuine power and influence – to a win-win situation. The process of negotiating this agreement is likely to be as important as the product.

The proposed National Neighbourhoods Agreement meanwhile has the potential to raise expectations and set standards for engagement. Triggers too have an important role to play in highlighting failures in public services, although care needs to be taken that they do not drive a wedge between services and communities.

JRF research and practice suggests that there are other levers for change:

- First, central government needs to ensure that its policies do not contradict the neighbourhoods agenda. Research demonstrates how innovation and empowerment depend heavily on creative and inspiring individuals within communities and within the public sector. They are generally people who are prepared to take risks but they need to be supported and rewarded. A much more positive steer is needed if cultures are to change, with rewards for justifiable risk. This could be done through more active support from the Government Office, through changes in career incentives and through rewards for innovative practice.
- Second, government needs to work with the LGA, IDeA and other similar intermediary bodies to find effective ways of driving the neighbourhoods agenda and embedding effective practice. This might involve:
 - a major programme of capacity building in public and voluntary agencies, including joint training with community participants;
 - the restructuring of public sector careers and professions in ways which reward joint working;
 - opportunities for joint discussion, sharing knowledge, secondment, shadowing and learning across boundaries.

Mentoring, action-based training, cross-sectoral placements, shadowing, secondments and group-based training are already contributing to building capacity across partner agencies and communities. JRF has also been testing out the potential for adapting the Common Purpose model to neighbourhood level.

It is particularly important to find ways of **working with councillors**. It will be important, if change is to be achieved, to work with local councillors to develop an appropriate community leadership/ community advocacy role, complementary to community activism rather than opposed to it or duplicating it. Peer pressure is likely to be a particularly important lever here. It will also be important to ensure that this is a cross-party initiative. The history of neighbourhood working provides a number of examples where a change of administration has stopped promising initiatives in their tracks.

- A third line of attack is to equip **Government Offices** to drive change by giving them the authority, skills and knowledge to intervene, especially if this were to be attached to a mediation facility based at regional level. This could be enhanced by developing a regional facility for community audit, with experienced residents working alongside Government Office personnel to assess progress as part of the CPA and/or LAA process.

It will be particularly important to maintain and build on the skills and capacity that have been developed in relation to community engagement and neighbourhood working over recent years and ensure these are not lost in the reorganisation that is following the move to LAAs. Some Government Offices have created posts that will allow them to develop an overview of LAAs and share good practice. This facility should be extended to support for neighbourhood working.

Getting the context right: actions for government

The devolution agenda has reduced the number of levers that central government can use to ensure that the intentions of neighbourhood working are realised in practice. There is a limit, in any case, to how far central government can dictate how LSPs and local authorities operate. However, there are still a number of steps that central government can take to ensure that its neighbourhoods agenda achieves the aspirations expressed in its documents and statements:

- ensure that the work of central government departments is better integrated and that all central government departments consider the implications of their policies for the implementation of the neighbourhoods agenda;
- ensure that Government Offices have the authority and skills to support good practice and provide them with a clear role;
- work with the LGA and other relevant bodies to promote a culture of change;
- set a clear framework for neighbourhood working through the proposed National Neighbourhoods Agreement;
- guarantee that the time and stability needed locally for the neighbourhoods agenda are not undermined by subsequent calls for innovation and change.

Closing the power gap: community capacity

The government's commitment to closing the power gap between citizens and government is clear from recent ministerial statements. The case for community empowerment has also been accepted in many parts of the public sector. There is a growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of community empowerment (see, for example, ODPM 2005), principles of good practice are clear and there is no shortage of handbooks on community engagement for the practitioner to draw on. But communities and their partners are working in a complex policy environment – even those committed to community engagement still face a number of challenges. There are still many public bodies that are asking for more guidance on how to effectively engage with communities. Many community organisations also need support if they are to move beyond their own immediate concerns and engage strategically as partners at neighbourhood level.

Community capacity

Expectations of communities need to be realistic.

It is important to have realistic expectations of what can be demanded of communities. Demos has suggested that “a system that mobilised even 1% of citizens to participate actively would still have the potential to be both effective and legitimate” (Skidmore et al, 2006: forthcoming). Not all residents want to engage in order to improve services. And not all can. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, many will be struggling to survive. They simply want the quality of services that other neighbourhoods can expect as of right, for minimum input.

JRF work has shown that the most effective – and accountable – engagement is built up over time by investment in a variety of activities that start at very local level. The roots of community engagement have to be fed if citizens are to make a real difference and have real influence where it matters. Otherwise it is only the most confident or those ‘with an axe to grind’ that will get involved.

This support needs to be maintained. Groups ebb and flow, participation goes in cycles and enthusiasm waxes and wanes. Leaders ‘burn out’ or simply move on to other interests. The JRF Neighbourhood Programme has shown that even the most successful community organisations can go through periods when they lose touch with their communities and need to re-engage. Community organisations also need support at times of crisis or when leaders leave. An effective neighbourhoods policy needs to ensure that there is somewhere for these more experienced groups to turn.

At the other end of the scale, JRF research and practice has demonstrated that the government’s call for community engagement, however welcome, places huge expectations on what, in many communities, can be very fragile networks and groupings – often dependent on one or two people. It is easy to forget this in our enthusiasm to engage communities, only to find instead that we have set them up to fail. JRF research has also demonstrated both the high costs of engagement and the lack of recognition for those who are able to engage.

Closing the power gap

“Residents often considered that they were being put under too much pressure, with insufficient technical support. Programmes were felt to ‘make’ and conversely to ‘break’ ‘community stars’: individuals and groups whose contributions were valued on some occasions and then denigrated on others, depending upon how closely they reflected official agendas”.

(Anastacio et al. 2000, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/770.asp)

It is important both to invest adequately in engagement and to be realistic about what can be expected. There are groups who can go it alone, but many – especially small and ‘hard-to-reach’ groups in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods – need basic resources and someone to turn to if they are to survive at all, let alone engage with an ambitious neighbourhoods agenda. Research suggests that support is also needed to equip community organisations whose focus has been on immediate and very local issues to operate strategically and extend their vision to the wider neighbourhood. Support is particularly important to build **local community leadership** skills which must be matched by some unpacking of the undermining concept of ‘usual suspects’ and an increased understanding about the context in which community participation takes place: “while we are focusing on the leaders as having let [people] down, the real issue of the structure or decision making process and its flaws is not addressed” (Regional Forum and University of Bradford 2004).

If this investment is to be effective, LSPs need to have a clear community development strategy, which maps existing support for the sector and identifies the ways in which partners will address the gaps in support.

Elements of support

JRF and other evidence suggests that there are four elements of support:

Small money with no strings attached.

While some authorities offer a small fund at ward level, the JRF Neighbourhood Programme and other programmes such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) Community Chest and Community Learning Chest funds (later incorporated into the Single Community Programme) have demonstrated the value of providing more direct access to such support, with grant recipients themselves involved in grants panels. Unfortunately, as central government transfers greater control over how money is spent to local authorities and their partners, it is increasingly evident that the survival of these small grants is at risk.

SMART

“... the impact can be quite disproportionate, in sparking off enthusiasm, releasing new energy and voluntary effort, and making things happen to improve the quality of life in their community....”
(Paul Boateng, Home Office, 2001)

The SMART project in Hull was formed by volunteers to help run activities in a new Space for Sport and Arts Building – a fantastic building but no paid staff. In June 2004 they were successful in obtaining £4,100 from the Community Chest fund. This money was used for running an ‘envisioning’ day for all the volunteers and others perceived as partners in the development work, for example, from the local school, the education authority, Sure Start and others who might be potential future funders. Plans from the day led to:

- securing funding to employ a project manager;
- £45,000 over three years to run an out-of-school club;
- £52,000 over two years has been secured from Sure Start to provide wraparound care (childcare that wraps around a child’s education, combining education and care) in two of the local schools;
- nine local people have been employed in paid positions and also some of the volunteers have gained employment within the local school.

SMART is now exploring funding from Sure Start to run one of the children’s centres in Hull – potentially half a million pounds for a new building. Not a bad return for less than £5,000! (See Wilson and Heeney 2005.)

Access to independent core funding.

It can take a long time to move from the initial spark of activity to a point where a group commands widespread support and can establish a stable income stream. Investment needs to recognise the dynamics of community engagement. Funding which expects groups to run before they can walk again sets them up to fail. An initiative similar to the Tenant Empowerment Grant (perhaps a Neighbourhood Empowerment Grant) would act as a springboard for community-based organisations to play an effective neighbourhood role and build their capacity both to develop and to engage effectively in new neighbourhood structures.

Building strategic capacity

The South Yorkshire Objective One Directorate took a long-term strategic approach to use of its structural funds. The 60 plus community partnerships were required to apply a community development framework in their initial strategies and action plans in order to assess their baseline level of development and their capacity to make best use of the programme. Those communities identified as being at a low level of development were given additional capacity building support in the first three years in order that they might make full use of the programme later on, and funds were planned on the basis of this later entry to economic development.

Access to independent support.

The JRF Neighbourhood Programme has demonstrated the value of 'light touch' support for a range of organisations from the very small to the highly experienced. Through its own Guide Neighbourhoods Programme, the government has been experimenting with the idea of 'community anchor organisations' – experienced neighbourhood organisations that can provide support to newer, less experienced groups. It has also given community groups access to Neighbourhood Renewal advisers.

'Light touch' support for communities

The JRF Neighbourhood Programme has worked with 20 neighbourhoods, offering a range of 'light touch' support to a range of groups, from the most fragile to the very experienced and well resourced. The support it offers includes:

- a small credit line offering access to small-scale funding
- access to expert support and advice
- access to information
- networking opportunities with other neighbourhoods
- mediation and brokerage.

The Programme has demonstrated the particular value of having a trusted ally who can offer support, technical expertise and recognition. Having 'someone to turn to' can make a great deal of difference. However, this 'light touch' support requires a certain level of capacity. The most fragile groups need more support to get them to first base (Wilson et al. 2005, www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=707).

An adequately resourced and independent infrastructure.

This kind of support is often provided by infrastructure organisations within the voluntary and community sector. Indeed the government recognised the need for this in its Single Community Programme that supported the development of community empowerment networks to support community engagement in the LSP and other partnerships at city- or district-wide level. An adequately resourced and independent infrastructure is not only important for capacity building; it is essential if diverse voices are to be brought into dialogue and to find common ground.

This infrastructure needs to be supported by a national programme to help groups develop the strategic capacity to operate in the way that the neighbourhoods agenda requires, equivalent to the Change Up arrangements to support the voluntary and community sector in its service delivery role. This could be developed through the extension of the Academy for Sustainable Communities in association with other community sector support bodies at national level. This programme could be channelled through community empowerment networks – although the future of these organisations is uncertain following the devolution of their funding. At city- or district-wide level, a recent JRF study also suggests a Community Governance Strategy at local authority and/or regional level, to build skills and learning opportunities among all partners.

Diversity and the neighbourhoods agenda

The neighbourhoods agenda needs to take account of the diversity of communities.

Working at a neighbourhood level brings services and decisions much closer to communities. But some people are very isolated or even ostracised within their neighbourhoods, especially if they are different from the 'norm'. Similarly, in rural areas, engagement at a neighbourhood level may still overlook those on low incomes, who are excluded by lack of transport, access to affordable housing and cultures of compliance and deference. Some communities of identity – faith-based communities, minority ethnic communities, gay lesbian and transgender (LGBT) communities, for example – will also have strong links beyond the neighbourhood where they live, particularly to focal points such as a mosque or community centre or distinctive shops and services.

The costs of ducking the diversity agenda are evidenced not only in the riots that engulf some areas but in lesser conflicts that may not hit the headlines but sap energy because communities are working against each other rather than joining forces for change. Reaching the hard-to-reach involves all the steps described in the previous section. In addition, neighbourhood policies and structures need to ensure that diversity considerations are not edged out by too rigid a spatial focus and that, instead, neighbourhood working increases understanding and awareness between different local communities. This requires that:

- any funding promotes cohesion within and between neighbourhoods rather than setting up competition between communities;
- definitions of neighbourhood boundaries take account of diversity considerations, ensuring that divisions are not reinforced by the way boundaries are drawn;
- neighbourhood working engages with city- and district-wide organisations where these can help local communities of interest to make their voices heard.

Engaging young people

JRF research suggests that substantial resources are required for effective youth participation, and in particular the provision of dedicated workers seems crucial. It also suggests that mediation and brokerage that can kick in at an early stage are essential to avert or resolve long-term problems. The Foundation is currently commissioning research to explore these issues further. (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/hr918.asp)

New forms of relationship

Finally, the freedoms and flexibilities that the government is extending to the public sector need also to be applied to the voluntary and community sector. The problems of excessive regulation are well documented. Studies in the past have repeatedly demonstrated how excessive regulation and micromanagement inhibits innovation and confounds bottom-up practice, “falling back on mechanisms which give away little decision making power and limit the community to a ‘sensitising’ and ‘gap filling’ role” (Shiner et al. 2004, www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/d44.asp). While Treasury control over public funds is clearly essential, it is easy to be ‘penny wise and pound foolish’. To date, this risk-averse culture has been driven

from the centre. But increasingly, the government is looking for ways of increasing freedoms and flexibilities locally, with the Minister calling for forms of accountability that are 'proportionate and needs-based'. The key to success will be driving this recognition through different levels of government. At present, a risk-averse public culture remains the norm and any requirement from central government is magnified at each level of the accountability chain.

Closing the power gap: actions for government

All new initiatives and programmes need community capacity building budgets to be in place. Neighbourhood Empowerment Grants could contribute to capacity building in the roll out of neighbourhood management.

As part of the neighbourhoods agenda, all LSPs should be required to have a community development strategy that maps support for community groups, shows how community engagement will be supported and sets clear targets.

Government Offices should be given the authority and skills to ensure that closing the power gap is an integral part of the neighbourhoods agenda, and be given access to resources for mediation and benchmarking community involvement.

The government should consider how its investment in the infrastructure for community empowerment could be continued in a devolved policy context, especially in those authorities that do not make satisfactory alternative arrangements.

The more 'mature relationship' being promoted between central and local government should be reflected in a similarly mature relationship between local authorities and the voluntary and community sectors.

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