

Two Sides of the Coin: Developing Capacity in both Communities and Services

Learning Lessons for Neighbourhood Renewal in Brighton and Hove

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NOT FOR QUOTATION

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March 2006**

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Community involvement and the development of partnerships between local people and service providers is considered key to the success of Neighbourhood Renewal and reflects the Government's wider Civil Renewal agenda. Neighbourhood Renewal is the Government Initiative aiming to narrow the gap between the 88 most deprived authorities and the rest of the country (SEU, 2001), tackling so-called 'postcode poverty' by focusing on improvements to key public services.

Whilst nationally some Neighbourhood Renewal initiatives have been evaluated (see for example, SIGOMA, 2004; Murie *et al*, 2003), there remains a recognised deficit of evidence in terms of what works and what doesn't. This means that the information base available for local decision making is weak.

Focus of the research

Research carried out by the Health and Social Policy Research Centre, of the University of Brighton, during 2005 aimed to improve this knowledge base by researching six case study examples of projects within Brighton & Hove, with a view to identifying successes and challenges in terms of how projects contribute towards Neighbourhood Renewal goals. The projects included:

- The Hangleton & Knoll Project -a community development project undertaking a community survey in partnership with the local community association.
- The Whitehawk Inn -a training organisation seeking greater involvement of local people in the organisation through volunteering.
- Engage -a Christian community development project providing action learning opportunities for those seeking to engage with their communities.
- The Carers Centre in partnership with East Brighton New Deal for Communities 'eb4U'-an outreach project identifying 'hidden carers' within East Brighton.
- Sussex Community Internet Project (SCIP)-an infrastructure organisation providing ICT support and training to community and voluntary organisations looking at the impact of web-design training.
- Sussex Police -project seeking to establish local police surgeries in Central Brighton.

The research was funded by the Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE) and the ALTogether Programme. These programmes have a common ethos of sharing learning, which fitted particularly well with the aims of the research. This allowed scope for the development of a reflective, collaborative research style with a clear intention that participation in the research process should add value to the projects involved. The research represented an innovative partnership between the University and the Neighbourhood Renewal team within the Local Authority.

While clear routes and opportunities for local people to be represented in decision making regarding Neighbourhood Renewal exist at strategic levels within Brighton & Hove, the research findings are concerned largely with issues of involvement and capacity building at the local level –within a neighbourhood or organisation.

Findings

Research findings relate directly to recent national guidance in the shape of 'Firm Foundations', a Government framework promoting a coherent approach to capacity building across the many departments which seek to support it (see Home Office, 2004). In particular, these findings highlight the importance of:

- i) Capacity building of both local people, service providers and funders
- ii) Learning for local people, service providers and funders.

i. Capacity Building

The research shows that much community activity and capacity already exists within communities and neighbourhoods and that 'getting involved in the community' means different things to different people. In many cases there is a preference for involvement on an informal level –helping out a neighbour, turning up at a community event, publicising events through personal networks, rather than sitting on a committee. Formalising such activity through formal group formation (as is often encouraged by funders) is not always appropriate and findings suggest an important role for 'umbrella organisations' in providing support for community activity in such cases.

The research highlights the importance of projects taking a community development approach, building upon existing relationships, capacity and trust and acknowledging local 'cultures of participation'. The projects looked at in this research illustrate that a central figure is often key in co-ordinating any involvement. The research highlights the time that may be required to achieve meaningful engagement. Many of the people the projects seek to engage have complicated lives and often require considerable support and encouragement to become involved in something new. Such support work is intensive and may not immediately relate to the project's outcomes.

Finding out what people's interests and skills are, and how they'd like to be involved, enhances the likelihood that they will get involved and stay involved. However, projects can experience difficulties funding work that meets identified needs as many funding streams have prescribed outcomes which do not necessarily match how local people choose to get involved. Successful projects recognise that a range of opportunities may be necessary to support the involvement of local people.

ii. Learning

Communities and Services learning together is an important focus of Neighbourhood Renewal. The research illustrates how learning takes place and is being supported in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings e.g. between individuals, within organisations, by statutory services. If the ways in which people tend to interact and participate within their communities are not understood and built upon, those seeking the wider involvement of local people in Neighbourhood Renewal (workers on the ground, funders and services) run the risk of being inaccessible and irrelevant to the very people they seek to engage.

The case studies highlight the value of adopting a reflective approach to the development of projects, allowing projects to respond and adapt, rather than stick rigidly to goals. Projects benefit when associated funding allows a level of

flexibility around outcomes as well as recognising 'softer outcomes' which cannot always be measured.

The research identifies the potential value of enhancing training for service providers, specifically the Police and health care professionals. Relationships built with the community and voluntary sector via this process can raise awareness and strengthen and expand opportunities for referrals.

Building upon the existing capacity of local people to get involved and developing the capacity of service providers and funders to better understand and respond to the needs of local people are two sides of the Neighbourhood Renewal coin (Home Office, 2004). Both are necessary if local people are to be involved in making decisions and setting priorities in their neighbourhoods.

Recommendations

1. Those seeking the wider involvement of local people in Neighbourhood Renewal (workers on the ground, services and funders) could benefit from actively developing their understanding of the local 'culture of participation' in neighbourhoods and the various ways in which people learn. Such knowledge ensures Neighbourhood Renewal processes build upon how local people choose to interact and get involved in community activity.
2. Service Providers could be supported (e.g. by the Neighbourhood Renewal Team and Neighbourhood Renewal Review Group) to develop more of a co-ordinated and responsive service by adopting a community development approach and employing development workers where appropriate.
3. Those seeking the wider involvement of local people in Neighbourhood Renewal could usefully explore ways of supporting one-off community activity or groups that wish to remain informal i.e. are reluctant or unable to constitute to access funding. The potential for umbrella organisations to support such groups should be examined and possible ways forward identified. (This could include relaxing restrictions on larger umbrella organisations to enable them to access funding on behalf of more informal groups).
4. Existing and developing funding streams could benefit from developing supportive, facilitative and flexible relationships with the projects they fund. The Scarman trust and their use of development workers to help projects develop their ideas provides a useful model. Such an approach enables projects to be responsive to developments within their work and allows funders to recognise and respond to the contributions projects are making to a range of outcomes.