

## Building Sustainable Communities Seminar Series

Monday 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2008

Coin Street Community Centre, 108 Stamford Street, South Bank, London SE1 9NH

### **Seminar one: Building forms of stewardship that encourage participation in new developments – what is known about good practice and research?**

The Young Foundation is hosting a series of four seminars explore different ways of building environmentally and socially sustainable communities. This is particularly important given government's new emphasis on increasing housing supply. The results of the discussion will help inform a toolkit for practitioners to promote practical ways of tackling these issues.

The first seminar will concentrate on resident participation and involvement in both the planning of new communities and, as they become established, in wider civil society.

The four seminars will be informed by findings from a variety of case studies exploring how similar issues have been tackled in regeneration projects over the past decade, and in previously built new settlements.

The seminars aim to:

- support practitioners to develop a more rounded approach to new housing developments which can help ensure that the creation of new settlements is more than just a land transaction, but also builds in good governance, participation and longer term stewardship
- build on existing knowledge and good practice solutions, drawing on research from the UK and internationally and strong practical examples, and help ensure that policy is framed to enable their implementation.

The themes explored in the seminar discussions will, along with the case study research, form a toolkit which will be made available at the end of the project.

This paper sets out some initial thoughts to help frame the discussion.

## 1 Participation in new settlements

Involving residents in decision-making is key in ensuring that both new residents and existing communities gain a sense of ownership over the planning and development of new housing developments. However, resident involvement in previous regeneration and new town developments has varied greatly, from simply ensuring that residents are **informed** of the changes occurring around them, to **consulting** them, to finally allowing them to **participate** in shaping the new community, physically and socially.

Where participation has been successful, difficulties can still arise over the need to balance the desires of the incoming residents with those of the existing community, and in turning resident enthusiasm for discussions of specific planning issues into wider and more sustained involvement in civil society.

Encouraging participation of residents in planning developments and, in the longer term, encouraging their involvement in wider civil society is complex. Participation or consultation can slow down decision-making processes and lead to frustration with resulting delays. However, involving local people in the development process can both improve the quality of the conclusions reached, and encourage residents to contribute their time to wider community activities in the future.

Tensions can arise over how representative those involved in decision-making are of the community at large, and the difficulties extrapolating community views from a small sample of residents. Local councillors, elected through the democratic process can be seen to have a certain degree of legitimacy, however they may be perceived to be led by party political affiliation rather than very local community needs. Tensions can emerge between elected members' and community activists' roles as community leaders.

The involvement of local people can challenge the conventional role of agencies engaged in developing and managing communities. This might precipitate a change in organisational culture. Similarly it can also lead to clarity about what can and cannot be decided, or influenced, by members of the public. This is a particularly pertinent issue for bodies that operate at arms length from democratically controlled bodies, such as Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) and the future Homes and Communities Agency itself.

## **2 Learning from previous experience: the New Towns**

The period immediately following the war up to the 1970s saw the UK's most significant era of housing growth, important in this was the creation of 21 New Towns. The experiences of both the new residents and professionals involved in their planning and development provide valuable lessons for modern day practitioners.

The New Towns, managed by their Development Corporations, took differing approaches to resident participation. Some specifically employed officers responsible for social 'relations' or 'liaisons'. Neighbourhood councils and associations were also set up as new settlements began to welcome residents. The first autonomous community based groups that formed were often tenants' associations. More recent research has shown that, in the present day, New Towns generally have more community organisations than other pre-existing towns with similar socio-economic characteristics. Milton Keynes, for example, is unusual amongst urban centres in the number of parish councils within its boundaries.

However, the experience of the New Towns also demonstrates some of the difficulties involved in creating new communities. Large influxes of new residents into local areas had a profound impact on local political dynamics, which contributed to tensions between existing communities and new arrivals. Many of the new residents were young families that didn't necessarily have the time or the inclination to get involved in associations and traditional governance structures. Studies in Telford suggest that it took up to 15 years for the new community to form stable social networks.

The most successful approaches to New Town development were built on an understanding of the incoming population, giving new residents the opportunity to adapt existing infrastructure to their needs, and involving them in planning later phases of development.

### **'New Town blues'**

Some of the residents moving into the New Towns in the post-war period displayed symptoms of mental health vulnerabilities, commonly known as 'New Town blues'. Though much of the evidence of this was anecdotal, research from the 1970s, demonstrated that a lack of social ties can predict lower mortality from almost all causes of death.

More recent research looking at Cambourne, a new settlement currently being built nine miles to the west of Cambridge, have also shown evidence of new residents suffering mental health problems. A Cambridgeshire PCT report recommends that decision-makers and developers must ensure that resources (including community facilities) are made available to promote social cohesion at the same time as building the physical environment. The report also argues for the involvement of existing communities in the planning of both new, and later phases of, housing settlements.

### **3 Young Foundation wider neighbourhood work**

The Young Foundation has been engaged in a variety of neighbourhood-based projects, involving both research and practical initiatives, over the past three years.

This has found that organisations that have been most successful in empowering communities are those able to balance their focus on people, processes and their own structures and organisational culture. Organisational culture can be particularly important in enabling empowerment; examples of this are neighbourhood policing and the work of organisations like Tees Valley Housing Association, which designed and instituted its own culture change program to enable it to respond better to the needs of its local community.

Motivations for local authorities to devolve more decision-making to residents and communities are to improve service delivery; increasing empowerment and engagement in democratic structures. Housing associations undergoing similar processes appeared to be motivated by a mixture of internal business drivers and pressure from residents and local authorities.

Communities in England are becoming increasingly diverse creating greater challenges for those trying to increase participation and involvement. There is a wealth of good practice in how to involve different groups, which has evolved over the last decade to keep up changing demographic trends. Some of the areas that find this issue most pressing are those with very small existing BME populations and little local experience and skills in managing diversity, within agencies and existing populations.

Sources:

**CLG (2006) *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns***

**Bennett J., with Hetherington D., Nathan M. & Urwin C. (2006) *Would you live here? Making Growth Areas Communities of Choice*, report for IPPR**

**Involve (2005) *People & participation*, Beacon Press: London**



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Goh, S. & Bailey, P. (2007) *The effect of the social environment on mental health*  
Young Foundation (2007) *Transforming neighbourhoods: local work in 15 areas*  
N. Bacon, L. Bartlett and A. Brady (2007), *Good neighbours: housing associations involvement in neighbourhood governance*

### Policy Context

#### **Housing Green Paper (2007):**

announcing the government's commitment to build 3 million new homes by 2020, including five new eco-towns.

#### **Local government white paper (CLG 2006):**

confirmed 'place shaping' agenda for English local authorities, encouragement to introduce community empowerment measures including neighbourhood management and neighbourhood charters. Some proposals - including increasing local control over the setting up of new parishes or community councils - were taken forward through the **2007 Local Government Involvement in Public Health Act**. The **2007 Sustainable Communities Act** also introduced measures to encourage the development of sustainable communities.

#### **Community Empowerment Action plan (CLG/LGA 1007):**

extended government's community empowerment agenda to include new focus on participatory budgeting and citizens juries. 18 local authorities designated as empowerment champions

#### **Empowerment White Paper (CLG 2008, forthcoming):**

is expected to consolidate the government's agenda on this issue.

#### **Quirk Review ( CLG 2007):**

encouraged transfer of assets from local government and wider public sector to community organisations

#### **Councillors Commission (CLG 2007):**

measures to buttress locally elected members' community leadership role

#### **Report from Commission for Integration and Cohesion (CLG 2007):**

acknowledging complexity of diversity and setting out new approaches to building cohesive communities.

#### **Sub-national economic development and regeneration review (HM Treasury 2007):**

has changed the overall context of the strategic framework in which new housing developments will sit, and sets out a clearer role for local authorities in promoting economic development and neighbourhood renewal.

### First thoughts

In this seminar we will consider how to 'build-in' both physical and social infrastructure that can engender a sense of belonging for new residents. Can residents be supported in forming social networks, in becoming involved in civil society and in building a local social capital? We will also explore how local authorities' place-shaping role can underpin the creation of mixed and sustainable communities.

### Our questions

1. Why, despite the fact that so much is known on this topic, is it still very difficult to get right (if there a **right** way)? If not, how do we judge what is appropriate?
2. How can we engage with a population that doesn't yet exist? What are good representatives or proxies?
3. How can we incentivise the people we need to form a mixed community to move to a new settlement and how can we incentivise them to stay?
4. How do we make people feel that they belong in new places and in new communities?

## Case study profiles

### Walker Riverside

Walker Riverside, initiated in 2003, is a 15 year regeneration program based in the Walker district of East Newcastle. The residents of area were previously predominantly employed in the nearby shipbuilding yards, but since the city's industrial decline Walker has been affected by increasing depopulation and deprivation among the remaining residents.

The project is currently aiming to demolish a total of around 700 homes and build another 1600. The design codes laid out at the start of the project mean that all of the new homes are and will be lifetime homes and will meet Eco-Homes standard 'very good'.



The partners in the project are BNG (Bridging Newcastle Gateshead, a market renewal pathfinder set up in 2003), Bellway, Places for People, the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships; each of which are represented on the project board along with local councillors and residents.

### Byker

The Byker area of East Newcastle was redeveloped in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the architect Ralph Erskine. The project was designed to preserve the community networks between the existing residents, by moving groups of neighbours into their new homes together. The design of the estate was radical for the time and included a large wall, up to nine stories high, along the north side of the development to shield it from a planned motorway, which was never built.



The estate is now managed by Newcastle City's ALMO, Your Homes Newcastle. They are currently investing in the fabric of the buildings, bringing them up to their 'modern homes' standard. They are investigating ways of ensuring that the estate remains in good condition in the future.

### Castle Vale

Castle Vale's estate of 34 tower blocks was built in the 1960s on the site of a former aerodrome to the north-east of Birmingham. From the 1970s the estate suffered from



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high levels of deprivation with low employment levels, high levels of crime and a lack of social and physical infrastructure.

In 1994 the residents of Castle Vale voted for the estate to be managed by a Housing Action Trust (HAT), which from the following year made significant inroads into regenerating the estate, demolishing 32 of the tower blocks and building houses and low-level apartment blocks in their place. Since 1995 the new housing on the estate has been managed by the Castle Vale Community Housing Association (CVCHA) which now provides intensive community support in the form of neighbourhood wardens, youth provision and employment training.



### **East Thames Group**

East Thames Housing Association is a medium sized housing association based in Stratford, East London. The organisation has its own Sustainable Neighbourhoods Team, which is involved from the outset with all their potential new developments.



The association has recently won awards for its development of high density housing along Tanner Street in Barking, and is reaching completion of its Harford Street development near Mile End. The organisation published a High Density Housing Toolkit in 2006, which has since been endorsed by the Housing Corporation.

### **Kings Cross**

The London Borough of Camden incorporates a large range of diverse neighbourhoods, which together they provide a snapshot of London's diversity. The Kings Cross central development area is currently being redeveloped for new commercial, retail and residential space and is one of the largest developments in central London.

Camden Council is landlord to 33,000 existing tenants in the wider borough. In 2003 tenants voted against a transfer to an ALMO. Between May and December 2007 Camden Council undertook an ambitious consultation process with its 33,000 existing tenants to discuss its proposed investment strategy for their homes.

