

CONSIDERED IN ISOLATION

Does size matter for disadvantaged small housing estates? This is the central question for a Young Foundation project investigating different approaches to tackling entrenched deprivation on small estates.

Up and down the country there are many small pockets of social housing where residents experience persistent and profound deprivation. Often these are the most disadvantaged households in an area and are clustered together on one or two streets of a larger estate or in a corner of a neighbourhood.

All the usual indicators of deprivation are concentrated in these small areas: crime, antisocial behaviour, unemployment, low educational achievement and poor health – as are other problems, like higher than average rates of domestic violence or conflict between neighbours. Rightly or not, these areas tend to develop a local reputation for being crime hotspots or sink estates.

This is a familiar picture to anyone working with disadvantaged communities of all sizes. But do the effects of deprivation have greater consequences in very small estates? The project is looking at the function size plays in making disadvantage easier or harder to measure and tackle. Are these estates too small to attract substantial regeneration funding or management programmes? And are conventional approaches to regeneration simply not appropriate for small estates?

The year-long project involves residents and local agencies on three small estates in Coventry, South Shields and near Maidstone, Kent. Each one has fewer than 500 households and is either geographically distinct from surrounding neighbourhoods, or in one case, its reputation sets it apart.

The project will bring local people and agencies together to take a holistic look at social problems on the estates – this means looking at the underlying issues that are keeping these households in poverty, as well as the symptoms of these problems – and through some rapid action planning, develop new approaches to tackling them.

Initial conversations with people living and working on the estates have revealed common stories and experiences: they are small neighbourhoods with strong social networks supporting extended families, friends and neighbours. Many residents have a sense of belonging and pride about where they live. And people are generally satisfied with the where they live and have ideas about how to improve their communities.

At the same time however, the estates are known locally as problem areas. Their stories are of long-term neglect, disappearing services, failed or stalled attempts at regeneration and residents who are frustrated with agencies, afraid of crime and see limited opportunities for young people. Unemployment is a problem for all three estates and the recession is reducing the possibility of large-scale regeneration and job creation. Housing allocations policy has a different impact on each estate but in each case creates tensions between residents.

Behind these familiar descriptions there are a set of

When it comes to deprivation, are very small estates doubly disadvantaged? Early findings from a new study suggest size does matter, says Saffron Woodcraft

dynamics at work that appear to be linked to, or at least exaggerated by, the fact these are small and self-contained areas of housing:

◆ **Reputation is a self-reinforcing problem**

Reputation is a problem for each of the estates. They contain some of the least desirable pockets of housing locally, and are seen as hotspots for crime, violence, problem families, troubled youth, and in some cases racism and harassment. These problems are definitely present in these neighbourhoods, but whether they live up to their reputation is debatable. Once established however, reputation is hard to crack. In at least two of the estates, maybe all three, young people are using the estate's reputation to boost their own identity as tough and troublesome locals. Areas with a reputation for being difficult become stigmatised and it can be argued this influences how local agencies think about delivering services to these households.

◆ **Strong social capital doesn't always mean positive outcomes**

Strong social networks, neighbourliness and belonging are often seen as an essential elements of a resilient and flourishing community. However, strong social networks can also have negative effects. The estates included in this study have different but distinct estate cultures. The common factor is their roots in long-established, extended family networks that prioritise the 'local way of doing things'. While this means unlimited practical and emotional



support for those families and friends who are in the network, newcomers are not always welcome and change is not encouraged. Stories of exclusion – and sometimes hostility and harassment – towards outsiders emerged frequently in conversations with residents and agencies.

◆ **Estate culture impacts most on young people's aspirations**

Young people are particularly affected by this type of estate culture. The focus on maintaining family ties and the local way of doing things was described by many people as limiting their experience of life beyond the estate and with it, exposure to different ideas and lifestyles. Many residents and agencies described how often the only way to 'get on' or 'achieve' is to leave the estate – and with it the security of friends and family. Problems with self-esteem were reported in all three areas, linked to lack of confidence and skills to deal with life beyond the estate.

◆ **'Not for people like me...'**

Agencies described how they struggle to get residents who are most in need to use local services, while residents talked about how they feel that services are not relevant or not accessible to people like them. This points toward a broader issue of perception and widespread misunderstandings between residents and agencies about local needs, and how confidence and self-esteem play a role in preventing residents in greatest need from accessing services.

WHY SIZE MATTERS

Size does appear to make a difference. We have identified four factors that appear to exaggerate the effects of deprivation in very small estates.

◆ **Size makes it easy to hide deprivation**

It is clear from the work done so far that official measures of

FIND OUT MORE

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◆ **The Young Foundation's** small estates project began in February and is being funded from an innovation and good practice grant awarded by the Housing Corporation (now Homes and Communities Agency) in 2008 and now managed by the Chartered Institute of Housing on behalf of the Tenant Services Authority.

deprivation, such as super output area statistics, disguise the real extent of deprivation (as data is skewed by the presence of more affluent households). This means resources are allocated to other estates or neighbourhoods that appear to have more pressing social needs.

◆ **Poor service delivery is disguised**

Problems with routine service delivery and estate management (like rubbish collection, street lighting, street cleaning and basic repairs) are much easier for services to overlook or ignore in very small areas – especially if estates have a poor reputation. This is because poor performance against service level agreements can be masked by performance data for neighbouring areas; and agencies can make arguments against taking action because of the high cost of tailoring services to a very small area.

◆ **Allocations policy may have disproportionate effects**

Early findings from the project suggest that housing allocations policy appears to have more negative effects in small estates. Concentrating vulnerable or chaotic tenants in a very small area of housing has a proportionally greater impact on other residents than in larger areas. However, more investigation is needed to explore this claim.

◆ **Isolation amplifies estate culture**

Early findings point to the importance of very localised values or estate cultures in shaping people's aspirations, especially young people. Isolation from other neighbourhoods appears to concentrate the effects of estate culture and can limit people's mobility and scope to experience life beyond the estate boundaries. However, this is an area that needs further investigation to understand how local values can mitigate or reinforce problems of entrenched deprivation.

CHOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Broadly speaking, there are three different approaches to tackling problems of entrenched deprivation:

1. Tackling everyday issues through public service provision
2. Improving local economic, social and physical conditions through regeneration
3. Interventions to tackle underlying causes through non-conventional means.

Arguably, more-targeted and better-resourced neighbourhood working could tackle some of these underlying issues. However, it is the last approach we believe has the most potential for tackling entrenched deprivation. Traditionally, tackling issues with identity, self-esteem or aspiration are not within the mainstream remit or toolbox of approaches for local agencies. But innovative new approaches are emerging, such as a community college in South Shields providing classroom-based lessons to build pupils' resilience and a social landlord in Coventry which is delivering lessons on being a responsible social tenant.

Much more will emerge from this work as the project progresses. There is still work to be done to understand how resources are allocated to very small estates and the cost of working at this scale. For now, it is worth considering that small estates need a different approach to targeting deprivation – one that focuses on the whole experience of living in these neighbourhoods and the emotional and psychological barriers that hold people back, not only the physical and economic ones.



Smaller estates may be suffering a 'double whammy' of deprivation