



## Revitalizing Low-Income Public Housing Through Community Participation in the UK

*Poverty is at the root of the problems facing many public housing projects in the U.K. today. Experience emerging from 100 low-income housing estates echoes findings from urban upgrading for the poor in developing countries. Tackling poverty and unemployment in low income communities cannot be left to the market alone. Community participation and full partnership with communities is key, but this is constrained by the push to achieve results quickly, as well as lack of agency interest and skills in working with poor communities as partners. Lasting change requires a strong national and regional policy framework, a new approach based on inter-agency cooperation, local delivery and meaningful participation by local residents. Residents of such projects offer a significant resource for regeneration, particularly when they have established a foundation of local activity and organizational experience.*

### Background

In 1992, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation of the United Kingdom funded a research program to explore ways of developing a more central role for tenants and residents in the physical, economic and social regeneration of their "housing estates" (public housing projects). Across Britain, some 2,000 low-income public housing projects are caught in a spiral of poverty, unemployment and heavy demand on welfare services. Residents face problems of social isolation and economic stagnation which are reinforced by public perceptions of the stereotypical "housing project."

The 33 case studies supported by this program bring together experiences from over 100 estates across the British Isles and provide people's own perspective on estate life. The studies revealed many aspects of effective community control including: involvement in design of housing and environmental improvements; locally managed services; job creation; and participation in multi-agency partnerships.

This unique body of experience offers many examples of successful practice and allows agencies to identify and synthesize the main elements needed for a successful strategy and important lessons based on stakeholder participation. It also highlights the pitfalls and the areas where tensions remain and progress is slow. As such, it offers an important agenda for ensur-

ing that disadvantaged communities both contribute fully to, and benefit from, initiatives within their own neighborhoods.

### Policy Focus

In recent years, the central government has responded with a comprehensive strategic approach to regenerating the estates. This significant advance in public policy emphasizes "partnership" and "community involvement." It offers residents opportunities to take more control over local services and to play a major part in strategic, long-term programs for their communities.

While the government has accepted the case for resident involvement, there is still much to learn about how to effect meaningful participation. Agencies that have participated in the most successful estate regeneration initiatives have found that it takes time to change traditional ways of working, to develop cooperation with other agencies and community residents, to learn to take a strategic view and, above all, to ensure that residents are equal partners in regeneration rather than token players. Lead agencies face many pressures in implementing the regeneration process as they adjust to financial constraints, changing demand, and local and central government reforms. Experience shows that commitment to resident involvement can founder on competing policy and performance objectives, lack of

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**Box 1**  
**Involving Young People**

In Pembroke Street, children were involved in the rehabilitation of the estate by getting the local schools involved in designing the security gates and entrance mosaic for the estate.

In Meadowell, the community newsletter has a separate youth section produced by young people themselves. Young people who were in jail after the riots were visited to keep them informed on what was going on in the estate, an initiative that has now been taken up by the housing department. Young people have helped both to design and build the new youth center and are now forming a construction cooperative to bid for work on other parts of the community village. Some young people already have jobs on the construction site for the village.

In Birmingham, SHAPE Housing Association worked with schools to:

- Design a school garden
- Produce a quarterly community bulletin
- Carry out an environmental audit of SHAPE
- Design a village notice board

One school Head reported much closer contact with the local community as a result, including with Asian mothers who had in the past been difficult to involve.

Sources: Watson, *Putting Back the Pride* (20); Gibson, *Danger-Opportunity* (16); McArthur, *Housing Associations and Neighborhood Regeneration* (22).

understanding or insecurity among agency staff, and other claims on resources. There are also widely differing interpretations of what resident and community involvement means.

Studies of 100 public housing projects across the British Isles identified a set of "ingredients for success" in strategies aimed at regenerating low income estates. These include:

### **Assessing Community Strengths**

Each public housing project is unique. Successful regeneration strategies must start from a careful assessment of the nature and history of a particular estate, the factors which shape it, and the resources available to it. Every effort should be made to challenge the stereotyping and prejudice from which many estates suffer. While it is important to acknowledge the pressure un-

**Box 2**  
**Mechanisms for Community Participation**

Although many special government initiatives in the U.K. now emphasize community involvement, evidence suggests that this often happens after bids for services have been made and initiatives launched. To rectify this situation, a number of procedural changes are recommended:

- Sufficient lead-in time should be allowed for residents to make an informed and effective contribution. If there is one message above all others that emerges from the studies of Britain's housing estates, it is that official timescales do not allow residents to make their full contribution.
- All bidding guidance in every government-sponsored initiative should give consistent and high priority to creating opportunities for resident-led initiatives in a range of service areas. Agency regional offices need to be rigorous in examining bids for evidence of participation and in tying acceptances to appropriate consultation. This requires well defined criteria having the same weight as financial and administrative criteria. A high profile should be given to community involvement targets when publishing the results of the bidding process.
- Agency regional offices also need to ensure that ongoing community participation is built into delivery plans, that performance targets are set for community involvement and that these are monitored as rigorously as other targets. Consultation with residents through their existing intermediary bodies and neighborhood forums is required to develop and enforce realistic criteria.
- Where residents' groups are involved in unsuccessful bids, agencies should take active steps to provide feedback to allow them to improve their bidding skills or to develop alternative resources.

der which residents live, it is even more important to recognize the assets and potential that local people, buildings, firms and services represent.

## **Involving Residents at the Outset**

Successful solutions and action plans start from residents' own priorities. As the major stakeholders, residents can bring enormous expertise to the development effort if they are involved at an early stage in developing plans for the regeneration of the estate. Feasibility studies can often tap a rich vein of experience, interest and skills by drawing upon the input of residents. Agencies should employ participatory tools to ensure that community members who are not "joiners" or who lack confidence about speaking in formal meetings can contribute fully. It is particularly important to find ways of involving young people and ethnic minority groups. Before outside bodies proceed with designing a regeneration strategy, they should also ensure they are aware of already existing resident initiatives.

## **Investing in Social Capital**

As they take on responsibility for regenerating their community, residents are likely to need capacity building support. Agencies must allocate sufficient time to ensure confidence, skills and capacity are strengthened. Training, specialist expertise and dedicated resources can be crucial in developing community capacity and individual technical and organizational skills. Ideally, residents will control how this outside support is employed and targeted.

Relatively small levels of resources can make a big difference in developing the capacity of residents to make a full and informed contribution. However, because community-based groups are often organizationally fragile and do not have financial reserves to draw upon, agencies may want to establish a "Community Resource Fund" to ensure that groups have access to necessary resources. In addition, financial procedures and processes must be straightforward and administratively efficient.

## **Changing Service Delivery**

Changes in service delivery which have made a considerable difference to estates include: decentralization; resident participation in estate improvement, service planning and provision; estate agreements prepared jointly between agencies and residents; and establishment of a variety of tenant management organizations. This flexibility in agency response based on local definitions of need has facilitated new levels of resident participation.

Successful working partnerships require the commitment of both agencies and residents. On the one hand, agency professionals need to be prepared to adapt their ways of working to fit in with residents' priorities. This may require training and the transformation of agency culture. On the other hand, expectations of residents must be realistic, especially when they are being asked to take on the management of services which have proven challenging to most professionals. The shift from campaigning and mutual support activities to managing their own services can prove more difficult than residents anticipate. Along with training, community members need resources adequate to the task and support in maintaining their accountability to the community-at-large: resident control should not be regarded as a less expensive alternative to professional management.

Successful management and service delivery also require agencies to establish close working relationships with other agencies. Again, this demands new skills and work routines for professional staff.

## **Tackling the Local Economy**

Jobs and income are essential to public housing regeneration. To this end, several avenues have proven worth pursuing:

- Developing opportunities within estates for jobs in local mainstream services and in housing and other regeneration initiatives supported by appropriate training.
- Continuously improving access to the mainstream economy through training, job placement and facilitating the transition from welfare benefits to paid work.
- Developing community-based service organizations in areas where there is an insufficient market for the private sector and where potential customers cannot afford to pay.
- Supporting efforts to further develop existing informal economies on estates. These may include credit unions, self-help efforts, skills exchanges and schemes to ease the transition from welfare to work.

## **Sharing Power**

Partnerships between agencies and residents offer the potential for new forms of local governance in which, ultimately, significant power is shared with residents and where professionals work for and with communities on an equal basis. This, however, remains a long-term goal. At this stage, major differences in power,

resources, culture and capacity exist between outside agencies and local residents.

To move toward power sharing, residents need support in building up robust and independent organizations. Agencies must respect community views, even when they are in conflict with their own. The most successful existing agency-resident partnerships within estates have all gone through periods of disagreement but have emerged the stronger for it.

### Planning for Lasting Change

In developing regeneration strategies, agencies should plan for their “exit” from the beginning. Prospects for sustainability are increased by the development of local capacity, both among residents and in locally managed mainstream services. They also depend crucially on developing community-controlled “successor” bodies with assets, endowments or attractive opportunities for future investment. National policies are needed which can both encourage this and establish a viable legal and financial investment framework for successor organizations over the long term.

## A Comprehensive Approach

While each estate is different and the starting point for regeneration depends on the unique opportunities available, a comprehensive approach must be adopted if real change is to be achieved. Community activity is not enough on its own. Without the commitment and resources of all the major players, including national government, local resident activity will only have a limited impact on the real pressures facing estates. Confidence and organizing skills should be built through smaller-scale local activity. Encouraging a variety of local organizations which represent different community needs and interests ensures informed and accountable leadership. Effective community participation has emerged by piloting activities and building capacity simultaneously, and ensuring that success is recognized beyond the local level.

Ultimately, public housing regeneration cannot be achieved within the confines of one locality. National, regional and city policies must be dedicated to countering the economic and social exclusion confronting all low income residents.

### Box 3 Wider Policy Implications

The study of over 100 low income housing estates in Britain suggests that social capital is built through an active tradition of local activity and organization which gives people confidence, skills and experience. This is the foundation on which schemes to introduce community-based participation must be built if they are to succeed. If development is to build on the potential that lies within local communities it needs:

A strategic approach that targets and invests in neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated, but which is firmly linked into area-wide regeneration programs. A “community impact assessment” should be required of proposed major developments so that the social impact, and the likely costs attached to this, can be assessed and taken into account from the outset.

Knowledge based on local people’s own perceptions, expertise and aspirations. All new initiatives should be required to show how local communities have been involved in initial planning and will be involved in implementation.

- Sufficient agency resources and expertise to support effective local participation. Placing responsibility in the hands of communities does not mean leaving them to struggle alone. It requires investment to support small-scale community activities and to provide a financial infrastructure which will support the growth of sustainable community regeneration organizations. A Community Resource Fund would allow communities to articulate their own priorities and to become involved in development initiatives at the earliest opportunity.
- Locally funded and administered services which offer residents the opportunity to participate at whatever level they choose.
- The development of community based organizations with assets, organizational capacity and long-term viability.
- Improved access to economic opportunities within and outside the neighborhood.
- New forms of partnership and decisionmaking, with outside agencies prepared to adapt their priorities and ways of working to allow residents to participate as full partners.
- A new type of dialogue with local communities which respects their autonomy and expertise while accepting them as full partners rather than as beneficiaries. This requires: decentralized administration; information disseminated through local media; training and organizational programs throughout the agency so that front-line practices are changed; strong coordination of agencies operating locally; and agency coordination at the international and country levels.