



Poverty, Neighbourhood Renewal and the Voluntary Sector in West Cornwall



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1. INTRODUCTION

Encouraging community and voluntary sector involvement in neighbourhood regeneration is acknowledged by government as crucial to the success of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) and a key criterion for the accreditation of NRF Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Local accountability and the fostering of local leadership are key goals in the development of the government’s Neighbourhood Renewal strategy (SEU, 2001). In this view, involving local people and communities by drawing upon individual and collective resources unavailable to the statutory sector, is vital to the successful development and implementation of sustainable community strategies (DETR, 2001).

However, ensuring that local communities and voluntary groups receive the support they need to participate fully in the design and delivery of LSPs is not an easy task (see Channan et al., 2000). The research reported here outlines a range of issues pertinent to this agenda, not least in relation to the role and extent of voluntary sector involvement, the nature of voluntary sector representation, and the structural and institutional barriers to effective voluntary sector involvement in local partnerships. The research was commissioned by West Cornwall LSP and contributed towards the development of a local strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal in West Cornwall. This paper explores how local authorities, statutory organisations and community and voluntary groups have negotiated partnership arrangements in the development and delivery of local regeneration strategies, and the issues arising in relation to facilitating effective voluntary and community sector involvement in Neighbourhood Renewal.

2. THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL

Whilst West Cornwall has received funding under most area based regeneration schemes, historically regeneration schemes have often emphasised physical renewal at the expense of creating better opportunities for people and long-term community capacity building. There has thus been a tendency to ‘parachute in’ solutions from outside rather than engaging local communities and building local capacity to act. Historically, regeneration schemes have been

a policy response to urban and especially inner city decline. Deprivation in rural areas tends to be 'hidden' due to the geographical dispersion of rural communities, and the key dimensions of deprivation in rural and urban areas frequently differ. This makes rural deprivation much more difficult to address through standard, 'off the peg' area-based initiatives and solutions. These observations emphasise the importance of harnessing the ideas, knowledge, skills, experience, energy and enthusiasm of local community groups and voluntary sector organisations.

However, in Cornwall as elsewhere voluntary sector organisations have tended to play a marginal role in the development and delivery of local regeneration strategies. Until recently the relationship between local authorities and the voluntary sector has been one of grant aid and marginal involvement (Taylor, 1997). Although the development of a "contract culture" amongst local authorities in the 1990s has increased the prominence of larger voluntary groups in partnership arrangements, our research suggests that effective joint working for community regeneration between statutory and non-statutory sectors remains patchy.

3. METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here are based upon 51 semi-structured interviews with "key stakeholders" in the Neighbourhood Renewal process. The sample was developed with the aim of representing the diversity of views anticipated across different sectors, at different organisational levels, in different localities, and so on. A significant bonus was the contemporaneous timing of the community and voluntary sector conference 'Making it Happen' (November 2001). This event was sponsored by the Government Office South West in order to explore the involvement of the sector in neighbourhood renewal.

The findings are subject to a number of limitations relating primarily to the timescale of the fieldwork. Inevitably, representation of some groups and concerns is stronger than others. Any project of this scope will tend to gain access to more powerful voices at the expense of less powerful groups and interests. More generally, the processes of exclusion and division within the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities need to be recognised as a tension both within this research and especially within the process of neighbourhood renewal (Brent, 1997; Anastacio et al., 2000).

4. KEY FINDINGS

There was considerable agreement between respondents in terms of the institutional and organisational issues which need to be addressed in order to facilitate more effective partnership arrangements between local authorities, other statutory agencies, and voluntary and community groups. These are summarised in Box 1 (below).

Box 1: Obstacles to Effective Partnership Working in Neighbourhood Renewal - Participant's Perspectives

- An imbalance in the capital as against the revenue budgets, and an emphasis upon large scale projects which can leave the more disadvantaged neighbourhoods and groups even further behind
- Difficulties of obtaining matched funding and the complexity, bureaucracy, and lack of transparency of bidding processes, which divert attention from longer term development
- Dangers of fragmentation because of the multiplicity of new initiatives and policies
- Dangers of disillusion and initiative fatigue when consultation and new initiatives do not lead to tangible results for disadvantaged neighbourhoods
- Insufficient proactivity, cooperation and flexibility on the part of some statutory agencies in response to community initiatives
- A focus on 'hard' quantitative targets compared to qualitative goals and long-term community development work in deprived neighbourhoods
- Negative perceptions of community engagement and receptiveness to regeneration initiatives by some statutory partners.

Improving Relations with Statutory Agencies

The idea of partnership between statutory local authorities, service providers, and community and voluntary sector groups is now familiar concept. Both in relation to specific initiatives and as a more general response to local poverty and area decline, local authorities are increasingly playing an 'enabling' role in managing the delivery of services between statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations. However, as Chanan et al. (1999) note, statutory partners need to change attitudes and share information, resources and power with voluntary sector organisations if locally based strategies are to be effective. Different agencies will have different contributions to make depending on the area but all statutory agencies need to be aware of and address the disparities of power between partners and their differing abilities to set agendas within partnerships (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999).

Whilst the statutory sector in West Cornwall does embrace a number of inter-agency mechanisms these are not widely inclusive of the voluntary and community sectors. Moreover, many of the services responding most frequently and directly to disadvantage, such as health and social services, found any diversion of staff resources from front line services towards wider partnership bodies almost impossible to manage. Active involvement in neighbourhood renewal will require a greater commitment from service managers to enable the perspectives of front line staff to be included within partnership arrangements.

Encouraging Community Development

Many respondents referred to a decline in support for community development work in recent years, as regeneration activity was focused away from local development onto funding of large scale, economically orientated projects and wealthier areas. Development agencies in the community and voluntary sector were also concerned that the understanding of community development needed to be reclaimed. Arguably, the increasing emphasis upon

community development in public policy signals a shift in focus away from its role in enabling communities to press for more and better resources and services, and towards its use as a tool to dissipate and manage social disharmony (Pople and Redmond, 2000). The use of the term was seen as having been distorted by the increasing emphasis on economic regeneration at the cost of social regeneration focused upon developing community life, improving local conditions for disadvantaged groups, and empowering residents to achieve greater control over the circumstances and decisions which shape their lives

Community development workers needed to be supported by organisational structures which provide a vehicle for community issues to be expressed and responded to at strategic level. Investment in this type of development work emerged as a significant area where neighbourhood renewal could both promote a more sustained, community-based vision and 'fill in the gaps' left by other regeneration programmes at a neighbourhood level. An increase in community development support at a local level was also seen as addressing the absence of community organisation in some neighbourhoods. Assisting local activists to come together to develop groups and activities on the issues they identify is a key skill in developing community capacity (Mayo, 1994; Pople, 1995; Taylor, 1994). Although there were active groups in some neighbourhoods they needed additional support, and others currently lack any kind of residents' association. The *Community Empowerment Fund* and the *Community Chest* are important resources in facilitating representation and involvement by the community and voluntary sector in this respect. However, neither of these obviate the need for more sustained support for community development at a strategic level.

Accessing Regeneration Funding

The various area based initiatives represent both opportunities and potential dangers arising from further fragmentation. Such schemes can sometimes increase inequalities for the most deprived neighbourhoods. As the government has acknowledged, regeneration policies have often fragmented into small and confusing initiatives that lead to duplication in applying and running separate schemes with subtly different rules that make little sense to those on the ground (SEU, 2000). These observations are especially pertinent to the work of smaller, locally based voluntary and community groups who often lack the resources and capacity to make sense of the complexity of regeneration bidding processes (Anastacio et al., 2000)

Such considerations apply even more to neighbourhoods without significant community organisation. Community development can assist the smallest and least resourced groups to begin to access information, funding and wider networks and opportunities. As a complement to the larger funding programmes, accessible funding schemes need to be developed which do not require complex procedures and matched funding (see eg. Duncan and Thomas, 1999). This can assist small projects which, in turn, can begin to make tangible improvements in communities and promote further engagement.

Challenging Images of Community

Low aspirations, limited horizons and mistrust of service providers amongst residents in 'deprived' neighbourhoods were frequently cited as significant obstacles to effective social regeneration. In this view, these problems were associated with difficulties in sustaining widespread public involvement in community initiatives, limited support for community organisations and representative mechanisms, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

However, there were also challenges to this dominant view. Neighbourhood and residents group activists often expressed very high aspirations for their neighbourhood - aspirations

which did not always mesh with the agendas of statutory agencies and local authorities. Some respondents referred to the damaging impact of a 'culture of blame' and the stigmatisation of 'deprived' areas. As Dean and Hastings (2000) argue, regeneration initiatives themselves can sometimes contribute to the continuing 'problem' image of poor communities. It was argued that the most marginalised communities may need to be facilitated to express their anger about longstanding experiences of neglect before they can engage more positively with regeneration initiatives.

There was also a widespread perception that the contribution of the voluntary and community sectors were insufficiently valued as a vehicle for stimulating public engagement with the regeneration agenda. Some respondents felt that voluntary services, especially in rural areas, could be relied on inappropriately as substitutes for statutory services. Others considered that the contribution of volunteering to community social development was not adequately recognised and supported. The value of volunteers' time, especially in consultation forums, was not always acknowledged and recompensed. As has been argued elsewhere (eg. Purdue et al., 2000), volunteers need additional financial support and training if their involvement in regeneration partnerships is to be effective.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the past area-based initiatives have often focused upon economic regeneration at the expense of long-term social and community development work in poor neighbourhoods. This legacy has erected institutional barriers to effective community and voluntary sector involvement which are yet to be resolved. Resourcing effective voluntary and community sector engagement is essential since many voluntary groups lack the resources to engage fully with partnership agendas and bidding processes. However, addressing asymmetries of power requires not simply additional resources but also significant shifts in the institutional cultures of partnership organisations with a core commitment to community involvement (Duncan and Thomas, 1999).

Representing the diversity of community and voluntary organisations in terms of the nature, scale and support needs of groups is a key challenge. However, it should be acknowledged that the diversity of community and voluntary sector interests cannot be adequately represented within the LSP framework. Still less should such representation be viewed as a definitive expression of the very diverse needs, views and perspectives of local communities. This is especially pertinent in relation to the representation of socially marginalised groups assumed to be amongst the key beneficiaries of community regeneration. In this situation there is a danger that community and voluntary groups will become a focus of unrealistic expectations on the part of partnership organisations concerning their capacity to speak for local people. The representation of community and voluntary groups is not a substitute for longer term community development initiatives. Whilst there is now widespread recognition of the importance of community based approaches in regeneration, in practice partners often retain closer links to major institutional networks than to community organisations. Potentially this can undermine public confidence in their priorities and plans, placing participating voluntary organisation in an invidious position.

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