Changing neighbourhoods

The impact of 'light touch' support in 20 communities

The past ten years have seen a range of new policies to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest of society – in England, Scotland and Wales. All these programmes have emphasised the need to engage citizens at neighbourhood level in achieving change. It was against this background that, in 2002, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) launched its Neighbourhood Programme to support community groups and organisations in 20 neighbourhoods across the three countries. This summary, written by the team evaluating the programme, highlights the key findings from the four-year programme.

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The findings at a glance

The JRF Neighbourhood Programme provided the opportunity to test out a 'light touch' approach to supporting groups at neighbourhood level. It also provided an insight into the experience of 20 very different organisations working in a range of different national and local settings. As significant new policy initiatives are developed by the administrations in the three countries, this experience has important lessons for the future of effective and sustainable community engagement at neighbourhood level. The programme evaluation found that:

- **Sustainable neighbourhood-based organisations** are vital to effective community engagement. If the intention to engage communities at neighbourhood level is to become reality, local authorities and the key strategic partnerships in England, Scotland and Wales need to have a community development strategy that maps existing resources and commits local and regional bodies to providing 'light touch' and more intensive support as circumstances require.

- A low level of continuous **'light touch'** support can make a real difference to neighbourhood groups. The 'light touch' support provided through the JRF programme illustrates the value of giving neighbourhood organisations access to:

    - a facilitator: someone who is 'on their side' and to whom they can turn for ideas, support and when things go wrong;

    - credit: small amounts of unrestricted money can make a big difference, particularly to smaller community groups and those just starting out;

    - networking opportunities: there is a confidence and status that comes from finding out your experience is shared with others;

    - help with action planning: even the smallest of community groups benefited from support to review local needs and opportunities, map out their future and reflect on past achievements and difficulties;

    - a broker who can mediate with other organisations and agencies if necessary and unblock relationships with power-holders such as the local authority.

- More intensive **community development support** is needed where there is a long history of disadvantage, where there is a fragmented community and where there is a major change at community level e.g. as a result of regeneration programmes. It will also be needed where there are pockets of disadvantage in more affluent areas, which are often hidden from view and where there has been little previous investment.

Cover photo: Community work in St Pauls, Bristol: Neighbourhood Renewal facilitator Lyn Sharry shares a joke with a resident.

■ The pace and complexity of policy change is demanding for communities that are already stressed. **A responsive and engaged public sector culture** is one which:

- builds a percentage for participation into all its neighbourhood strategies;

- recognises that flexibility and realistic timescales are needed if local resources are to be used effectively;

- rewards officers who are prepared to take risks;

- ensures that neighbourhood structures make sense to the people living there;

- provides opportunities for formal and informal learning between public agencies and local communities.

■ A wide **range of agencies** can make this agenda a reality:

- national and regional government who can set standards, encourage flexibility and champion tried and tested ways of working;

- local government infrastructure bodies who can promote and support a responsive and engaged public sector culture;

- third sector infrastructure bodies who can provide the skills and advice to support sustainable neighbourhood organisations and champion the community sector at different levels of government;

- registered social landlords and others who play key roles at neighbourhood level;

- community anchor organisations: experienced community organisations with skills and knowledge to share.

Turn inside to read more about the programme and the lessons learned during the last four years.

The policy agenda

Over the past ten years, policy-makers across Britain have made a concerted attempt to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest of society. The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal in England grew out of New Labour's commitment to minimise social exclusion while social justice has been a hallmark of the programmes of the devolved Scottish and Welsh administrations. Common to all three administrations is a commitment to empowerment and partnership – engaging the people living in these neighbourhoods in the process of change.

As policy has evolved, this commitment has remained, although there have been changes in emphasis. First in Scotland and then in England, there has been a shift from specially targeted central government funding initiatives to an approach where the needs of these neighbourhoods are to be met within a more comprehensive framework for local government – in England, the Local Area Agreement; in Scotland, Community Planning. In Wales, where the approach has been less target-driven, with more of a developmental, capacity-building approach across a larger number of neighbourhoods, the central government special initiative remains, although here, too, a new policy of Local Service Agreements is being introduced.

The Neighbourhood Programme

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has a long history of influencing social policy through research and debate. Between 1992 and 2000, through its Action on Estates and Area Regeneration Programmes, it funded nearly 100 studies of neighbourhood renewal initiatives across the UK. Following these initiatives, it took the decision to move into practice development and test out how it could use its research to support neighbourhoods to

New housing developed as part of the regeneration of Norfolk Park, Sheffield.

benefit from the new opportunities in neighbourhood renewal and beyond. The result was the Neighbourhood Programme, which worked with 20 community-based organisations across England, Scotland and Wales to help them to achieve their aims at neighbourhood level. The groups were at very different stages of development, from very small, unfunded community groups to very large neighbourhood organisations with budgets running to millions. The idea was to offer support not through major funding but through a range of 'light touch' resources and to build a 'learning network' through which the organisations could share experience and support each other.

Box 1: The programme offered the following resources:

- facilitation: through five highly experienced independent facilitators who had between 15 and 30 days to spend with the group over three years;
- credit: through a small funding pot of between £5,000 and £10,000 that the groups could spend at their own discretion over three years;
- access to information: through the facilitators, the programme manager and a programme website;
- networking: through a twice-yearly event which brought all the participating organisations together and occasional regional workshops to share experience.

As the programme developed, other elements were added or became significant:

- action planning: introducing a number of groups to the value of regular planning and review;
- mediation and brokerage: the support of the facilitator and/or JRF personnel to address problems in the relationship with the local authority or other local organisations;
- kite marking: groups being able to use the JRF name to promote their profile locally;
- four 'joint projects': a thematic cross-neighbourhood approach to four issues highlighted by the 20 neighbourhoods in the programme (community engagement, funding, diversity, working with power-holders);
- dissemination: giving groups on the programme a national platform and using the experience of the programme to discuss the challenges of neighbourhood working with policy-makers from local and central government in the three countries.

The programme not only provided an opportunity to test out new ways of supporting local community-based organisations. It also provided a unique opportunity to track the progress of 20 very different organisations, operating in very different contexts, over a period of four years – providing a 'bird's eye view' of what happens in neighbourhoods.

Who was on the programme

Twenty neighbourhood-based organisations were chosen to provide a diverse sample across the three countries: four projects in each of Scotland, Wales and three English regions: Yorkshire and Humber, West Midlands and South West England. The organisations were at different stages of development and based in different types of neighbourhood – some were community led; others had paid workers. They ranged from informal groups of volunteers to well established organisations with 70+ employees. Some had experience of neighbourhood renewal initiatives; others were small pockets of deprivation in more affluent areas.

What happens in neighbourhoods: the challenges groups face

The participating organisations identified a number of common challenges at the outset of the programme. These were:

- local knowledge and analysis;
- engaging with the wider community;
- organisational capacity and leadership;
- divisions and fragmentation within the neighbourhood;
- lack of influence with local power-holders;
- difficulties in securing sustainable funding.

Local knowledge and analysis

Community planning and review encourages neighbourhood organisations to become more strategic and gives them more credibility when dealing with decision-makers. Yet relatively few organisations pay attention to planning unless it is a funding requirement. The programme introduced 'action planning' as a tool to help the participating organisations reflect on what they were really about, to understand the context in which they were working and to determine short (one year) and

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Box 2: The neighbourhoods that took part

ENGLAND

South West
- Broad Street Community Council/Broadgreen Organisation for Neighbourhood Development, Swindon;
- Boscombe Working Community Partnership, Bournemouth;
- St Pauls Unlimited Community Partnership, Bristol;
- Tamar Development Trust, Plymouth.

West Midlands
- Canley Residents Action Group, Coventry;
- Castle Vale Housing Action Trust, Birmingham;
- Oak Crescent Residents Group, Pickersleigh Ward, Malvern;
- Lodge Farm Community Network, Dudley.

Yorkshire and Humber
- Boothtown Partnership, Halifax;
- Eastfield Neighbourhood Partnership (Eastfield PACT), Scarborough;
- Integrate, Todmorden;
- Norfolk Park Community Forum, Sheffield.

SCOTLAND
- Empowering Communities Group, East Renfrewshire;
- Pilton Partnership, Edinburgh;
- East Pollokshields Community Planning Partnership, Glasgow;
- Skypoint/Faifley Neighbourhood Forum, Clydebank.

WALES
- Caia Park Partnership, Wrexham;
- Gellideg Foundation Group, Merthyr Tydfil;
- Llanharan Community Development Project, Rhondda Cynon Taff;
- Ty Sign Local Communities Partnership, Caerphilly.

longer-term (three years) priorities. It was also a means by which JRF could assess the needs and progress of organisations.

At the start, some of the participants were resistant to action planning. However, smaller organisations in particular came to the view that using the action plan as a basis for annual review was an extremely valuable process. They reported that it *"sets your sights on something"* and that without it they *"wouldn't have had anything to judge progress"*. Many now intend to keep their action planning process going after the end of the programme.

Engaging with the wider local community
Government's commitment to community engagement is very welcome but it places high expectations on what are often fragile groups and organisations. If it is to work, these groups and organisations need to be able to call on a large enough pool of active residents. This increases the energies and resources available to an organisation; it ensures that the organisation is responding to local needs and aspirations; it gives the organisation legitimacy when it is dealing with outsiders; and it ensures that engagement is not dominated by one or two individuals, however well-intentioned. But involving people is not easy. Small organisations often lack the confidence to go out and engage more people – they may not know how to do it, or they may not see the need if they are essentially social groups. Spreading involvement is also important for larger, more successful community organisations, so that they do not lose touch with their roots as they become more professionalised. For many organisations, reaching out to young people was a particular priority – to bridge the generation gap and foster the active citizens of the future.

Box 3: Spreading involvement

The programme provides examples of several familiar ways of spreading involvement:

- **Celebratory events** in the neighbourhood get the organisation known and get more people involved. Broad Street, Boothtown and Integrate have all held successful multicultural events with food and dance.
- **Local community buildings** provide a visible focus for the neighbourhood and bring people into the organisation.
  Ty Sign Local Communities Partnership, a very small, estate-based community group when the programme started, developed a community shop/café in a row of shops as a focal point for the community.
- **Open space** also provides a visible focus and clearing up a local park can provide a safe public space for people to gather together.
  St Pauls Unlimited worked with the council to clean up and reclaim their local park from the drugs trade and to foster greater mixing between members of different communities.
- **Street representatives** provide a link between the organisation and local residents.
  In Malvern, residents were encouraged to host informal meetings in their front rooms with the idea that each meeting would identify at least one person willing to provide street level input to the local Operational and Strategy Group.
- **Community newsletters** are a good way of getting in touch with people, and organisations in the programme were particularly interested in learning how to set one up.
  In East Pollokshields, a community newspaper was set up as a local social enterprise to generate jobs and income for the community. The aim is to roll out this model more widely if it works.
- **Youth forums** have been one effective way of involving young people.
  In Boothtown, a Youth Forum set up by two community members now has 100 young people on its register.

How to pull in the crowds: Boothtown Festival shows the way.

A shop in the heart of East Pollokshields, Glasgow.

Some of these methods come with health warnings. Community buildings can be a millstone if they need too much maintenance and renovation. Community newspapers can be highly variable in quality and difficult to maintain – they need expertise and resources.

Organisational capacity
The examples below illustrate how people learn and gain confidence through being involved at neighbourhood level.

One young person spoke about the leadership skills he had developed: organising events, leading the youth group and representing young people as chair of the council's Youth Forum. Now he is getting other young people involved in the group.

> "As a young person I've become more mature. I'm seen as a bit of a role model for others now. They treat me like a local councillor sometimes."

Another person described how he changed from being a fairly passive person, who found it difficult to strike up a conversation, to being much more assertive, with the confidence to speak in a plenary session at a JRF national networking event.

Nonetheless organisational and leadership development are a major challenge for neighbourhood organisations. But while organisational failures, lack of strategic capacity and failure to engage effectively in partnership are often blamed on a lack of leadership, few resources are invested in building this capacity. Supporting board and committee members to lead and supporting paid workers to manage were therefore major tasks for the facilitators. Growth was another challenge. Groups are often unprepared for the considerable responsibilities that go with employment and the change in dynamics that employing people creates locally. There are many guidelines to help them recruit, but few to help them to manage staff and performance. Some of the organisations on the programme also ran into financial difficulties and this emphasised the importance of effective auditing systems – where finances are concerned, trust is not always enough.

Working with diversity
Policy-makers often speak of the need to develop 'social capital' in communities, on the assumption that community ties are weak. But many communities do have these strong bonding ties already. What they lack is the 'bridging' social capital that builds ties across social groups/communities, both within a neighbourhood and between neighbourhoods.

Box 4: Building bridges in neighbourhoods

The programme team found a variety of creative activities that were building bridges between different groups at neighbourhood level:

- **celebratory events** were important in bridging ethnic and generational divides;
- **targeted services** were reaching out directly to marginalised groups, eg. Caia Park Partnership used digital technology to bring together Polish, Portuguese, Chinese, Czech and other isolated families;
- **formal partnerships** were being built to bridge communities, eg. in Swindon, Broadgreen Organisation for Neighbourhood Development (BOND) was set up to bring people together from a range of ethnic groups to collectively tackle common issues; East Pollokshields Planning Partnership was established specifically to work with diversity and community cohesion issues.

Integrate in Todmorden used a survey of local Asian families not only to find out what they wanted for their own community but also to connect them with existing groups and help them to feel part of the wider community.

Caia Park Partnership has been providing English language courses and bilingual advice for new migrants, which are attended by over 70 Polish and Portuguese people. People from all over Wrexham came to CPP because the Polish people who lived in Caia felt comfortable there and recommended it. CPP also provides interpretation and translation services and helps with signing up children to schools.

Organisations were also building equal opportunities into their own practice e.g. Castle Vale Community Housing Association has appointed an equalities and diversity co-ordinator to help engage a range of groups in partnership work and service delivery.

Despite the policy commitment to community engagement, this programme echoes the findings from too many other initiatives before it: that many community organisations still feel marginalised in partnerships with statutory authorities and agencies. The need for more recognition from power-holders was top of the agenda for many organisations in the programme.

While there is genuine commitment in principle to community engagement in parts of the public sector, this is by no means universal. As the English Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, states: *"The best councils and councillors already work closely with citizens and communities – we want this to be the case everywhere."*

Some local authorities have made huge strides in terms of engaging communities, but in others, institutional and bureaucratic structures, cultures and practices create obstacles to partnership working and genuine community empowerment. And good relationships are often dependent on individual allies. In the end, implementation will only be as good as the weakest link. One programme participant remarked on *"the continuing failure of public authorities to understand how communities operate (with all their complexity and confusion) and for them (local authorities) to adapt their ways of working to be more*

responsive, more generous and more trusting towards community members".

There are lessons for central government here too. One organisation described its early days as a "huge power struggle" for control between the government funder, the accountable body and community interests. The pace of policy change also puts considerable pressure on relationships between community organisations and their funders or local power-holders. In some neighbourhoods, several government initiatives were competing for local attention and participation. Another problem for many programme participants was the lack of opportunity to have a strategic voice. Even where relationships with local councillors were good, groups often lacked influence over decisions at the city-wide level.

Keeping the organisation going

This programme has provided a unique opportunity to observe the life cycles of organisations. Groups ebb and flow, sometimes developing organically and sometimes struggling to keep going in the face of external pressures. Many individual participants felt that they and their organisations had gained immensely in confidence and capacity during the life of the programme. But four of the 20 organisations failed to survive in their original form until the end of the programme and one will come to an end shortly. This is not always a disaster – in this last case, the organisation is winding up because it has done its job and in another of the four neighbourhoods, the demise of one group opens the way for a new, broader organisation to be set up. But in two other cases, failure to survive because of internal and external pressures represents an enormous waste of energy, local knowledge, commitment and learning.

Not surprisingly, funding and fund-raising were identified by most projects as central concerns. A big theme within action plans has been the need to secure and develop community assets as a means of increasing sustainability.

What helps?

'Light touch' support can make a hefty contribution
The rationale for the Neighbourhood Programme was to test out an approach to supporting community empowerment and 'better' partnership working with public bodies that rested not on an intensive funding programme but on 'light touch' support and networking.

The programme was able to demonstrate the potential of a small pot of flexible funding, a little mentoring from

a trusted 'critical friend' and the opportunity to meet with other neighbourhood organisations across the three countries – at a cost of roughly £7,500 per neighbourhood per year. In neighbourhoods that experienced poverty and fragmentation but were not targeted by a regeneration programme of some kind, this was often the only means of support. Indeed, the programme not only demonstrated the value of supporting organisations; it was also a lifeline for some isolated community workers, to help them better support residents in their neighbourhood. But there are some factors which are critical to making light touch support effective:

- Firstly, it needs to fall within someone's role. Some leadership is important in championing the light touch approach and ensuring that it is well co-ordinated and managed.
- Secondly, it is not the answer to everything. In the programme there was a threshold below which more intensive support was needed and a ceiling above which the programme offered little added value. Light touch support needs therefore to be part of a more comprehensive community development strategy which underpins public sector commitments to active citizenship, community engagement and empowerment, and partnership between communities and public agencies.

Subject to this, as policy shifts from the targeting of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods to more universal approaches, this light touch method is likely to have an increasingly important contribution to make as part of a package of support to neighbourhood working.

The 'light touch' in action: facilitator Jenny Lynn with representatives from Boothtown Community Partnership.

Knowing where you want to go

All organisations benefit from the process of collectively reviewing where they have got to, recognising achievement and focusing on priorities for future development. The programme found that no group or organisation was too small to carry out action planning and that, with support, it was an opportunity to broaden involvement and ownership. In most cases, the action planning process was short, 2-3 hours maximum, and as participative and fun as possible. It was important that people saw it as relevant to them and felt able to contribute to it.

However, the term 'action planning' can put people off – it can sound too formal a process for a small community group. The initial resistance to action planning from some of the neighbourhood organisations suggests that it is more likely to work if it is:

- introduced sensitively by someone the organisation already trusts, rather than simply being imposed;
- tailored to the organisation, so that it can be realistic, relevant and fit for purpose;
- owned by more than just one or two people; it is a valuable way of involving the whole committee and staff team;
- fits with other demands on the organisation: larger organisations may be overwhelmed by a several funders all asking for different action plans, so the purpose of yet another needs to be clear.

Trusted allies

For most participants, it was access to facilitators that was the strength of the programme. The design of the programme ensured that relationships could be built over time – there was no 'staff turnover'. The facilitators supported capacity building and organisational development, encouraged groups to grow and broaden their membership, helped to establish organisational systems, signposted organisations to further sources of information and useful contacts, and helped groups to plan more strategically. They variously operated as mentor, a critical friend, a mediator and an independent broker as required.

The five facilitators worked on a regional basis and were selected for their knowledge and expertise. They thus brought with them status and credibility with external actors in and beyond their region. Although contracted to the programme, the facilitators were not JRF employees and this arm's length management approach gave them a highly valued degree of independence from the programme.

Each region had its own facilitator. There were one or two cases where the match did not work, but generally, the facilitators thought that the regional allocation was preferable to a 'pooled' approach, mixing and matching skills and approaches across the three countries, because it allowed for the development of a long-term relationship between facilitator and organisation. This low key support role is different from the consultancy roles the facilitators played elsewhere and illustrates that neighbourhoods often require, and benefit from, something different from either an occasional 'trouble-shooting' intervention or a more high-powered, change-agent approach:

> "… the facilitator role is more active and closer to the action. It is a more measured approach."

> "This model is about building supportive tissue … limited but tenacious light touch support."

The fact that they had a general rather than specialist brief was also important – they were not put in by a funder to solve a particular problem. Facilitators suggest that in order to make the process work as effectively as possible, 8-10 days a year would probably be the minimum time commitment.

Peer support – learning from other neighbourhoods

The development of a learning network for community organisations was always at the heart of the programme. For many of the programme participants, attending events and conferences was unfamiliar – they had rarely had either the opportunity to do this before or the support and encouragement to help them feel comfortable and confident enough to benefit. Indeed, these events provided a launchpad for further networking opportunities – groups have visited each other, successful networking events have been held at regional level and some of the neighbourhood groups have presented at, as well as participated in, other national conferences.

> "We started off really nervous, but built confidence and made friends at the networking events and the convention too. Two years later we will go anywhere."

JRF organised two national networking events a year over the life of the programme, two-day events which alternated between midweek and weekends. These were mostly devoted to interaction between programme participants but with occasional outside speakers who contributed expertise and additional information to stimulate thinking and follow up discussion between programme participants. The success of the events was

opportunity to feedback to JRF their experience of the programme and how it was working, and to see how others were using the programme.

Despite the overall success of the networking opportunities, groups often found it difficult to justify taking time out away from their neighbourhood. Sustaining these links and relationships in the absence of resources for a network – or the personnel to organise, encourage and inspire organisations to participate – will pose a considerable challenge.

A friend at court

As the programme developed, the potential for the Foundation to act as an 'honest broker' when difficulties arose – either within neighbourhoods or between neighbourhood organisations and power-holders – became more and more apparent. 'Brokerage' developed as a significant element of the programme. It was used where:

■ a local authority gave very short notice for the withdrawal of substantial amounts of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, without observing due process;
■ a local authority responded to a new national programme by setting up a completely new partnership, despite the existence of a well-functioning partnership in the neighbourhood already;
■ an organisation in the programme was one of three separate government-funded initiatives in the neighbourhood that were not working together effectively;
■ past difficulties appeared to be impeding effective collaboration between the local authority, developers, the community and other agencies in a local regeneration programme.

Delegates enjoy a workshop at one of the Neighbourhood Programme's national networking events.

in part due to the relationships that were built over a period of time – at each event participants formed closer links with other organisations, often based on common interests and activities. Despite some misgivings from participants at the outset and despite different policy contexts, it made little difference whether organisations were from Wales, Scotland or England. Indeed, the Welsh and South West regions joined forces for a series of very successful regional events. The challenges that groups faced were the same – how to get more people involved, how to get the group on a firmer footing with the council, how to access funding for buildings, how to engage young people, etc.

"A five-minute conversation while queuing for coffee can be very productive!"

In addition, the networking events provided an opportunity for the neighbourhood organisations, the facilitators and JRF to get on with particular pieces of work while they were together. They also gave neighbourhoods the

Box 5: The value of brokerage

In **Caia Park**, the sometimes uneasy relationship between the Caia Park Partnership and the new Communities First Partnership led to a series of meetings between the main community agencies in the neighbourhood. The facilitator prepared for these by sounding out partners in advance and preparing a report on their views. The three agencies drew up an agreed protocol for joint working. Amongst other things, this protocol ensured that each partner signing up to the protocol would consult on any new initiative that was likely to have an impact on others. In time the precise clauses of the protocol become largely irrelevant – it was the process of negotiating and working together that was most important.

Sometimes brokerage involved senior JRF players in high-profile meetings between the stakeholders; sometimes the facilitator adopted a more 'softly, softly' approach. Either way, it was essential to prepare the ground and success depended both on the clarity of the next steps for all stakeholders and keeping the local organisation at the centre of negotiations.

Brokerage is not the answer to everything. Difficulties remain in some of the neighbourhoods where brokerage took place and it is difficult to define success. Mediation is seldom a 'quick fix' – it is a process that requires ongoing support and relationship building between the parties concerned. What is important is that projects can call on someone they trust to help unblock some of the obstacles they face.

If the neighbourhood agenda is to be effective, it needs to be part of the culture of local authorities and other public bodies. As part of the Neighbourhood Programme, three events were held with local authority chief executives, leaders and other senior staff under the banner of 'Bringing "Neighbourhood" Centre Stage'. In Scotland and Wales, other public and community organisations also attended. These provided an opportunity for local authorities and others to explore the role for neighbourhoods in local governance and the links between neighbourhood regeneration and service delivery.

There are inevitable tensions between existing power structures and community organisations who want to maintain the right to challenge as well as find ways of working with decision-makers and service-providers for the benefit of the community. And it is important to emphasise that there were examples in the programme of people within public authorities championing change, recognising that power grows when it is shared – to the benefit of both the policy-makers and communities. Relationships undoubtedly improved in a number of neighbourhoods.

Working well together

The evidence from the programme suggests that community groups as well as power-holders need to be challenged if relationships are to change at neighbourhood level. It echoes experience elsewhere in finding that there are some people or groups stuck in a negative mindset (*"seen it all, done it all and nothing works"*) or acting as a block to wider engagement, while some organisations have such formal representative structures that nothing gets done. One organisation in the programme decided to abandon its moribund processes and to get a group of 'dynamo' people together from different groups to make things happen. The result is a new group of people reflecting different communities, who all have an interest in finding their common ground and tackling neighbourhood issues and with others.

Working well together in Eastfield: resident Chris Parson chairs a meeting of Scarborough's Eastfield Partnership, which brings together community and statutory partners.

A housing officer in Castle Vale, Birmingham, where a community-based housing association spearheads neighbourhood developments.

Flexible programme development

Finding the balance between running a coherent programme and allowing for a flexible approach to meet the needs of all stakeholders is a challenge many policy-makers and programme delivery agencies will recognise.

Box 6: Working well together

In **Boothtown**, the chief executive has sanctioned a 'community engagement working group' of senior officers to foster joint working with communities, across departmental boundaries. Those officers who work closely with the Boothtown Partnership feel that it genuinely empowers them.

In **Pilton**, housing officers and community activists are engaged in joint training; in **Boscombe**, a 'job swap' scheme found a council chief executive taking a temporary post as a frontline worker; in Plymouth, the **Tamar Development Trust** provided a secondment opportunity for a local authority manager.

In **Eastfield**, the local organisation felt that its association with JRF had put the neighbourhood on the radar of the local authority and moved it from being 'nowhere' to being seriously considered as the place to pilot neighbourhood management.

Many participants felt that the programme's flexibility was a considerable strength. It allowed a variable degree of access to programme resources, depending on the needs of the participating organisations. For example, some organisations received more time from a facilitator than others, some received a bit more cash help than others, and in the early days there was some trading off between these two sets of resources – giving up some of one to get a bit of another.

The cash help, or credit, as it was known, could be used flexibly in response to the needs of the organisation; there were no strings attached and it wasn't tied to a financial year. Equally, the facilitators could use their judgement to determine the balance between doing and enabling in each situation. In this way, the programme was able to recognise different starting points, and allow the flexibility for a group to change direction and to call on a different kind of help. Few funding programmes offer this latitude. The Foundation itself underestimated the time needed to 'get the show on the road' but was able to respond positively by extending the programme's life while retaining the budget ceiling. This flexible response proved very productive.

What this means for policy and for practice

Policies have been promoting a new relationship between the public sector and those active in neighbourhoods for some time. But the 'how' of making this happen still seems to elude many public sector bodies. So what will make community engagement policy stick at the neighbourhood level?

The experience of the programme suggests that engaging communities fully in the services and decisions that affect their lives requires:

Sustainable community-based organisations
- a strong base of participation;
- the capacity to engage with the diversity of local communities;
- effective leadership and accountability;
- a strategic plan with effective management systems;
- sustainable funding.

A responsive and engaged public sector culture
Structures for neighbourhood working that are real to the people who live there, backed up by:
- support and incentives for officers working at neighbourhood level;
- informal opportunities for learning and dialogue between public authorities and local residents;
- allowing the time for things to work;
- resources for brokerage.

These requirements need to be encouraged and reinforced by government agencies who interact with local authorities and other agencies in the implementation of nationally agreed policies and priorities.

A community development strategy
The stated policy intention to engage communities and citizens in decision-making and service provision at neighbourhood level needs to be part of a broader community development strategy at regional and local level, which encompasses community empowerment, civic engagement and organisational development, as highlighted recently in England in *The Community Development Challenge (Communities and Local Government, 2006).* This should map the existing resources and assets available to community organisations at neighbourhood level and identify resources for:

- intensive support to those neighbourhoods that need it;
- a percentage for participation – to enable groups to engage and to invest in the infrastructure;

- light touch support across local neighbourhoods – facilitation; small grants; networking opportunities; access to information;
- adequate support for local community workers;
- a package of explicit support and incentives for public sector players, including councillors, to work alongside communities and to harness community knowledge, experience and energy;
- facilities for brokerage: a place to go when things go wrong.

Some of the organisations that could provide light touch support include:

- government offices at regional level in England and national government in Scotland and Wales, through a network of neighbourhood advisers based on the model of neighbourhood renewal advisers in England, but with more flexibility to work developmentally with community-based organisations at neighbourhood level;

- The Academy for Sustainable Communities (England), the Scottish Regeneration Centre and Regional Centres of Excellence – action learning sets (learning groups that explore solutions to problems) and mentoring opportunities are already being developed in some regions;

- the third sector and community sector infrastructure (with support from Capacitybuilders in England, Communities First in Wales – through the Communities First Support Network – and Communities Scotland);

- community anchor organisations – experienced community organisations with skills and knowledge to share;

- registered social landlords.

> ### Box 7: Providing light touch support
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> In **Pickersleigh, Malvern**, where community engagement is very fragile and resources for community development are few and far between, the support of the local housing association has been critical in increasing local confidence and supporting the local authority's lone community worker.

Other bodies are also well-placed to contribute to a light touch package, for example:

- infrastructure organisations in the public sector (supporting public authorities to engage effectively);
- community foundations (for credit).

In addition to the above recommendations for a community development strategy:

- Neighbourhoods need to have a real identity for those living and working there and should be designed with communities to ensure they make sense to people and allow for optimum involvement.

- Partners need to have realistic expectations of community participation, especially in neighbourhoods where people are struggling to survive.

- New opportunities for participation should take account of other local initiatives and ensure that demands for community participation are streamlined. Care needs to be taken not to overburden neighbourhoods with forums, committees and partnerships.

- Capacity building is needed across all sectors to drive the culture change required to implement the neighbourhoods agenda – this should include joint training with community organisations, job swaps and secondments.

- Effective engagement with communities also needs to be incentivised and rewarded through performance management systems, Local Area Agreements and promotion systems.

- As there is more and more encouragement to transfer services to the third sector, funders need to be aware of the challenges of growth – of employing staff and taking on greater financial obligations, to observe Compact principles (a Compact is an agreement between public bodies and the voluntary and community sector, giving a framework for working together in a spirit of trust and respect) and to be prepared to support smaller groups in particular to handle these challenges.

- Encouraging groups to plan is important but funders should be flexible in their requirements for strategic and business plans. Otherwise, groups will be trying to work to a range of different plans, to suit the needs of a whole range of funders.

What this means for community organisations and workers
- Action planning is a worthwhile investment of time as it helps organisations to focus on community agendas in the face of pressures to keep pace with different policy initiatives.

- Widening community involvement and finding new ways of involving community members are essential if groups are to be taken seriously by power-holders. If power sticks with a few people, groups lose credibility. Create a variety of ways in. Encourage people with energy to get on and do things. A positive and active culture is infectious.

- Identify opportunities to network with other organisations like yours as a way of learning what works and finding ways through difficulties and seemingly intractable problems. Infrastructure organisations can help with this.

- Be careful about how much you can handle. Clarify the risks, build group skills and identify appropriate support mechanisms before taking on big responsibilities such as paid workers, asset bases and enterprise development.

- It is essential to have financial checks and balances in place. Trust is never enough. It is also important to look for help when employing staff, especially if you have never done it before, so that you know your legal responsibilities and have someone who can help if things go wrong.

What this means for government at national and regional level
- New policies need to take into account existing demands on local authorities and community groups to ensure that they do not cut across existing good practice.

- Community engagement needs to be built into Local Area Agreements, Community Plans and Public Service Agreements in a meaningful way.

- Civil servants who are involved in negotiating these agreements need to be trained to ensure that this happens and to ensure that community development strategies are in place and fit for purpose.

- Continue to support the community sector infrastructure to champion the interests of community-based organisations within government and with the full range of public bodies.

The new Communities England will need to take these principles on board and ensure its ways of working are both consistent with and encourage local community development strategies.

Photos: The pictures from St Pauls, Norfolk Park, Broad Street, Eastfield and East Polokshields were taken by Kippa Matthews; all other pictures are from the neighbourhoods in the programme.

For more information

The full report, **Changing neighbourhoods: lessons from the JRF Neighbourhood Programme** by Marilyn Taylor, Mandy Wilson, Derrick Purdue and Pete Wilde, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 978-1-86134-977-4, price £15.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

Printed copies from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN, Tel: 01235 465500, Fax: 01235 465556, email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk. (Please add £2.75 p&p for first book and 50p per book thereafter.)

Also available on www.jrf.org.uk are four short summaries from joint projects that were carried out as part of the Neighbourhood Programme, focusing on *Community engagement and community leadership, Funding, Diversity* and *Being taken seriously by power-holders*.

Read more at www.jrf.org.uk

Other formats available. Tel: 01904 615905, Email: info@jrf.org.uk

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