

Headlines from Community Think Tank

A New Deal for neighbourhood renewal – How can residents help make it work?

Held at Trafford Hall on 4th-5th July 2017

1. Demolition is not the only option

- There is often an assumption that estate regeneration is about demolition and rebuild – reflecting the thinking that a clean slate approach can solve all social, environmental and community problems. In reality, **there are several options to neighbourhood renewal**, ranging from refurbishment and retrofit, to infill development and refurbishment, to partial demolition/partial refurbishment, or a mix of the above.
- Poverty is not a direct cause of social problems though they are sometimes related. The idea that ‘concentrated poverty’ in social housing estates leads to social problems and anti-social behaviour drives demolition decisions, but there are other, possibly more effective ways of dealing with social problems than total clearance, such as visible street policing, on-site management, pro-active youth organising etc. Many estates, built for social housing, are extremely low income but work well, are well managed and popular with residents. Low incomes and social problems do not necessarily mean an estate cannot be made to work.
- **There is no one-size-fits-all solution** to the problems of decay, and the approach needs to be tailored to the particular estate and to local conditions. Regeneration decisions should not be based on preconceived ideas but on a careful, transparent, even-handed cost-benefit assessment. It is possible to build a model of sustainable regeneration that takes into account social and economic factors, the advantages and full costs of demolition, alongside realistic timescales, rehousing issues, tenants and leaseholders’ views, demand for social housing (current and future), affordability of ‘affordable’ rents on new property etc. There are several examples of **successful estate refurbishment schemes to high-energy efficiency standards** that have delivered better homes, better community facilities and opportunities for local people.
- **Estate decay is not the residents’ responsibility.** It is often made worse by the **lack of ongoing maintenance and weak local management.** Asset maintenance is an ongoing process in order to address the inevitable wear and tear of rented homes. Without this, estate conditions can spiral out of control. The ‘broken windows’ theory – that multiple small signs of neglect and abuse lead to chaotic conditions and a rise in crime – has been shown to apply in housing areas that are allowed to decay.
- Estate Management Boards and Tenant Management Organisations provide a **model of tenant-led management, and offer some valuable lessons in regeneration.** **Community-led regeneration schemes** are usually successful because resident involvement in the decision-making leads to more gentle and more sustainable regeneration plans, specially devised to address community needs.

2. Social conditions are important

- **Social outcomes are integral to a well thought-out and successful regeneration.** Regeneration in its broader sense has the aim of improving homes for residents (current and future) while strengthening communities and improving education, job and training prospects for local people. Meeting social regeneration goals is more difficult in London and the South East where regeneration often happens in partnership with private developers who have aim to maximise the value of their for-sale rehousing and do not find it easy to deal with a legacy of rehousing low-income social tenants as part of their plan.

- **Community concerns should be the starting point** of any regeneration proposal. It is only by listening to tenants' worries that problems can be tackled in a timely and effective manner. Regular door-knocking helps maintain a clear and accurate picture of people's individual circumstances.

3. Community involvement

- **Resident consultation and involvement help to ensure** the successful outcome of regeneration schemes. Residents have local knowledge and can provide useful input and feedback on how regeneration plans might work and be implemented. Consultation should be a two-way process, so that residents feel ownership of regeneration plans. This helps to ensure the long-term sustainability of an estate. Tenants' input into the design of their new homes is particularly valuable.
- **It is often quite difficult to get tenants involved.** Some people feel disenfranchised because they do not believe they can make a difference. **Door-knocking** helps people to know the community group members, and **street representatives/community champions** can be effective in getting the community on board.
- Engaging different groups in the community requires **thinking creatively about engagement strategies**. The use of fun days and community events are opportunities to talk to people about the regeneration plans. Engaging young people and working with schools are also winning engagement strategies.
- **Building a truly representative community group** is a crucial stepping-stone to devising a people-oriented regeneration plan. A **strong, trusted, respected** community group can secure a place at the negotiating table, hold other stakeholders accountable to the community and have the strength to help shape key regeneration decisions.
- **It is important to invest enough time in building trust**, especially between residents and the local authority/housing association involved in the regeneration scheme. Trust can be easily eroded if people are not kept fully informed, if promises are broken and decisions are taken behind closed doors. It is often difficult to re-build trust. **Transparency and honesty** are totally essential, particularly when things are not going to plan.

4. Communication channels

- **Effective communication** is extremely important in building trust and working in partnership with residents. Some news is better communicated **face-to-face**. **One-to-one meetings** are sometimes necessary to deal directly with problems. Group meetings often generate needless antagonism, if not carefully prepared and handled. Some people for whom English is not the first language may struggle to understand leaflets, so special effort is needed so that communications reach everyone affected by the regeneration.
- **An Independent Tenant and Leaseholder Advisor (ITLA) can play a crucial role** in supporting/advising residents about their individual circumstances, and in helping set up a representative community group. Regeneration can cause disruption to people's lives and vulnerable tenants in particular need handholding and support, which an ITLA can provide. An ITLA worker can help with capacity building, training and support for residents.
- Having **residents as allies** is in the interests of social landlords and other local stakeholders, such as the local authority, the builders and other agencies. Residents can contribute to the delivery of a successful regeneration scheme in several ways: by feeding back on the impact of allocation policies and practice on tenants, so that they minimise harm to tenants; by looking after and improving communal spaces for the benefit of all residents; by providing creative and informed ideas to address local problems, based on local knowledge and understanding.