

The renewal of urban neighbourhoods

Written by Dr Dick Atkinson

Introduction

Three thousand neighbourhoods in Britain are now excluded according to research by the government's Social Exclusion Unit. Each urban area has its share. This represents a huge national and local problem which has been getting worse and, unless tackled, will undermine efforts to guarantee a wider urban renaissance. A major question for the coming years is: 'How can these neighbourhoods be turned from places of despair into flourishing ones full of hope?'

If a few neighbourhoods can answer this question it would be of great value nationally as well as to themselves. If they are properly resourced and supported, they could lead a rolling programme of recovery which would eventually include all 3,000 neighbourhoods in Britain.

The problem

We need to be clear about the problem and its scale, to arrive at a solution:

- two years ago, *Rebuilding Britain* was published by the Social Exclusion Unit. The statistics show that the quality of life for one-third of our population who live in 3,000 plus excluded neighbourhoods is not acceptable. In particular, people in these neighbourhoods suffer from a combination of poor health and education and from high crime and unemployment
- people in these areas feel *powerless* to do anything to change their life circumstances. They know what they want – a better life for themselves and their children – but they do not know how to make a difference. They feel excluded from and abandoned by the 'system' and the government
- the Social Exclusion Unit report also

said that successive governments have known about these problems since the 1950s and 1960s. They have devised a succession of renewal strategies to solve them. Large sums of money have been spent: Urban Aid in the 1960s administered by the Home Office; the Single Regeneration Budget and others administered by the then Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. But, despite billions of pounds and fine phrases, matters have got worse

- the Social Exclusion Unit set up 18 policy action teams which toured the country with policy makers and practitioners, looking for solutions, and practical measures in neighbourhoods which bucked the downward trend and which were successful
- they brought together the pieces of a puzzle to complete a new picture both of what does not work and how sustainable success could be achieved.



Residents in Balsall Heath discuss with the chief constable how to reduce crime

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Why renewal has not worked

The reasons why renewal has not worked so far are:

- **programmes had been time-limited to three to five years.** Renewal takes far longer: 20 years longer. People have not just become materially poor, they have become spiritually poor. Less visible, more corrosive, this could take a lifetime to alleviate
- **funds have been 'front loaded'.** To gain extra funds, professionals who submitted the bid had to say what it was to be spent on and so local people were excluded
- **programmes focused attention on extra or top-up money.** They did not address existing mainstream budgets. An average neighbourhood of 15,000 people receives £100m from the state for housing, health, schools, police and benefits every year. Yet, until very recently, no programme made extra money dependent on disassembling these existing funds and rearranging them in new ways to produce better, more cost-effective, outcomes. So, when external funding ended, progress also ended
- **residents were not in the lead.** As they did not feel involved in or own the process of renewal, they did not look after it or sustain it after it had been and gone
- **renewal programmes were not focused on the neighbourhoods where people live,** but on administrative areas defined by planners and politicians
- **finally, programmes were competitive.** They made areas bid against one another, so there was one winner and many losers.

Successful renewal

Successful renewal, the Social Exclusion Unit concluded, means putting residents in the lead, building their capacity and confidence and making sure they can talk on equal terms with the planners. It means giving unmanaged, unaccountable, excluded

neighbourhoods a manager, enabling residents to agree a neighbourhood development plan and providing them with the financial and other resources needed to deliver that plan in partnership with statutory colleagues.

- in both Castle Vale and Balsall Heath in Birmingham, which have very different needs and with very different funding, residents are in the lead. They have neighbourhood development plans and neighbourhood managers, inter-agency teams which are part of a resident-led neighbourhood strategic partnership
- while neither of these neighbourhoods can be said to be fully recovered, so much progress has been made that residents and policy makers from other parts of the Midlands, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions look to them for advice and guidance about how they can replicate the success. Life expectancy in Castle Vale which, six years ago, was seven years less than the national average, is now only two years less. In Balsall Heath, which was Birmingham's red light zone, the council and police said it was not possible to end street corner prostitution or reduce crime, Residents did both in three years, reducing insurance premiums and doubling house prices
- other examples of recovery can be found in every region of the country: Poplar Harker and Bromley by Bow in London, Royds in Bradford, the Eldonian Society in Liverpool, and the Wise Group in Glasgow are just a few. All differ in detail. Some arrived at success from a housing perspective, some from an educational or cultural one.

The legacy of the past

How have these successes been achieved? What principles, if any, lie at their foundations? Some of the answers may lie in the past.

A hundred years ago, brave and responsible people had to challenge and change the system, call for universal suffrage and invent the Labour Party so that their fellows in the industrial mills and mines could

benefit. In those days, the early unionists not only called for 'workers control' in the factory, the contributions they made from their meagre wages also paid for their own cooperative shops, doctors and adult education classes.

The post-industrial, dispirited, atomised, neighbourhoods in which people live today are not unlike the un-unionised places of 100 years ago. Equally, it depends on mature and caring leaders to organise their fellows into new associations capable of changing their living conditions and improving the quality of education, reducing crime and the fear of crime, creating jobs and involving more and more people who, previously, had supposed they could not make a difference to the lives of their children.

If any philosophy lies at the foundation of neighbourhood renewal it is the mutual self-reliance first demonstrated by the cooperatives and unionists of the nineteenth century. Perhaps too, it relates to the principle of subsidiarity which says: 'That which can be done at the local level by local people can and should be done by them. Only those matters which require overarching considerations should be decided at a higher level.'

The principles of local, mutual help and subsidiarity motivated those who created the settlements which still endure in the East End of London and Aston, Birmingham. The modern equivalent of these complex, caring, associations are called Community Development Trusts. Today, there are 100 settlements and 300 trusts and both have national associations.

Two new terms which arise out of settlements and trusts have entered the language of renewal.

Social capital

Everyone needs the support of parents, other relatives, teachers, and good neighbourhoods to develop. Neighbourhoods which flourish have many helping hands. They are rich in **social capital** and have a strong social infrastructure. Those which are excluded have a weak infrastructure and are poor in social capital.

Capacity builders

Those who manage and staff settlements and trusts are social

entrepreneurs or **capacity builders**. Just as the private sector entrepreneur creates economic capital, so the social entrepreneur creates social capital. They enable local people to manufacture or 'grow' the care and confidence they need to shape and realise their hopes. This can't be redistributed from elsewhere. It really does have to be 'home-grown'.

Capacity building

The need to build the capacity of the community is now appreciated by many people. But few yet know how to achieve it. The interests of the many can be opposed by a few negative people who resist change:

- **criminals**
- **local figures** who were used to ruling the roost when nobody else was involved, but who can't cope when lots of people are involved
- **professionals**, like the teacher who wishes to keep parents out of school because 'amateurs have nothing to do with education'
- **the councillor** who feels threatened if they can't see how bottom-up and top-down can synchronise.

Time and effort is spent on trying to include everyone by capacity builders. But one or two people will not want to be included. They will go to considerable lengths to maintain the failing *status quo* and prevent the inclusion and capacity building of the many.

To help the large majority step to the fore, develop their own voices, build a new array of little associations, it is necessary to hold these negative elements at arm's length. One of the most fundamental features of capacity building is the creation of space for people who are shy, lack skills and the confidence to shape the quality of their own lives and contribute to the well-being of the community.

Time is important. The fabric of industrial and post-industrial neighbourhoods has been unravelling for 50 years. It will take a generation, as well as space, to re-knit tattered areas and include excluded people.

To achieve space and time, capacity building requires a strong but delicate hand, a firm but gentle lead. Toughness is needed in keeping the

unwanted away, tenderness is required in giving people the long and slow chance to discover their identity and impose it on the public arena.

Local people also need resources if they are to realise their hopes:

- **an office and meeting space.** At first an empty shop or old church hall may suffice, but any self-respecting community will need something like a village hall where many functions can be held
- **staff.** Just one capacity builder will not be enough for long. Each neighbourhood will detail its own needs. These might include a number of street caretakers, carers for the elderly, staff for a playgroup, a fund-raiser, negotiator with statutory services, manager of houses leased from the local authority or all of these
- **assets – property.** A mini-bus and truck might be needed by the caretakers, an old school building by the play-group or carers for the elderly. The users of the park might wish to own it and to reopen a disused church as the focal point of life for the neighbourhood.

And all of these will need the running costs which cover heat, light and petrol as well as the salaries of the staff.

With capacity building resources such as these, residents who were dependent have come to associate together to form not just 'home-grown' and 'tailor-made' tenants and friendship groups, but nurseries, family centres, job creation schemes and Community Development Trusts which deliver services and welfare on a significant scale. These local, self-help associations which support the unconfident individual and provide them with a springboard to life now exist in every part of the country.

Diverse neighbourhoods

Top-down services are generally uniform and 'one-size-fits-all'. Empowered neighbourhoods rich in social capital differ from each other. They develop their own character, culture and facilities. These might include:

- distinctive welcome signs and street furniture which spell out a new brand image

- one or more urban village centres and public open spaces for communal gatherings and celebrations
- the self-help provision of:
 - care for elders
 - care in the community
- the maintenance and management of parks, car parks and the adoption of 'confused' open spaces
- maintenance and management of public housing
- community safety
- supplementary rubbish collection, the management of beat sweepers and the collection of street bins
- job creation schemes
- the management of one or more schools, preferably in a collegiate network of around six primary, one secondary, a college and university, as well as supplementary classes and leisure centres
- a village voice and forum and, through it, the governance of all these items which subsidiarity shows can be undertaken and delivered locally.



Students prepare the community paper

Some neighbourhoods will provide all and more of such services. Others will buy them in from new providers, while others will accept them from existing top-down service deliverers. Further, as we envisage a rolling programme of renewal, weak neighbourhoods will at first provide only a very modest range of the above until they gain confidence and provide more and more for themselves.

Managing the transition and the evolution of statutory services from 'doers' to 'enablers' will take skill, inspiration, will and single-minded leadership.

New 'town hall'

Because so many of the tasks once undertaken by the town hall can readily and more effectively be

discharged within each urban village neighbourhood, its size and the way it is organised will need to be changed. Most of the town hall's vertically organised, top-down, departments can be slimmed down or merged in order to meet the new horizontal functions of the kind which neighbourhoods really need.

Having lost the control and management of 'their' schools to school governors, a number of authorities have closed down their education committees: Kirklees, Calderdale, Rotherham, Barnsley, Gateshead, Hammersmith, Brighton and Hove, and Fulham have all done this. Once an authority has also let go of all its houses and some of its services, it will need to rethink its whole point and purpose. The local authority of tomorrow will look very different from that of today.

A fresh, community-sensitive, city department is needed which cuts horizontally across the city's old vertically designed bureaucratic and professional specialisms. There may be neighbourhood sub-departments which would marshal and deploy the levers of local government to service and enhance the growth points of each neighbourhood.

Many cities have developed neighbourhood offices in recent years, though not always in response to a clear neighbourhood voice. The capacity builder and neighbourhood forums can provide that voice. They can be the locally accountable body to which city government devolves funds and functions.

Because the aim of these new departments is to boost the confidence and capacity of the individual, see to it that others assist the developing child and take part in the revitalisation of neighbourhoods, it could be called the Neighbourhood Enterprise Department. Once this new department is devolved out to area offices in each neighbourhood it, in effect, becomes their new semi-autonomous mini-town hall.

As with the overarching city-wide set of Local Strategic Partnerships, its staff will be joined by officers from the police, primary care group and representatives from the private sector in the neighbourhood manager's inter-agency team. Together they will

work with the residents' neighbourhood forum and its staff to devise and deliver their area's neighbourhood development plan.

Delivering the plan will require a budget. Parts of this might at first come from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund or some other form of government grant. If renewal is to be sustained, however, it must presently come from disassembling and reassembling existing mainstream budgets.

Central and local government puts over £100m of taxpayer's money into a typical neighbourhood. If excluded neighbourhoods were businesses, their directors would have closed them down long ago and reopened them under new management, because the way the £100m has been spent every year helped produce the statistics of decay. So there is no point in giving extra grant aid for renewal on top of unyielding mainstream budgets. This would merely throw good money after bad. Only by rearranging the way services are delivered and paid for can renewal become effective and sustainable.

New 'local authority'

Territorial nationalism is becoming weaker. In the European and global world of post-industrial technology and instant communication, nationalism fades in the face of the global village. At once, power moves up and away from the borders of this country to Brussels and world-wide markets and, at the same time, it is shifting down to the urban village, street corner, family and individual.

In the new millennium the grip of the national politician and the industrially shaped political party will become even more tenuous, while the role of the urban authority and the previously ordinary, inconsequential, citizen will become more and more significant.

Reform of the old-style local authority does not imply its abolition. Rather, it suggests its revitalisation and the development of a highly effective new kind of local government. One of the major roles of this new authority will be to create the neighbourhood-specific devolved departments described above. There is however, a

vital range of other tasks which can only be discharged from an overarching civic centre. These include:

- the allocation of budgets between neighbourhoods, although as with schools, this can be done by means of a nationally agreed, value-added, formula
- responsibility for the dissemination of best practice between neighbourhoods, the inspection of the performance and services of mini-town halls and neighbourhood managers and the application of sanctions if agreed targets are not met
- responsibility for transport policy
- the oversight of refuse collection and disposal
- planning decisions when these impact beyond the confines of any one neighbourhood
- the branding and marketing of the urban area to the nation, Europe and the global village.

Regardless of Whitehall, each urban area needs to build on its international connections, become more like a city-state and less dependent on the nation state.

The reforms proposed are radical and require dramatic changes in style, attitude and outcome, but are not an attack on local government or the Welfare State. On the contrary, the reforms could rescue the democratic process from decades of inertia and popular resentment and herald a new era of acceptance and appreciation.

Conclusion

For 40 years, large sums of money and effort have been put into programmes of renewal to no lasting avail because the approach was too top-down and was not owned by residents in neighbourhoods. It is now clear that successful renewal depends both on the creation of a range of flourishing neighbourhoods and on the reform of the structures of local government.

Achieving this needs a huge and sustained political will. But it will also require a steadily accelerating rolling programme of recovery starting with what works and cascading competence from these existing successes which are to be found in the community sector.