

Disability and the regeneration agenda: making the links

By Claire Edwards

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Introduction

The recent CLES conference Disability, Regeneration and Social Inclusion: Making the Links, brought to the fore the increasing interest being taken by policymakers and practitioners in looking at how specific 'communities of interest' relate to the regeneration agenda. That disability, and disabled people, should be seen as linked to regeneration is however a relatively recent departure, and one which may reflect New Labour's concern with active engagement of communities in urban renewal (Imrie and Raco, 2003). This article explores some of the challenges to making the links between disability and regeneration, and in ensuring regeneration initiatives are relevant to, and involve, disabled people. In so doing, it draws on research conducted between 1998 and 2000, which examined how disabled people were being integrated into the regeneration of British cities. Whilst this research focused particularly on one initiative, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), the findings provide a clear platform from which to investigate the issues

and barriers around making meaningful links between disability and regeneration in the current policy context of neighbourhood renewal.

Why disability and regeneration?

It is well recognised that many disabled people experience disadvantage and discrimination in their lives. Statistics show that they are only about half as likely as non-disabled people to be in employment, and twice as likely to have no educational qualifications (Disability Rights Commission, 2003). Their lives are also often shaped by discrimination in a number of different guises, ranging from exclusion from the built environment and inaccessible transport systems, to overt cultural stereotyping in the media. Historically, disabled people's needs have never been recognised under the remit of regeneration. This is probably partly because they have never been associated with the 'urban problem' and have often been cast by the state as a dependent group, whose service needs relate solely to health and social care. Similarly, urban policy itself has never tended to focus on, or direct funding at, particular 'communities of interest'. Given the discrimination and exclusion that disabled people experience, however, it would seem crucial that they should have a stake in regeneration programmes.

There are a couple of points worth noting here that contribute to the argument for making this link. The

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first point relates to the current context of urban renewal which, under New Labour, has become increasingly focused on providing "people with the skills and capacities to reduce [their] poverty and dependence on welfare" (Imrie and Raco, 2003: 13), and to the 'bending' of mainstream spending on particular social and economic policy programmes (many of which are aimed at defined 'client groups' such as young people, ethnic minorities, and disabled people) to benefit the poorest communities. There is also a pre-occupation, as evidenced in key policy documents, most notably the Social Exclusion Unit's (2001) *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*, (referred to hereafter as the Strategy) with the active engagement of communities in urban renewal; faith communities, volunteers, and ethnic minority communities are all cited as groups that need to be involved in the regeneration process. In this context, it would seem important that disabled people gain recognition as one of these groups, both as beneficiaries of, and participants in urban regeneration policy.

This leads to the second, interrelated, point, which is that disabled people need to be recognised as citizens who are affected by, and can participate in, a range of issues in society (whether it be the built environment, education or employment), rather than being viewed in narrow terms as recipients of specific services, as they have often been in the past. As disabled people and disability organisations have highlighted, the experience of disability is as much about the discriminatory attitudes and barriers presented by a 'disablist' society, as it is about bodily impairment. From a legislative perspective, the Disability Discrimination Act is seeking to address discrimination in an increasing number of areas of society (including employment, access to services, and education), but it is important to recognise the contribution that disabled people can make to a range of social, economic and political issues - including shaping the places where they live.

In the sections that follow, this *Local Work* explores how connections between disability and regeneration might be made, by drawing on my

research based on the SRB. The SRB was introduced in 1994 with the objective of streamlining resources available for regeneration. Established as a fund for which local partnerships (made up of the public, private and community sectors) could bid, the SRB has broad aims, ranging from tackling social exclusion and disadvantage to improving physical infrastructure. In total, there have been 6 annual rounds of bidding for the SRB, but in 2001 it was announced that there would be no further rounds. Although Regional Development Agencies are meeting their commitment to existing SRB programmes from 'single pot' resources (Urban Forum, 2003a), it is clear that the focus of regeneration policy has shifted, primarily to the priorities set out in the Strategy (SEU, 2001). Nevertheless, I would argue that many of the issues relating to disabled people's involvement in the SRB remain pertinent in the current policy context, particularly given the continuing preoccupation with community engagement which emerged in the SRB and has developed as a key tenet of New Labour's approach to urban regeneration.

Towards making the links

Back in 1998, I began my research into disabled people's involvement in urban regeneration by approaching policy officials in the then Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) to interview. On explaining the research, I was asked somewhat quizzically what disability had to do with regeneration. Officials in central government and Government Offices for the Regions were unable to identify local SRB projects with a focus on disability. It took a multi-pronged approach, through an analysis of policy documents, a quantitative survey of SRB partnerships, and in-depth interviews at both the national and local level with disabled people, disability organisations, and local policy officials involved in regeneration, to identify any activity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the overall conclusions of my research painted something of a bleak picture in terms of disabled people's involvement in the SRB. Nevertheless, the research

yielded a wealth of data about how disabled people's needs were being defined in the SRB, their awareness and experiences of regeneration processes, and regeneration practitioners' attitudes to involving disabled people. In the next two sections, I draw on more detailed findings to discuss some of the barriers, but also opportunities, for making the links between disability and regeneration in the current context. I focus firstly on the national, policy-making level, to look at how disability is understood in the context of current urban policy and what regeneration means for disabled people, then move on to explore some of the issues of engagement in regeneration at the local level.

Linking disability to regeneration policy

Exploring the links between disability and regeneration must start with an investigation of how disability is defined and encapsulated within regeneration policy itself, at a national scale. This is particularly the case in a policy arena, which is built around a plethora of strategies, guidelines, and action plans issued by central government to those implementing regeneration locally. These documents are necessarily subject to different interpretations at the local level, but provide a strong steer about the focus of policy and the way central government perceives things 'should be done', and who should be involved.

In the context of the SRB, it was clear from an examination of key policy documents (in this case, the bidding guidance), that there was minimal focus on disability or disabled people. Disabled people were referred to only once in the bidding guidance in relation to an output "number from disadvantaged groups being targeted who obtain a job e.g disabled people" (Department of Environment, 1997: 28). Whilst the guidance also stressed involving local communities in SRB partnerships and local decision-making processes, disabled people were not specifically identified as one of those 'communities of interest' that regeneration practitioners should engage with.

This lack of identification within the policy itself raises a couple of important issues in terms of disabled people's relationship with the SRB. Firstly, it demonstrates a policy realm which is largely divorced from issues of disability, reflecting a broader 'compartmentalisation' of disability into distinct issues for particular government departments. When interviewed, many policy officials in Government Offices managing the SRB understood disability as an issue of social security, for example, and were wary about the SRB becoming something which all groups could lay claim to (Edwards, 2003). It was also not surprising to find that national disability organisations were not familiar with regeneration initiatives and had not been engaged in any consultation processes on regeneration policy at a national level.

Secondly, it is clear that where disabled people's needs were identified in the SRB, it was in very narrow terms. In particular, where disabled people were perceived as recipients of SRB-based schemes, it was largely in terms of participation in training or employment programmes. This was confirmed in a questionnaire sent to 200 SRB partnerships as part of the research, which revealed that providing jobs and training was the most common objective of all SRB partnerships surveyed, including those targeting disabled people (Edwards, 2001). Such a focus is reflective of New Labour's emphasis on social inclusion through employment, and on initiatives such as New Deal for Disabled People, which seek to assist disabled people in entering and sustaining employment. Clearly, these and other local initiatives, have an important role to play in enabling disabled people's participation in society. However, it is just one way of viewing social inclusion - and in this context - disabled people's role in regeneration.

These findings seem to suggest that the SRB - and regeneration policy more broadly - requires a greater recognition of the varied roles which disabled people can play in regeneration, including their role as active citizens engaged in local decision-making processes. Ensuring the link between disabled people and regeneration requires a definition of

disability which recognises the impact of societal barriers, and an understanding of how regeneration can contribute to disabled people's inclusion in society. Social inclusion for disabled people is about a range of issues - from accessible transport, to the built environment, provision of services and changing societal attitudes. Disability is not a singular issue or experience, it should be woven through a range of policy arenas. Thus, as the Neighbourhood Renewal Race Equality Action Plan states of race in regeneration, so the same might be said of disability: "We aim to ensure that race equality is a central plank of the national strategy, rather than an 'add on'" (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2002: 3).

In more practical terms, making the links at a national level requires a cohesive approach between government policymakers and departments working in the areas of regeneration, and disability issues. An identification of disabled people in key regeneration policy documents, and a greater engagement between government and disability organisations about the relevance of the regeneration agenda to disabled people, needs to occur. These are all things which have not been apparent in the context of the SRB. Although it is early days, it is possible that the Strategy will offer a more positive way forward, with its more holistic understanding of the causes of deprivation - although how much more 'visible' disabled people are in this document compared to the SRB is questionable. Whether connections are made, moreover, will also depend on how far disabled people can negotiate the plethora of new "supra-local" institutions established to co-ordinate and implement urban renewal, in particular, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) (Imrie and Raco, 2003: 17).

Engaging disabled people at the local level

Whilst strategic policy documents may set out the direction and objectives of urban policy, it is clear that these are open to variable interpretation at a local level. In the context of the SRB, interviews with disabled people and local regeneration managers revealed a number of issues that

need to be addressed in seeking to make connections between disability and regeneration at the local level. As a starting point, regeneration managers involved in SRB partnerships often expressed the feeling that they were dealing with a competing range of interests and priorities at the local level. Those groups who were able to influence local decision-making processes were therefore more likely to gain representation, and often funding. The involvement of disabled people in the SRB was very dependent on the local 'politics' of disability - whether there were disability organisations around, and their role and relationship with other key agencies locally. In one area, for example, a particularly vocal organisation of disabled people that was engaged in other local authority decision-making forums had been approached to participate in a regeneration initiative regarding the built environment. More commonly, however, disability organisations and disabled people in local areas where regeneration initiatives were underway were unaware of such schemes, or indeed, of what regeneration engendered. As one SRB regeneration manager noted, moreover, if disabled people did not push their interests forward, the partnership was unlikely to go and 'actively seek' disabled people out. This clearly has implications for a group who more than most, may live in institutionalised ways and places, and experience a greater degree of social isolation.

Where partnerships were aware of the need to engage with disabled people as a 'community of interest', it also raised issues about who should be representing disabled people's views. Some partnerships were unclear about how they could cover the range of different disability interests, reflecting not only the diversity of types of impairment, but also types of disability organisation (whether they were solely about providing particular services to disabled people, or whether they adopted a more campaigning role). Debates about representation in the context of the SRB could be made more difficult by a need to be running the bidding process to a tight timescale, and to be seen to engaging with those groups set out in the bidding guidance. Often, partnerships co-opted an umbrella

voluntary organisation to cover the needs of the 'community', but this could mean overlooking the diversity of the disabled population. Indeed, the priorities of someone with mental illness can be quite different to those of someone with a mobility impairment, for example.

There were some more practical issues that arose in seeking to engage disabled people, as those who had been involved in consultation fora, and partnerships noted. At a basic level, this included venues held for key meetings not being accessible or interpreters not being available. Some disabled people who had been involved in local community forums noted that the way in which business was done made it difficult for them to participate regularly: the length, times and frequency of meetings, for example, was problematic for one person whose back pain meant they could not sit through long meetings. Other disabled people noted battling with regeneration 'jargon', both in attending meetings, but also in terms of knowing how to put bids together to apply for funding. Information not being available in alternative formats (large print, audio, Braille, for example) was another concern. These issues seem to be persistent: two of the recommendations to come out of the Urban Forum's recent conference on LSPs for community representatives were a reduced use of jargon, and greater attention "given to the provision of access for community and voluntary sector representatives involved e.g. consistent childcare, disability access and prompt recompense for costs." (Urban Forum, 2003b: 4).

The findings of the research therefore suggest that there is scope for more effective engagement of disabled people in local urban policy processes, whether this is in participating in decision-making bodies such as local partnerships, in consultation, or indeed, in disability organisations applying for regeneration funding. This must start from a greater awareness of disability issues amongst regeneration practitioners, and proactive outreach work to disability groups and (more significantly) disabled people who may not interact with local organisations or services, to engage them in regeneration processes. Disability organisations themselves may also require support in bidding

for regeneration funding. To a certain extent, this is recognised in the guide lines for building LSPs, which stress that community involvement may require "capacity-building and training to enhance the involvement of hard-to-reach communities (including disabled people, older people, youth groups and people from faith, black and minority ethnic communities)" (DTLR, 2001: 13). Yet how capacity building takes place on the ground, and what it might mean for disabled people, requires more investigation.

Conclusions

As this article has identified, there are considerable barriers to making connections between regeneration and disability - but also potential opportunities. The apparent failure of the SRB to engage with disabled people raises a number of issues about the place of 'communities of interest' in the current urban policy context, with its emphasis on the Strategy and new partnership arrangements at the local level. Making the links requires thinking strategically about disability across the regeneration agenda, and identifying the impact of policies on different groups of disabled people. Locally, it also engenders some very practical issues, including raising awareness of disability issues amongst regeneration practitioners, outreach work to disabled people and disability organisations, and ensuring that all organisations involved in regeneration are meeting their requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act. These may seem to be very practical and obvious points, but they need to happen if the processes of regeneration are to become more accessible to, and engage with, disabled people.

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