

Tenant involvement in estate regeneration

The 160-flat Pembroke Street Estate was run-down, badly hit by the contraction of Devonport docks, and in a spiral of decline. The residents' association has been a crucial partner in a comprehensive regeneration project which has achieved wide-ranging improvements on the estate and is also having a positive effect on the surrounding area. Dick Watson, community technical aid consultant to the residents throughout, looks at the implications of their close involvement in the project:

- f** Residents had detailed local knowledge and an understanding of the range of problems needing to be tackled and were clear that physical improvements would not last without social and economic changes. Acceptance of this 'agenda' by the local authority led to an integrated package of measures.
- f** Residents were willing to contribute a large amount of time and energy because they were clear they were directly affecting the decisions being made.
- f** Access to good quality, independent advice and support was crucial in unlocking the residents' initiative. However, the funding which allowed this to happen is not usually readily available and can be difficult to raise.
- f** Direct negotiation and discussion between the residents' association and local authority officers generally worked well, encouraging innovative solutions, although the approach made additional demands on officers.
- f** Residents were involved to an unusual extent in detailed design and liaison with the contractor. This resulted in designs which they felt more appropriate to their own needs.
- f** The processes of consultation and involvement increased residents' skills, knowledge and confidence. Some unemployed residents found work through their involvement in the project.
- f** An integral community arts project attracted many residents, increasing their sense of ownership and giving the estate a personal identity.
- f** The timescale of both approval and implementation of government funding risked undermining residents' commitment and ability to participate.

“Everyone who has come into contact with Pembroke Street is nothing but gobsmacked. It is not just the improvement in the quality of housing but the change in the quality of outlook people have had there. It is exemplary - projects like this just demonstrate how capable local people are.”

(Chair of Economy and Employment Committee, Plymouth City Council)

The tenants' agenda

From their day-to-day experience of the neighbourhood, residents had detailed local knowledge and an understanding of the range of problems needing to be tackled - a more integrated perspective than an individual agency or local authority department. They were clear that physical improvements would not last without social and economic changes. Acceptance of the residents' agenda by the local authority has not only given residents a sense of ownership of the project but also provided the impetus for a comprehensive approach to estate renewal. This has resulted in:

- An Estate Management Board employing 5 residents and with a representative from each of the estate's 13 blocks. Residents viewed tenant management as the only way to halt the spiral of decline and had been working on their proposals for 5 years.
- A successful £5.6m Estate Action bid. Unusually, residents have been involved in both planning and implementation.
- Addressing high levels of unemployment by setting up a local skills register and including jobs and training for local people in the building contract.
- A community arts project complementing the estate improvements.
- A resident-run credit union.
- Proposals for a neighbourhood community centre to extend existing social activities.

Access to independent advice and support

The residents' association has had access to their own, independent advice and support covering housing management, economic development and estate improvements. It was important that this was available right from the beginning when the direction of the project was being decided, and that there was continuity throughout the project.

This support allowed the residents' association to build a more equal partnership with both the local authority and other agencies than would normally have been possible. It has contributed significantly to their effectiveness. Residents were able to present proposals that had more credibility with officers, and

to get a professional second opinion on the technical detail of local authority proposals. The advisors also took on a negotiating and advocacy role on behalf of residents - but crucially did so under the direct control of the residents, who retained the power to hire or fire them.

Independent support enabled the association to become a player in its own right, forming partnerships with organisations other than the local authority to work on particular projects. It allowed residents to contribute their skill and initiative and has drawn in a wide range of organisations and agencies who would otherwise not have become involved.

With the exception of grants under Section 16 of the Housing and Planning Act 1986 (for setting up tenant management organisations) statutory funding is not available for tenants to employ independent consultants. However, the cost of independent professional support was small in relation to the total cost of the project. Design and technical input - covering the estate improvements, employment and training in the building contract, the community arts project and setting up the estate-based repair and maintenance team - would at commercial rates have cost around 1 per cent of the price of the estate improvements. The estate's experience suggests that independent advisors have a crucial role to play and that funding for this would need to be made available if the success was to be repeated.

Direct negotiation

“Some councils say they have tenant participation because they have a ‘tenant participation officer’. But you need to get behind the facade to make officers accountable. A tenant participation officer is basically a messenger. We had no intermediaries so the tenants developed a knowledge of the system and true negotiation skills.” (Chief City Housing Officer, Plymouth City Council)

Plymouth City Council does not employ tenant participation officers and the residents' association worked directly with the local authority officers responsible for the different aspects of the project. This included:

- the housing department's development officer
- the project architect and other consultants (on design and liaison with the contractor)
- the city council's training officer (on local employment and training)
- the area housing manager (on setting up the estate management board)
- the neighbourhood housing manager (on arrangements for decanting, allowances, etc.)

- the arts development officer (on the community arts project)
- the deputy city housing officer (on policy issues which needed discussion at this level).

In many ways this direct contact worked well for tenants. Working relationships developed with key officers, who were often prepared to consider new solutions in face-to-face discussion. If residents and officers had spent less time round the table together it is likely that many aspects of the project would have been different. For example: it is the first estate improvement project in the city to include both employment and training and community arts; residents were deeply concerned about heating bills so the flats have been overclad and given very high levels of thermal insulation; considerable effort has been put into making ground-floor flats accessible to disabled people; residents were included on the interview panel for short-listed contractors; a project working party - consisting of residents and the 10 or so organisations and departments involved in the project - meets monthly to co-ordinate the work and iron out any problems.

However, this approach makes considerable demands of the officers involved, who must be enthusiastic about their role, willing to work with residents as equals, and experienced and confident enough not to feel threatened.

Government funding procedures

The procedure for funding estate improvements under the Government's Estate Action programme (now included in the Single Regeneration Budget) made it hard for residents to become involved.

All the key decisions have to be taken before funding approval is given. But most residents were unwilling to get involved at this stage because they thought it very unlikely that anything would ever happen.

The project depended on a determined group of about 10 residents who had a commitment to the neighbourhood and who felt trapped on the estate as it spiralled into decline. This group ended up working extremely hard for four-and-a-half years without knowing if their work would ever bear fruit. The nine-month delay before Government approval was eventually received was the most difficult time of all for the group: *"We all got so peeved off I think we could have all fallen by the wayside."*

When approval was finally given, the project had to go out to tender very quickly as Government procedures required money to be spent in the current financial year. This timetable would not have allowed residents any serious involvement in design

decisions. Fortunately the housing department had been prepared to fund most of the design work in advance and at risk, on a timescale that did allow residents to be involved.

If the funding bid had *not* been successful it is likely that the community's demoralisation and the waste of local authority time and money would have been considerable. It would have been difficult to involve local people in subsequent projects.

Residents' involvement in design and estate improvements

One of the more unusual aspects of the project was the extent to which residents took part in detailed design and were involved in the day-to-day progress of the building works. The residents' association:

- wrote their own comprehensive design brief independent of the local authority - 49 sections including (for example) energy efficiency, access for people with disabilities and the need for natural surveillance and defensible space;
- held weekly design meetings with the project architect;
- built a large-scale model of the estate to help visualise alternative proposals and explain them to other residents;
- took part with the project architect in meetings with specialists, consultants and suppliers;
- prepared their own brochure to support the local authority's Estate Action bid;
- put together proposals for local employment and training on site, community arts and liaison with the contractor;
- hosted the monthly meetings of the project working party;
- took part in preparation of the defects list before the flats were handed back.

Achieving all this required an astonishing contribution of time and energy. It was willingly given because residents were clear they were directly affecting the decisions being made. Their involvement has had a number of benefits:

- The design was appropriate, taking account of local knowledge and meeting local needs.
- Residents are particularly committed to high quality management and maintenance - and the knowledge that they would be responsible for maintenance influenced their design choices.
- Design captured the imagination of the group, and proved a good route to involvement in local management.
- The group gained greatly in skill and confidence as the project developed, becoming equal partners in

discussions and bringing local knowledge to bear on the decisions taken. The project architect summed it up: *"The team of residents stuck at it, worked hard and became very skilled."*

Community arts

Working with the local authority, Theatre Royal and College of Art, the residents' association set up and is co-ordinating a £60,000 community arts project. Children from the local primary school have designed a gateway linking the estate with the school. Residents from each block are working with art students on the design of pictorial metalwork panels in the stairwells. Residents are also working with artists on designs for fencing and gates, decorative stonework gate posts and a mosaic describing the history of the estate.

The project has drawn in many residents who were not previously involved in activities on the estate. They see the finished work as their own and this has helped develop a sense of ownership of the estate. The project gives an individual identity and personal feel to the estate and makes it a more pleasant place to live.

Empowerment

The project is a clear example of empowerment. Members of the residents' association have gained enormously in knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence and have built up an extensive network of contacts, enabling them to tackle problems effectively and run a competent and aim-directed organisation.

Some who were previously unemployed have gained employment through the project. Residents have led training sessions around the country for tenants' groups and local authority officers. According to one resident: *"You get more confidence in yourself; you're more willing to sit and talk because you know what you're talking about."*

Regeneration of the surrounding area

It is hard for improvements on a small estate in a deprived and rundown neighbourhood to be sustainable in isolation; it is important they act as a

lever for regeneration of the surrounding area. There are already signs that this is happening and two neighbouring projects are now taking place. Adjacent flats have been demolished and a local housing association is building 54 homes as a pilot tenant management project for the South West. Plymouth Development Corporation has taken over a nearby 11.4 acre waterfront site and is working on plans for housing, open space, employment, recreation and community use.

About the study

The report was written by Dick Watson, technical aid consultant to the residents' association for the past four years, and was based on interviews and notes taken during the project.

Further information

Further information and copies of the report Putting back the pride - case study of a power sharing approach to tenant participation are available from ACTAC - The Technical Aid Network, 64 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5SD (Tel: 051 708 7607), price £7.50.

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 46** Tenant participation in Wales (Sept 91)
- 96** First-stage training for tenant participation (Sept 93)
- 97** Estate regeneration at Meadowell (Oct 93)
- 100** Urban regeneration: UK and German problems and approaches (Dec 93)
- 105** Community involvement in City Challenge (Jan 94)
- 106** The purchase and management of leasehold flats by residents (Jan 94)
- 107** Multi-agency working on difficult-to-manage estates (Feb 94)
- 124** The management of leasehold flats by residents (Sept 94)

For further details on these and other *Findings* contact Sally Corrie on 0904 654328 (direct line for publication queries only).



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