Understanding neighbourhoods

Short summary

Reviews three recent reports published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on population turnover, support for neighbourhood organisations, and the social value of public spaces.

Overview

The past ten years have seen unprecedented focus in policy and practice on Britain's neighbourhoods. Most of the attention has been in terms of resources and expertise to help overcome persistent disadvantage and deprivation, and more recently on the involvement of residents in decision-making processes. Local authorities have to take a holistic approach which requires consideration of such factors as demographics, the role of community organisations, and maintenance of the physical environment; and to appreciate the relationships between each.

This briefing reviews three recent documents published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). The first is a stand-alone piece of research: the other two summarise a range of related research projects.

- *Population turnover and area deprivation* by Nick Bailey and Mark Livingston (Policy Press and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2007). This research covers England and Scotland.

- *Changing neighbourhoods: the impact of 'light touch' support in 20 communities* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, March 2007. This is an extended summary of *Changing neighbourhoods: lessons from the JRF Neighbourhood Programme* by Marilyn Taylor, Mandy Wilson, Derrick Purdue and Pete Wilde). This research covers England.

- *The social value of public spaces* by Ken Worpole and Katharine Knox (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2007). This research covers England and Wales.

The first item is based on 2001 census data and offers insights into questions of area stability, and the relationship between geographical mobility and deprivation. *Changing neighbourhoods* is a review of a large four-year research programme and is mainly concerned with the kinds of support needed to sustain community groups and organisations most effectively. The third report specifically explores the ways in which public space is used, and the implications for policy and practice.

While the subject coverage is not intended to cover all aspects of local life, taken together they offer some important linked messages for authorities.

Population turnover and area deprivation

What do we know about the effects of population change on deprived areas? The research by Bailey and Livingston suggests that the most important factor driving turnover is the demographic mix of an area, particularly the proportion of the population who are young adults or very young children.

Using neighbourhood level data covering England and Scotland from the 2001 census, the researchers claim that in England, there is a surprisingly weak relationship between turnover and deprivation (average turnover in deprived areas is 23% compared to 18% in the least deprived, and 20% overall). In Scotland, there is no difference in turnover rates by deprivation.

The research shows a tendency, on balance, for young adults (aged 19-29) to move into deprived areas and for other age groups to move away, especially households containing 30-44 year-olds and those under the age of eighteen. Among other things, this suggests that deprived areas are home to more than their share of people making the transition from living with parents to living on their own.

The researchers suggest that policies designed to achieve stable or sustainable communities may need to pay greater attention to promoting demographic mix as much as income or tenure mix. Indeed, policies to promote income or tenure mix could potentially undermine stability if they target single people and couples, perhaps through the development of starter homes.

The analysis also shows that:
- deprived areas do not have a general problem of instability; turnover levels are only slightly above average
- deprived areas do not generally see significant net out-migration of less deprived individuals; there are flows in both directions and these are nearly in balance
- an average of around 50% of migrants move to/from non-deprived areas each year.

Related insights into the challenge of 'de-concentrating poverty' were offered by Julie Cowans in a TCPA paper called *Cities and regions of sustainable communities,* published in 2006. In particular, Cowans noted that 'worst-first' regeneration policies don't appear to be working because they're too exclusively focussed.

Changing neighbourhoods

The JRF established its Neighbourhoods Programme in 2002 to test out a 'light touch' approach to supporting some 20 community organisations working in a range of national and local settings. The main messages come under two broad headings:

The need for sustainable community-based organisations, having
- 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; and
- sustainable funding.

The need for a responsive and engaged public sector culture, having 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.

The authors stress the continuing importance of community development strategies in order to ensure that local people are engaged fully in the services and decisions that affect their lives.

The implications of the research for local authorities and other partners are summarised as follows:
- 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 called for 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 community engagement 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 (http://www.thecompact.org.uk/); 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.

What mainly distinguishes this piece of work from other calls for investment in community development is the emphasis placed on 'light touch' support with recognition of the possible need for more intensive support as circumstances require. For instance, the programme demonstrated 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 – at a cost of roughly £7,500 per neighbourhood per year.

The social value of public spaces

In 2005 JRF commissioned a series of research projects to look at different kinds of public space across Britain, how they are used and how they function. The projects focused on different types of places, including parks, town-centre high streets, open spaces in residential areas, shopping precincts and community centres.

The overall programme was anchored by a 2005 publication from Demos, *People make places*, which highlighted the importance of seeing public space from the perspective of the participant. *People make places* articulated the view, which is echoed in the subsequent studies, that public space is 'co-produced' by people. It only comes into being when it is activated by the presence of people according to their dynamic and changing patterns and timetables.

This was followed by specific projects on public spaces and social relations; markets and social interaction; living and working in areas of street sex work; the use of urban public places in a provincial town; and mixed use streets.

Worpole and Knox note that public space is expanding, not decreasing, and strategies may need to take account of spaces not traditionally regarded as public space. Prevailing definitions reflect the urban renaissance agenda, concentrating on town centres and metropolitan spaces. The authors point out however that a wider definition is pertinent to the government's 'cleaner, safer, greener' agenda. Much of the research reveals an interest in how tensions and potential conflicts are dealt with, with some emphasis being given to the principle of self-regulation.

The research found that public spaces play a vital role in developing community ties and that they facilitate the exchange of ideas, friendships, goods and skills:
- street markets allow people from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds to interact;
- parks enable young people to make friends and mix with the wider community;
- cafés and arts centres are key social places for mothers and children.

However, some policies are felt to be having a detrimental effect on public space. Strategies intended to 'design out crime,' such as cutting down bushes,

installing vandal-proof street furniture and closing public toilets, limited their attractiveness and diminished their usefulness.

The research suggests the following messages for those responsible for planning, developing and managing public space:
- regeneration strategies that fail to take into account local attachments to existing places may undermine existing networks within local communities;
- public spaces that look good but fail to provide adequate amenities or connections to existing social and economic networks will result in sterile places that people just do not use.

Other findings include the following:
- There is a need to recognise and respect the rhythms of use of public space (in terms of different constituencies at different times of day).
- Not everybody is equal in public spaces: this point can relate to unapproved behaviour; to trade regarded as 'inappropriate' such as street sex work; to younger people; and to older people.
- Fear of crime in public spaces may be exaggerated.
- Multiple ownership and divided responsibilities make the effective management of public spaces difficult, but good design and management are important.

Future regeneration schemes and proposals for public space should be based on a better understanding of people's use of existing spaces and places. Some of these may appear banal or untidy to outsiders, but they often have their own customary forms of value and local meaning that can easily be destroyed. It is suggested that the local authority 'power of well-being' provides a starting point for developing strategies for public spaces that bring the economic, social and cultural aspects of daily life together.

Comment

Population turnover is about geographic mobility into and out of deprived areas. It offers a fresh, but not radically revised, basis of knowledge on which to develop policy. *Changing neighbourhoods* is mainly about supporting community organisations and groups. It challenges local authorities to review relationships with them and to work at ensuring their sustainability. *The social value of public spaces* is concerned with the ways in which people use their local spaces. It introduces the issue of informal relations in assessing the value of local resources: public space has a role in providing for informal and serendipitous encounters.

These reports can serve to illustrate how far we have come in recent years. Policy-makers have rightly become concerned about possible 'tipping points' in deprived localities where there seems to be high turnover: the research by Bailey and Livingston prompts us to differentiate the characteristics of such

areas and to focus on the age groups involved. Again, authorities are beginning to depend more heavily on the capacity of community organisations to deliver: the JRF review provides very clear conclusions about their sustainability and relations with the public sector. And we have witnessed a striking and welcome renaissance of public space in Britain in the past ten years; but Worpole and Knox sound a warning about the dangers of over-sanitising the social environment.

It's important not to imply that this selection of reports covers all aspects of neighbourhood life. In particular, they do not cover the emerging theme of behaviour, and the political pressures to influence it. The policy salience of antisocial behaviour, civility, neighbourliness and the everyday practices of community cohesion has risen rapidly.

Nonetheless, in drawing attention to the role of community groups and the value of interactions in public spaces, the second and third of the reports reviewed here contribute to this shift of attention away from physical regeneration. They were anticipated in *Respect and renewal*, a report by David Page published by JRF in December 2006, in which he claimed:

> 'Professionals underestimated the importance of social issues and were more focused on physical regeneration. Residents perceived social factors – crime and fear of crime, poor life chances for their children, and the consequences of poverty – as the main ones affecting their quality of life, not physical degeneration.'

As always with JRF, these reports are based on thorough research. They don't cover all the key issues that arise in our neighbourhoods, but taken in combination they suggest that authorities have been getting a lot of things right over the past ten years. For the most part, more informed tweaking, rather than radical reform, seems to be what is needed.

Weblinks

Population turnover and area deprivation by Nick Bailey and Mark Livingston. JRF 2007.
http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=874

Changing neighbourhoods: the impact of 'light touch' support in 20 communities. JRF 2007.
http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/2031.asp

Changing neighbourhoods: lessons from the JRF Neighbourhood Programme by Marilyn Taylor, Mandy Wilson, Derrick Purdue and Pete Wilde, JRF 2007.
http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubid=872

The social value of public spaces by Ken Worpole and Katharine Knox. JRF 2007.
http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=877

People make places: growing the public life of cities by Melissa Mean and Charlie Tims. Demos, 2005.

JRF public spaces website: http://www.jrf.org.uk/public-spaces/

Cities and regions of sustainable communities: new strategies by Julie Cowans. TCP, 2006.
http://www.tcpa.org.uk/press_files/pressreleases_2006/New_Strategies.pdf

Respect and renewal: a study of neighbourhood social regeneration by David Page. JRF, 2006.
http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=844

Additional information

JRF has work in progress on related themes, including a project on 'drinking places' and one on sites of contention in relation to gypsy travellers. These are due for publication later in 2007.