



Community infrastructure still crucial to new housing in localist era

'Community assets' is JRF's programme of research and development that is exploring the role of community-owned land, buildings and other assets in the development of neighbourhoods.

Its seminar series is a forum to discuss policy development issues relating to this agenda.

Important lessons have been learned about the centrality of community infrastructure to new housing developments. In an uncertain environment it is vital that this learning is not lost. Julian Dobson reports on the fourth of JRF's seminars on community assets.

Main points

- There is great uncertainty about how new settlements will develop and how local people can benefit within the Coalition Government's new framework for localism and the 'Big Society'.
- It is more important than ever to learn the lessons from previous housing schemes, both in the UK and in Europe. There is a danger that learning will be lost as central government steps back from a coordinating role.
- Chief among these lessons is that community infrastructure needs to be factored in at the start of a development process – and that this infrastructure consists of people, not just buildings.
- Land and assets need to be available for community uses at affordable prices so local people can maximise the benefits of community facilities.
- Communities and their capacity differ widely from place to place. Approaches that work in the shire counties may not be appropriate for complex urban areas.
- Taking the time to get community infrastructure right is the key to success. Different approaches are needed with mature and with latent communities.



Applying past learning to new approaches

The Coalition Government has torn up the rule book on housing development.

Where the New Labour administrations saw regional planning and housing targets as the solution to demographic change and a national housing shortage, the new Government expects localities and the markets to find solutions together, using incentives such as neighbourhood plans and the 'New Homes Bonus' to encourage development.

While opinions are sharply divided on how effective the new approach may be, the fact remains that sizeable new settlements will be required. Some, such as Northstowe in Cambridgeshire, a new town of 9,500 homes, have been in the pipeline for some time; others are at the initial planning stages.

The fourth of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's seminars on community assets, held in Birmingham on 15 February, sought to draw together key lessons from previous developments and examine how they could be applied in a localist era. Given the Government's emphasis on community ownership and involvement in service provision as a central plank of its 'Big Society' agenda, what should planners and developers do to ensure such aspirations are realised?

Big Society, big questions

What is clearest at present is the absence of clarity. The Localism Bill was still going through Parliament when the seminar was held, so there had been no opportunity to test the proposed new rights for communities to buy local assets, to build new homes and to challenge public agencies to consider alternative approaches to services. While the 'Big Society' has now become established in the public consciousness, there is still little certainty about what it means in practice or how it is to be achieved.

At the same time many established community organisations are struggling with the impact of spending cuts that have hit local government especially hard, often with knock-on effects for voluntary groups that have lost grants or contracts. As Marilyn Taylor, the independent consultant who introduced the seminar, put it, community organisations face 'an ever bleaker context' in which many are questioning whether new rights will mean anything.

One participant pointed out that local authorities are being given new duties to oversee neighbourhood planning at a time when they are looking at budget cuts of up to 30 per cent. With a price tag on neighbourhood plans of anything from £120,000 to £150,000, will councils make any serious effort to make the new regime work?

Reinforcing this sense of uncertainty is a suspicion that government ministers have little idea of how their reforms might work in different contexts. What might be appropriate for shire counties, where parish councils are an important part of the landscape of governance, might be entirely inappropriate for complex urban neighbourhoods with a high degree of movement in and out and no single representative body.

One discussion group at the event suggested the 'Big Society' was a vacuum that needs to be filled. To ensure communities benefit from the opportunities it may bring, it should be filled with the lessons from many years of neighbourhood work and community development.

Holding on to the learning

Despite the seeming chaos of the combination of new policies and radical spending cuts, we are not starting from scratch. As Dr Taylor pointed out, 'we have made considerable progress over the last ten years in grasping the critical importance of community infrastructure'.

But she said there was a risk such learning could be lost: 'I hope we're not forgetting the Egan wheel [a framework for thinking about sustainable communities] and all that learning we worked so hard for.' She stressed, too, that practice had not matched the aspirations of the sustainable communities agenda: success stories were few and far between, and often communities received little benefit through 'planning gain' mechanisms.

New neighbourhoods, she argued, required 'a co-produced process where everyone gets together and thinks about the future demographic of a place'. Nicholas Falk, Director of urban planning consultancy URBED, explained how this had happened in many places in Europe but very few in the UK.

European experience suggested several key elements were required to create sustainable new neighbourhoods. Many of these seem obvious – being close to jobs and services, being responsive to demand, having infrastructure provided in advance – but are relatively rare among new developments in the UK. In particular, land needs to be realistically priced: values tend to be set so high in the UK that it can be difficult to provide the same level of services or design quality as in Europe.

'It's absolutely fundamental that new residential developments are well connected, with walking and cycling routes and frequent buses, and with local restaurants and schools as meeting places, and lots of small play areas,' Dr Falk said. Skimp on these things and the neighbourhood is less likely to work. In Freiburg in south-west Germany neighbourhoods are designed so no house is so high that a parent can't be heard by children playing outside, he observed.

Dick Moran, Chief Executive of Caterham Barracks Community Trust, which oversaw the successful conversion of a former Army base in Surrey, echoed Dr Falk's comments. Too often, he said, we create places that are fit for planners. Instead we need to create spaces that are fit for people. 'Don't plan where to put the plants,' he advised. 'Watch where people walk.'

The most important infrastructure is people

The most important lesson in developing new housing estates or settlements is to put the community infrastructure in first. This infrastructure doesn't just consist of buildings and facilities – the key is the people who will bring the area to life.

Neil Stott, Chief Executive of Keystone Development Trust in Thetford, Norfolk, argued strongly that 'if you don't put in the people who will support other people first you'll fail'. New developments had to begin with the community development workers or organisers who would engage with new and prospective residents to enable them to shape the plans according to their needs. Without that, local people would simply end up with the few crumbs left over when everybody else had finished arguing about who should pay for what.

Dr Falk agreed: neighbourhood wardens and community associations are more important than community centres, he said. All sorts of premises could function as community assets. In Freiburg, for example, community organisations were able to take temporary lets on unused shops, and caravans were provided as meeting places for teenagers.

The same lesson emerged from Caterham's experience. At Caterham the local trust didn't build community centres, but created multifunctional places that community organisations could use. The newest of these is Arc, an arts and recreation centre containing an indoor soft play area that will produce a much-needed income stream for the community.

Both Dr Taylor and Mr Moran made the point that a place that functions well and that stresses the importance of quality would bring returns to developers in the form of higher house prices. At Caterham 'the relative value of the houses when wrapped up with social infrastructure is so much greater that the developer made more profit per house than on any other development,' Mr Moran said.

But local authorities and developers often remain unpersuaded. As one developer at the event remarked, 'the relative importance of community development compared with transport improvements is very hard to quantify. The status of community development in local government does nothing for its status in negotiations.'

The lie of the land

While people are at the heart of social infrastructure and need to come first, you can't get away from the issue of property – and that takes you into the thorny territory of valuations.

Much of the last government's thinking, inspired by the Development Trusts Association (now renamed Locality) and the Quirk Review of 2007, revolved around the importance of creating an asset base for community organisations. Such assets can range from community centres to wind farms; typically, organisations own or lease multipurpose buildings that can be used to generate an income stream. Keystone Development Trust has an office block worth £3.2m that covers its core costs; Caterham Barracks Community Trust owns a range of local facilities.

But the difficulty in Caterham is debt. The trust is struggling to repay £2m of borrowing and may have to sell assets to do so. Serviced offices that require 70 per cent occupancy to break even are only half full because of the impact of the recession.

Such stories are commonplace among community trusts, and many of them come down to the valuation of land. There was strong agreement at the seminar that land values were too high, and community facilities should be discounted. Some participants argued that community facilities should not be transferred at market value at all, but instead assessed according to the social value they provide. Others suggested planners should be more willing to challenge developers' figures about viability rather than allowing them to treat community facilities as a cost.

Localism, leadership and luck

A further challenge for local authorities and developers is to understand what the 'community' is in a particular place, and what capacity it has to take part in planning and decision-making. On a greenfield site, for example, the community is latent rather than actual: the few people who are already there may be the ones most fiercely opposed to any development at all. As Neil Stott pointed out, 'you can't engage with people who aren't there'.

Sometimes the most outspoken people can become the core of a new community organisation. Dick Moran observed: 'If you get a few people in the community who are complete lunatics and will not roll over, that's your leadership.' From such leadership can emerge organisations that will represent local people and build bridges with official agencies and housebuilders.

Such leadership will be necessary if the aspirations of neighbourhood planning are to be met. Speakers observed that professional 'silos' continued to frustrate the best plans, despite years of effort to encourage public agencies to work in a cross-disciplinary fashion. Social, environmental, community and design issues should be considered together, Dr Taylor argued.

Opinion was divided on whether the Government's policies would help such a process. One participant described the Localism Bill as 'fundamentally anti-local authority', but Dr Taylor countered that 'enlightened local authority leadership' would be protected through the primacy of councils' core strategies and development documents.

The idea of the 'Big Society' won little enthusiasm. One attendee predicted a 'patchwork quilt' of activity, populated by 'self-selecting examples of Big Society in action'; another suggested a Darwinian struggle for survival would ensue, with little support for communities that couldn't manage.

In areas where there is already some degree of community infrastructure – such as rural parishes – there may be opportunities for formal approaches to neighbourhood planning, as well as the chance of raising money through parish precepts. In other areas success may come from more entrepreneurial approaches.

But such successes may often be the result of good fortune, Dick Moran suggested. Westway Development Trust in west London had been able to gain an asset – the space under the Westway flyover – that was thought to have no value; Coin Street Community Builders on London's South Bank has been able to make money by selling parking space on undeveloped sites. Such variety of opportunity and capacity will make it more difficult both to achieve the aspirations of the Localism Bill and to assess whether the new rights it promises are making any difference.

Time is more important than policy

A common conclusion from the case studies and stories shared at the event is that success takes time. Community organisations and structures can't be rushed into existence; people's capacity needs to grow. This strongly reflects the conversations at previous events in this series: any new rights and powers will only be effective if given time and support.

Trying to speed up the process of asset transfer and development is unlikely to help. Communities need space to articulate their aspirations, skills need to be built up, governance has to be sorted out, and land must be transferred and developed. 'In complex urban neighbourhoods it can take a long time to build community capacity,' Dr Taylor warned. Neil Stott agreed: 'It takes decades of hard graft to make places work. If you're not prepared to pay... you need organisations like mine to do it for you. Let us do it well.'

Nicholas Falk argued that funding for community development should be built into all new schemes from the beginning, and suggested that one per cent of the scheme value should be earmarked for the community.

Such an approach might address one of the strongest themes of the day's discussions: the concern that the potential offered by the Localism Bill and new rights was balanced by a greater degree of risk than in the past, including the loss of regional infrastructure, the removal of assistance for neighbourhoods, and the risk of 'asset dumping' by public bodies. There was a consensus that much had been learned in the past and it was important to hold onto it and find new ways of sharing learning, but that this was becoming more difficult.

Neil Stott urged participants not to 'slavishly follow the most recent policy announcements' on localism and the Big Society. Communities should think the challenges through in a 'more rational' way, keeping in mind their long-term goals. He quoted a Chinese saying: 'If you sit by the river long enough you'll see the body of your enemy float past.'

- Marilyn Taylor's briefing paper, *Community infrastructure in new residential developments*, and reports of previous events are available from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/events/community-assets-seminar-series>

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Ref. 2637

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead,
40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of JRF's research
and development programme. The views expressed in it, however,
are not necessarily those of JRF. ISSN 0958-3084