

“The government is committed to ensuring that communities’ needs and priorities are to the fore in neighbourhood renewal and that residents of poor neighbourhoods have the tools to get involved in whatever way they want.”

(A new commitment to neighbourhood renewal: national strategy action plan. Social Exclusion Unit, 2001)

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In 1997 the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was given the remit to examine how to develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates: including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad housing. In response to this challenge a report entitled ‘Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal’ was published in 1998 analysing the problems facing deprived neighbourhoods. It recommended that a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal should be developed - a strategy that would be a comprehensive response, at national, regional and local levels, to the problems involved.

18 Policy Action Teams

In order to develop the National Strategy, the SEU established eighteen different Policy Action Teams (PATs) – concerned with everything from Jobs to Unpopular Housing, Arts and Sports to IT and Skills. They were required to carry out fieldwork and consultation and to come up with some recommendations.

The PATs separately brought together government officials, local residents, relevant professionals and academics. The team members also visited a number of deprived neighbourhoods and specific initiatives which are attempting to address some of the issues. At the end of their deliberations, each PAT published a report of its findings and recommendations.

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal

In April 2000 a proposed framework for the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was published drawing on the recommendations made by the various PAT reports. The government accepted around 85 percent of all recommendations and a further 10 percent were accepted subject to some modifications. The

Strategy then became the subject of further, widespread consultation.

In January 2001 the government launched its Action Plan relating to the implementation of the National Strategy. Its main concerns are based on two long-term goals:

- in all the poorest neighbourhoods to have common goals of lower worklessness and crime, and better health, skills, housing and physical environment.
- to narrow the gap on these measures between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country.

In pursuit of these goals, the intention is:

- to introduce a variety of new policies in the areas of worklessness, crime, skills, health, housing and the physical environment, new funding streams and targets.
- to promote better local co-ordination and encourage community empowerment by promoting the development of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), developing Neighbourhood Management arrangements and by ensuring that 'communities and residents have a powerful voice in neighbourhood renewal in ways that suit them'.
- to provide national and regional support via a national Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) linked to the DTLR, with regional Neighbourhood Renewal Teams reporting to regional Government Offices.

LSPs will bring together the public, private, voluntary and community sectors with the intention of:

- (i) agreeing local priorities
- (ii) preparing a Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (by April 2002)
- (iii) securing the commitment and agreement of key stakeholders
- (iv) collaborating on a concerted plan of action

It is hoped that targeted funding (via the Community Empowerment Fund and Community Chests, administered through regional Government Offices) will assist residents and community groups to participate in the LSPs and run some of their own projects.

Community Empowerment

Community Empowerment informs much of the rhetoric and many of the aspirations of the Strategy. It is recognised that this is a complex process, but should include:

- outreach - especially to excluded communities, to raise awareness and invite their views
- facilitation - to help choose community representatives on the LSPs
- participation in sufficient numbers on the LSPs with opportunities for training and support to be able to do this effectively
- government intervention if LSPs do not engage with their communities appropriately or take sufficient account of community views.

LSPs will be expected to 'involve communities' in their deliberations, 'welcome involvement' and 'actively seek it out'. A specially recruited Community Task Force will be established to advise the NRU on how best to involve local people and to respond to communities needs and priorities. A dedicated Skills and Knowledge Team within the NRU will be responsible for developing learning and capacity building to assist residents in effective participation.

Commentary

There are several general concerns about the strategy but also some real possibilities for developing adult learning opportunities.

1. Local Strategic Partnerships

LSPs will not simply be confined to areas in need of neighbourhood renewal. The network is expected to cover the whole country, as a means of creating a community strategy and co-ordinating it through community planning. There

is currently much debate about size, whether LSPs should reproduce local authority boundaries or focus on problem estates. Rather inevitably, the debate has shifted to questions of mechanics and systems at the expense of issues. The risk in this is that LSPs will tend to reflect a rather bureaucratic response to devolving power and responsibility to the areas they will cover, in ways that will subsume existing networks and could well stifle energy, diversity and specificity.

Although the intention of LSPs implies community engagement of a serious order, there is also a risk that practice will focus more on management than on participation and more on formal representation than on direct practical involvement. Concerns about ‘yet more structures’ and ‘too much bureaucracy’ which have dogged discussions about Learning and Skills Councils and Local Learning Partnerships can appear to be inevitable when devolving power and responsibility at local level.

Additional money for neighbourhood renewal is in the hands of local authorities. Community involvement relies upon residents’ representatives on LSPs and upon targeted funding administered by regional government offices. This approach is based on forms of representation and organisation that have sometimes proved ineffective in other contexts – for example in political parties and trades unions, and in voting behaviour when it comes to local and national elections. There is a risk that structures and systems modelled on the organisational preferences of existing institutional practices will be unable to significantly revitalise local democratic engagement.

2. Active Citizenship

A second concern is the government’s apparent reluctance to hand over control to neighbourhood groups and individuals without pre-determining the terms and conditions by which that control will be managed. There is a basic contradiction in an approach which claims to offer innovatory and power-shifting opportunities but which relies on replicating institutional arrangements that minimise the power and the presence of ordinary people, instead of developing and building up a culture of active engagement. Neither is there much evidence that local politicians and local public sector workers – including adult education providers – are any more likely than national

professional groups to welcome the advance of ‘people power’ or to develop the skills and understanding that would make local community involvement real and effective.

3. Lifelong Learning

A third area of concern is that the recommendations made about lifelong learning for adults are considerably muted. Educational recommendations are predominantly focused on early years, school provision and extending the Connexions Service aimed at young people. Adults are to be prioritised in relation to basic skills and on-line learning through neighbourhood based learning centres. It is expected that schools, FE colleges, universities, Local Learning Partnerships and the Learning and Skills Councils will become active members of Local Strategic Partnerships.

Possibilities for adult learning

The potential opportunities that could be opened up to adult learners via the neighbourhood renewal strategy are immense.

For example:

- (i) The concern to tackle poverty and the commitment to joined up thinking which helped to produce the neighbourhood renewal strategy will remain a central plank of government economic and social policy throughout its second term of office.
- (ii) The role of local authorities in the new arrangements recognises that they are well placed to co-ordinate effective planning, including education development, because they provide many of the key services on which neighbourhood renewal depends. They should be very familiar with local needs.
- (iii) The strategy, in focusing on an anti-poverty agenda, goes some way to accepting that poverty, whilst acting as a major barrier to participation, is not always people’s fault. The neighbourhood renewal strategy offers education providers a good deal of freedom when it comes to setting educational objectives. It will be possible to argue that

community empowerment is as valid an objective as the more usual attention paid to accreditation and qualifications.

- (iv) The role of adult learning in community development will be welcomed by LSPs and LSCs if education providers are convincing about what resources they need and how their approaches could make a contribution.
- (v) Those education providers with the most creative and effective outreach approaches will be able to use the neighbourhood renewal strategy to support joined up outcomes.

Learning for Change

It is clear, however, that if the government is serious about collaborating with local people in sufficient numbers to make a difference to the decision making process involved in neighbourhood renewal, then adult learning has an important contribution to make, especially in relation to community leadership training and education for active citizenship.

This is not just a question of 'educating individuals' via 'off the peg' courses that happen to fit in with current provision by local colleges and the community education service. It implies building on what local people already know from their own informal learning in neighbourhoods and communities. It means providing relevant learning opportunities in non-formal community settings, in ways that directly relate to the real life issues and concerns facing different communities.

It means building up a culture of learning that relates to a culture of activism in ways that assist local people to address their shared concerns, to bring about changes, and to have more control over their own lives. Participatory research methods, participatory appraisals, campaigns and community events, and informal learning in social and cultural action are all examples of engaging local democratic activity in ways that are based on participation, networking and mutual learning.

Community development and outreach workers, animateurs and cultural workers – who take their lead from local people, who offer their skills in relation to the issues identified by local people,

who work in solidarity with local people, and who are happy to hand over power and control to local people – can become serious allies in supporting community groups involved in neighbourhood renewal.

Jane Thompson, NIACE

References and Further Reading

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www.niace.org.uk/Information/Briefing_sheets/socialalex.pdf

Useful contacts

Social Exclusion Unit
Cabinet Office
35 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BQ
Tel: 020 7944 8383
Web site: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/

Includes information and downloads for Social Exclusion Unit reports. All SEU reports including Policy Action Team Reports can be purchased from the Publications Centre at the Stationery Office or downloaded from the Social Exclusion Unit web site.

Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR)
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU
Tel: 020 7944 3000
Main Web site: www.detr.gov.uk
Neighbourhood Renewal Unit:
www.neighbourhood.dtlr.gov.uk

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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