

Delivering Effective Regeneration

Learning from Bridging NewcastleGateshead

Briefing paper



Key points

- The government has outlined a new ‘localist’ approach to regeneration with the aim of “putting residents, local businesses, civil society organisations and civic leaders in the driving seat”.
- The tools available for this new regeneration approach, particularly the sources of finance, represent an evolution in policy rather than a revolution.
- Many communities have experienced multiple waves of regeneration. This presents an opportunity to learn from these experiences, but also challenges, due to ‘regeneration fatigue’.
- Analysis of previous regeneration projects has repeatedly highlighted the problem of trying to use short-term funding for long-term regeneration, but the lessons have been ignored.
- There is often a marked difference between the problems described by local communities themselves, and those described by politicians, policy makers and regeneration practitioners.
- The communities being supported by regeneration are often poorly defined, making it difficult to effectively target interventions and monitor performance.

Policy recommendations

- The government's new approach to regeneration should **build on the existing experiences of communities**, both good and bad, rather than attempt to start again from scratch.
- A **long-term commitment**, preferably with some level of **cross-party support**, is needed to successfully achieve regeneration.
- Given the localist approach being adopted, the government needs to **clarify what will happen if the priorities of the local community conflict with those of national politicians and policymakers**.
- A much **clearer definition of the 'community' being supported by the approach** is essential. This includes specifying those who are expected to benefit from regeneration programmes and addressing the complexities of local communities.
- A localist approach to regeneration may achieve results in some communities, but not be successful in others. The government therefore **needs to consider multiple approaches to regeneration**, which will work in a variety of contexts.
- The **assessment of regeneration should be an ongoing, participative and independent process**, in order to safeguard the support of local people, funders and central government.

A new approach to regeneration?

In January 2011, the UK Coalition Government set out its vision for regeneration policy. *Regeneration to Enable Growth* made it clear that the government is intending to take a different approach. This approach “is localist - **putting residents, local businesses, civil society organisations and civic leaders in the driving seat** and providing them with local rewards and incentives to drive growth and improve the social and physical quality of their area”.¹

Research supported by BSHF suggests that it is important that this ‘new’ approach to regeneration builds on a clear understanding of both the successes and failures of previous programmes.

This localist approach will **need to achieve change in areas that have been involved in regeneration projects for many decades**. For example, the city of Newcastle upon Tyne can be considered to be an “urban laboratory”² where many different regeneration policies and strategies have been attempted over at least the last forty years. As the Audit Commission recognised in its early assessment of Bridging NewcastleGateshead, a Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder regeneration programme which ran from 2003 until 2011 in the North East of England:

“The pathfinder area has been subject to numerous programmes of interventions in the past...but all have failed to halt the area’s decline.”³

Many of the residents in regeneration areas will have lived through a number of different initiatives. **Residents in Bridging NewcastleGateshead described themselves as suffering from ‘consultation fatigue’, and may not immediately embrace another new approach to regenerating their local area.** People in the regeneration area have also experienced the emotional impact of being involved in demolition and relocation programmes. One of the residents who had been moved to allow demolition described her feelings in this way:

“It was a real trauma moving... [it was] where I’d lived all my life, a home and we’d all been brought up together and we’d had happy times.”⁴

The impact of these regeneration programmes on a community should not be underestimated. Conversely, communities that have been heavily involved in,

or feel they have benefited from, regeneration programmes may not wish to adopt a new approach. This means that **the government needs to build its new approach on existing experiences of communities in regeneration areas** rather than attempt to start again from scratch.

The tools that are available to local communities to achieve localist regeneration are similar to those used by previous governments. This is particularly true of the funding sources that are available to support regeneration. Many of the funding sources are a continuation of programmes such as Supporting People, Decent Homes and the European Regional Development Fund. Other ‘new’ funding sources (such as Community Infrastructure Levy, Tax Increment Financing and self-financing for council housing) have been developed by government departments over several years.

New funding sources, such as the New Homes Bonus will be available, and other changes, such as reform of planning policy, are being enacted. However, in general terms the tools available for regeneration represent an evolution in policy rather than a revolution.

A long-term commitment will be needed to successfully implement a localist approach to regeneration. Previous regeneration programmes such as the New Deal for Communities have found that “**community engagement requires consistency, dedication and commitment**”.⁵ Successful programmes also require continuity in staff working on regeneration programmes, clarity on how communities are going to be engaged and realistic timescales for delivering change.

One of the key issues for funding of regeneration is ensuring long-term stability. Analysis of previous regeneration projects has repeatedly highlighted the problem of trying to use short-term funding for long-term regeneration, yet the lessons have been ignored. **Uncertainty is one of the main concerns expressed by residents experiencing the regeneration process.** There can also be pressure to show progress within electoral cycles, which can be difficult for long-term programmes.

Gaining some level of cross-party consensus on regeneration, particularly its funding, would create major long-term benefits through greater stability. Ideally this long-term approach should include responding to the views of existing communities and combining different aspects of regeneration (community, economic and physical).

What is regeneration trying to achieve?

It is important that the government clarifies the aims that it has for regeneration. The strategy outlined in *Regeneration to Enable Growth* provides little information about what the government is intending to achieve, beyond general statements about the desire to “breathe economic life into areas”.⁶

Historically there have been a variety of different reasons used to justify interventions to regenerate communities. These include reducing ‘irresponsible’ behaviour, developing active citizenship, building social capital and creating sustainable communities. Some programmes have focused on environmental changes, while others have focused on people-based interventions.

However, **there is often a marked difference between the problems described by local communities and those described by politicians, policy makers and regeneration practitioners.** For example, communities in NewcastleGateshead described the problems with their area very differently from professionals involved in the regeneration programme.

“There was one bit missing in [Bridging NewcastleGateshead’s] analysis and that was how the community sees themselves – the personality and character of Walker – that should underpin the vision for Walker Riverside.” (Community worker, Walker Riverside)⁷

Discussions with residents in the NewcastleGateshead area revealed that they desired an improvement to their communities for themselves, their families and friends. This desired improvement included a regular public transport service, local banking facilities and greater availability of places to purchase healthy food. **They did not want master plans and new people imposing their ideas and lifestyles on them. They wanted regeneration on their terms – a vibrancy and renaissance that they understood and actively desired.**

The government is clear that it is seeking a localist approach. However, it has not yet explained what will happen if the priorities of local communities conflict with those of national politicians and policymakers. Without a clear, shared understanding of the problems and challenges facing regeneration areas, it will be almost impossible to begin to address them.

Who is regeneration for?

This leads on to the importance of definitions of community. The government has stated that “our approach is localist - putting residents, local businesses, civil society organisations and civic leaders in the driving seat.”⁸

However, this is difficult to achieve in practice, as there are a variety of overlapping communities and other stakeholders (including business and civic leaders) that will have different priorities. **Developing a localist approach will require careful balancing of different interests.**

Communities are also dynamic: **the needs and aspirations of different communities can change profoundly and sometimes rapidly.** Balancing of different interests must therefore consider these dynamics, to ensure that existing communities are not overlooked and regeneration is flexible enough to respond to changing needs. For example, existing residents felt that Bridging NewcastleGateshead tended to place the needs of future communities above their needs.

A much clearer definition of the community or communities being targeted is essential to any regeneration programme. With a clearer definition it will be possible to tailor support to different communities and assess the extent to which they benefit from regeneration programmes.

Measuring success

It will also be impossible to evaluate the success of this new, localist approach without a more specific definition of what regeneration is trying to achieve. A recent review found that “**it is important to set realistic targets for regeneration schemes**”.⁹ Such targets are vital to assess the impact of the government’s approach across the country. An important consideration is whether a localist approach to regeneration will achieve results in some communities but not be successful in others. If this is the case, the **government will need to consider multiple approaches to regeneration, which will work in different areas.**

The assessment of success should be an ongoing, participative process that seeks the views of a wide range of stakeholders. **Communities are always changing, so it is important that different views are sought and considered throughout the regeneration process.** The assessment of

regeneration approaches should seek to build on the lessons that can be drawn from previous experiences.

Assessment of success should also be seen to be credible by local people, funders and central government. It therefore needs to identify both the successes and failures of the approach. **Independent monitoring should be incorporated in the assessment process from the beginning, to enhance credibility.**

About this paper

This briefing paper is based on research by Dr Andrea Armstrong at Durham University, which was conducted with support from BSHF.¹⁰ The research focused on the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder regeneration programme, with particular reference to the Bridging NewcastleGateshead scheme, which ran from 2003 until 2011 in the North East of England.¹¹ This summary was prepared by Ben Pattison of BSHF.

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 - ¹¹ Bridging NewcastleGateshead, www.bridgingng.org.uk

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