

Workshop Report

Neighbourhood Renewal Workshop

Workshop held on
Tuesday 7th March 2006

at

Millennium Community Outreach
Centre



Prepared by

Michael Gallagher

The opinions expressed in this report represent the viewpoints of the workshop participants, and are not necessarily those of the authors or that of North Belfast Partnership.

Section I - Introduction

The workshop began with a PowerPoint¹ slide presentation outlining both the origins and experience of the Triax Neighbourhood Partnership Board within Neighbourhood Renewal. This included the distribution of Triax's 2003 Consultation report *Tackling Inequality Bridging the Gap*.

The slides included commentary on the distinguishing features of Neighbourhood Renewal including:

- Longer time horizon;
- Broadly based approach;
- Joined-up thinking;
- Partnership working.

It moved on to examine the structure of Triax

- Public-Private-Community / Voluntary sector representation;
- Role of Thematic Sub-Groups.

Some reference was made to the difficulties in keeping people interested in the concept due to the long planning period, and the fact that statutory agency representatives were not willing as yet to sign up as full members due to perceived legal restrictions.

The issue of deprivation was explored and the multi-faceted nature of it and the response needed to ensure a holistic approach.

The contrasts between the previous discrete programme based regeneration strategy and new neighbourhood renewal were discussed.

The issue of 'liveability' was raised and reference made to its importance as a measure within any Neighbourhood Renewal strategy. Residents in particular were said to judge Neighbourhood Renewal on these issues.

Part 1 of the presentation ended with a short review of the five themes that Triax had chosen.

¹ Presentations attached.

Section II – Neighbourhood Partnership Board – Practical Issues

This part of the presentation was designed to deal with the more practical issues that tend to arise within Neighbourhood Renewal and in particular the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Boards.

To contextualise this section emphasis was made of what Neighbourhood Renewal IS and, more importantly in some respects, what it is NOT.

This raises the question of Neighbourhood Renewal simply being seen as a funding mechanism for groups rather than something new and based around resident need.

Indeed within some areas Neighbourhood Renewal is being viewed as an add-on to existing funding with little difference in the outputs that it will be expected to deliver.

This ignores the genesis of Neighbourhood Renewal which sits at the micro-neighbourhood level and its success or failure will be ultimately determined not by its ability to sustain the community/voluntary sector but rather how it impacts upon the day to day lives of those within neighbourhoods.

Key Questions for Neighbourhood Renewal

- 1) Who defines residents' needs – Is it the organised groups who dominate the community/voluntary sector - many of whose priority is the survival of an existing organisation rather than meeting the demands of residents.
- 2) Are existing groups/organisations a barrier or a conduit to the views of residents?
- 3) Are groups ready for the challenges that Neighbourhood Renewal poses for groups and organisations within Neighbourhood Renewal areas – this includes the ability to work through the concept of Full Cost Recovery and how it might apply to their organisation.
- 4) As with the Public Sector reviews that are ongoing, the same basic questions have to be asked of the community/voluntary sector. These would include - Is there a need for the organisation to exist? If yes, then why does it exist and how best can its objectives be achieved?
- 5) Can the community/voluntary sector work with statutory agencies and vice-versa? Is there a basis for trust between both sectors? Or is there a lack of respect for how each works? Do those within the two sectors understand each other?

The needs of communities rather than existing provision must be the important consideration. As well as this Neighbourhood Renewal as a pot of money for statutory agencies was referenced in discussions with their involvement based not on what they were bringing to the table but on what they could take away.

For Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships there is the question of '*Consultation Fatigue*'. How can we get people interested in the Neighbourhood Renewal concept as they have been subjected to community audits, feasibility studies, needs analysis, gap analysis and so on with no evidence from their perspective that anything has changed?

In this regard there needs to be quick wins or the promise of early intervention if individuals and groups are to remain interested/involved in the process.

From a theoretical and practical point of view the question of creating *capacity* rather than more *dependency* needs to be addressed.

Internal issues within Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships –

Representation – Proportionality

In the case where you have a cross-community partnership should there be equal representation for each community regardless of the population numbers?

While it is clear (in theory) that resource allocation should be based on need this does not deal with the view that funds should be distributed/shared across neighbourhoods/communities on the basis of community identity.

In the allocation of funding, who *ultimately* decides? - Neighbourhood Partnerships, groups within these Partnerships, DSD, or DFP?

How to deal with the inevitable conflicts of interest that arise – need for clearly set out code of conduct which all partners must sign up to – *at the start of the process*.

The question of the limitations on funding needs to be kept in mind – Neighbourhood Renewal would not be able to support the existing levels of Local Strategy Partnership, BRO and Big Lottery funding. Some groups will lose out – who decides?

Can Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships move straight to ‘Pure’ Neighbourhood Renewal or should there be a transition phase? While in a theoretical context the first approach may be preferred it may nevertheless, on a practical level, make it extremely difficult to deliver Neighbourhood Renewal with the existing weak capacity within communities at resident level.

Indeed, if it is contended that there is weak community infrastructure in some areas at present, then without some attention to building ‘resident based capacity’ (whatever that may be) then Neighbourhood Renewal may quickly find itself running into the sand.

Have the Statutory Agencies bought into the concept of Neighbourhood Renewal? There is a real feeling that they have not. If so, then will Neighbourhood Renewal be additional or not?

A major question that needs to be addressed is the role of community groups representing residents’ interests? (Issue of ensuring community is truly represented on the Partnerships). Not an easy one to achieve or even evaluate.

If DSD allow back door lobbying then the process is dead. Thus DSD must be fully supportive of the process (so long as they are properly informed by Neighbourhood Partnerships) in order to strengthen the credibility of the Partnerships as competent, fair and transparent bodies which DSD can support.

Any suggestion (by word or deed) that there are alternative routes around Neighbourhood Partnerships would be fatal to the success of the Neighbourhood Renewal concept.

The Future

Do groups need additional audits? There has been a significant amount of money and time spent during the last few years on audits, feasibility studies, gap analysis etc. If an audit/survey is being used as an animation exercise within the community then that may be appropriate. However, there is no need to reinvent the wheel!

Can Neighbourhood Partnerships not begin the process now through identifying small pilot projects as a way of ironing out problems prior to full Neighbourhood Renewal? While workshops examining the roles of partnership members and training are all useful, it will not really until there are funds to be allocated that the Neighbourhood Partnerships will mature. Conceptual problems of conflicts of interest are easily resolved so long as they are virtual in nature – the real test and best training ground may be for the Partnerships to identify small tranches of funding and given responsibility for its allocation. This would act as an incentive for action and involvement whilst teasing out future problems.

There is a concern that Neighbourhood Renewal will in fact be the end of the community/voluntary sector. There is a belief amongst a reasonably large number within the sector that Neighbourhood Partnerships are being used as a 'stalking horse' to indulge in a cull of the community/voluntary sector and to ensure its 'withering away'. Thus it is seen not as promoting increased community participation but simply as a way to reduce the numbers employed within the sector as a parallel development to what is happening within the public sector.

However, exploring this issue from the other side, the community/voluntary sector has for years demanded a role in the allocation of resources. Are they now abdicating it? The sector has often claimed that it has the best knowledge and insight into social problems, and Neighbourhood Renewal is an opportunity to demonstrate that knowledge!

Section III - Discussion

On the whole, the main points that arose from the discussion were as follows

- 1) To date groups are not happy with the amount of information that they have been provided regarding the progress of Neighbourhood Renewal. They feel they are being kept in the dark and that agencies know more than they.
- 2) Little progress has been made on the issue of involvement by the statutory agencies within Neighbourhood Partnership Boards. Their presence is seen as passive observers.
- 3) The concept of Full Cost Recovery is still relatively new to many groups and most are unsure as to the full implications of it and to its application. This will be important for those groups with the capacity to bid for contracts to deliver public services in their neighbourhoods.
- 4) Hard choices have to be made by communities and real attitudinal change is necessary if Neighbourhood Renewal is to succeed. This change must also apply to statutory and other organisations.
- 5) Neighbourhood Renewal must influence, and be shown to be able to influence, local service delivery. Local knowledge should be respected and inform decision-making.
- 6) The whole question of low skill levels should be central to Neighbourhood Renewal. Closely related to this are the high rates of economic inactivity that persist within Neighbourhood Renewal areas. The single biggest challenge identified by Government is those within communities that have left the active workforce. In the absence of appropriate policies these very large numbers, who are benefit dependent, will continue to depress incomes within Neighbourhood Renewal areas. The community/voluntary sector viewpoint to date has been characterised as one of 'there are no jobs then this is what you could expect'. This is seen as a consequence of macro-economic policy and outside their particular remit, except for schemes aimed at maximising benefit and job provision within the social economy. Government views the status quo in this area as not an option. The community/voluntary sector needs to begin to explore what this means for them and for those within their communities. In the medium term without a significant change - i.e. decrease in the numbers economically inactive – Neighbourhood Renewal will struggle to make a positive impact upon the overall quality of peoples' lives.

- 7) In this context, Invest NI and other Local Economic Agencies have a critical role to play in creating jobs or growing existing jobs. Those in leadership roles within these communities need to explore what communities need to do to ready themselves for the challenge set by society's move to a 'knowledge based economy'. For those on the margins of the labour market such a significant change brings unrivalled opportunities and unprecedented challenges. Communities need to begin now to prepare for both. The first step in determining whether communities benefit or suffer overall is a recognition that changes are coming.
- 8) Neighbourhood Renewal is not centred upon improving community relations, but can work in this direction through the tackling of issues common to all deprived communities, irrespective of political/religious background. Participants agreed that the focus should be on socio-economic needs.
- 9) As with overall funding will Neighbourhood Partnerships be competing for funding? Thus, if opportunities arise for Partnerships to deliver programmes outside of mainstream Neighbourhood Renewal will they do this? If yes, then they may end up competing head-on with their partnership members for funding. Where this occurs, or is perceived to occur, then the relationship between partners may suffer.

Key Issues

Who ultimately decides upon the allocation of resources through the Action Plan? Will BRO / DSD have the authority to amend the Action Plan and can they do so without consultation with Neighbourhood Partnerships?

While there may be a clear and necessary need to insulate Neighbourhood Partnerships legally from the decision-making process this may be seen as removing autonomy from the Partnerships themselves. It may be useful to examine the mechanism applied by the Local Strategy Partnerships who sent Action Plans for ratification to the Northern Ireland Partnership Board which appeared to balance both competing needs.

Will the issue of financial accountability allow BRO / DSD to veto spending and how will this be managed?

Neighbourhood Partnership members need to act in the best interests of the community, not the groups that they belong to or feel they represent. If an individual's primary purpose is to secure or alternatively 'box-off' funding for client groups then the process will be substantially weakened.

How can Neighbourhood Partnerships ensure that the inevitable conflicts of interest can be managed effectively and early within the action planning process?

The composition of the Neighbourhood Partnerships will be critical to their success. The skills and knowledge of Partnership members will be more important than organisational representation.

It is important to be clear that resources are not just about money. Neighbourhood Renewal is also about utilising existing resources, including human resources. Such resources could include the secondment of expertise from statutory agencies – the Council, Housing Executive, Health Boards, Education Boards, etc - and other community support organisations.

What is to be done about areas that are outside Neighbourhood Renewal areas? At the time of writing, it is unclear what the Government response to this is. Should money be top-sliced for organisations that deliver across Neighbourhood Partnership areas but who are located elsewhere? Who decides where the money goes and how much?

There was a continuing lack of transparency in the process to date and a feeling that information was being held back from communities. Whether this is due to the fact that DSD has not fully worked out the process or alternatively was not telling was unclear to those on the ground. On the whole, however, there was dissatisfaction with this aspect of the initiative to date.

If Neighbourhood Partnerships move immediately to 'Pure' Neighbourhood Renewal then what mechanism can they use to deliver Neighbourhood Renewal on the ground? Where groups disappear (as funding ceases) and resident groups have not the capacity to deliver then how in practical terms can Action Plans be delivered?

Are we still in a transition phase awaiting the full implementation of NR?

In fact can Neighbourhood Renewal deliver until the Review of Public Administration is fully implemented? Within the English model of Neighbourhood Renewal local councils have a central role by virtue of the range of neighbourhood services they are involved in. Is it the case that Neighbourhood Renewal must wait until the same level of service provision is the responsibility of councils?

Is Neighbourhood Renewal something different and does DSD believe in it? The body language of some within DSD is that this is yet another initiative that will come and go and nothing to get excited about. Additionally, if it is to be moved to local council control within a few short years then they may feel it is not worth investing further in the process.

Overall Conclusions

There was a great deal of goodwill shown towards the concept of Neighbourhood Renewal but many in the community sector remains unconvinced that Government knows what it is doing. This is allied to a great degree of cynicism within the sector about the process to date.

At present people are prepared to go along with the Neighbourhood Renewal process but there is an obvious need to provide 'quick wins' and demonstrate to people on the ground that Neighbourhood Renewal can work, and that in doing so it will benefit local communities.

It is probably unfortunate that those within the statutory sectors entrusted with the delivery of Neighbourhood Renewal are viewed as non-transparent. This is more likely due to the drip-feed of information to groups, and the inability to answer core questions such as who will ultimately decide upon the allocation of resources. In the absence of clear answers then the credibility of the concept is seriously weakened. The same applies to the delivery mechanism for Action Plans where no definitive answers have been given.

In the background the closing of many community-based projects - due to the ending of funding - is further souring the context within which Neighbourhood Renewal is viewed by many in the sector.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.