

Impact Bexley

Regeneration - what people think



Summary Findings and Recommendations

An anecdotal study of local people's experiences and reactions to regeneration and the impact on their lives.



**NATIONAL
LOTTERY FUNDED**

Background and rationale

The results of Impact Bexley have provided a unique insight into the effect that publicly sponsored and run regional regeneration programmes have had on the lives of residents and communities.

The project ran from mid 2017 until June 2018 and during this time we held focus groups that were open to residents of our target groups in the Bexley borough. The approach taken was purely qualitative and the outputs are entirely anecdotal, so it is important that readers are clear that we do not claim these results to be completely authoritative.

One specific aspect that we tried to understand is how these changes affect the most disengaged and hard-to-reach in our communities, such as:

- people with learning difficulties
- people with disabilities, mobility issues or infirmities and other related issues
- people who are socially isolated or lack an extended social infrastructure
- those whose lives are constrained by mental health issues

Impact Bexley is run by Future Communities, a not-for-profit social enterprise based in Bexley. It was funded entirely by a grant from The Big Lottery Fund, to whom we are deeply indebted for this support. We would also like to express our thanks to the organisations and groups that contributed to the work:

- Centrepieces Mental Health Arts Project
- Christ Church Bexleyheath
- Crossness Engines Trust
- Learning & Enterprise College Bexley
- Orbit Housing
- Peabody Trust
- Re-Instate Ltd.

References

The Raynsford Review of Planning:

www.tcpa.org.uk/raynsford-review



Executive Summary

Objectives:

To understand the personal experiences of people and the impact of regeneration on their families, neighbourhoods and communities. Further, to establish if people feel that regeneration *delivers what they expected* and *achieves what they want*.

Method:

The study was purely qualitative in nature; based on anecdotal evidence from semi-structured, open dialogues collected during a series of focus group meetings. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the results are completely scientific and authoritative.

Scope:

To reach out to people who rarely have the opportunity to engage in typical consultation exercises, especially those that are least likely to be reached by conventional engagement methods. For information about the target groups and organisations see page 2.

Although not included in the formal focus group process, we did discuss issues of engagement with representatives of regeneration organisations. They noted that engagement with their respective target communities was far from straightforward and presented significant challenges.



Findings

1. People feel generally uninformed about the details and consequences of regeneration. The process by which planning consent is obtained was unknown, or at least unclear, for the majority of our participants.
2. Often people are wary of large organisations and statutory authorities such as local councils, transport organisations and housing associations.
3. Due to the above factors, engagement and consultation are challenging. Attempts by authorities to consult residents and communities generate variable results, either because of low response levels or as a result of lack of faith in the consultation process. The range of mechanisms used to engage tend to be limited, usually in the form of newsletters and surveys on paper or public meetings that are open to a large audience.
4. Regeneration has complex effects and is frequently seen as, at best, a necessary nuisance to be endured whilst the work disrupts people's lives.
5. The need for regeneration is often not well understood, and can lead to bewilderment and frustration. At worst it can have negative consequences for large numbers of residents.
6. Those consequences that were seen as specifically negative are significantly increased housing costs, both for home-owners and in the rented sector; reduced safety and security on our streets; and even the breaking up of established communities.
7. There was a widespread feeling that during the delivery period agencies usually failed to provide ongoing updates on progress.
8. People with certain disabilities (visual, auditory, or mobility impairments) were particularly critical of street and road layout changes. The most severe criticism was directed at designs that gave people in these groups little or no sense of their location and undermined their sense of personal safety.

Recommendations

1. Statutory authorities and their delivery partners need to rethink why, how, where and with whom they engage to obtain views on strategic decisions. Regeneration outcomes are too important to people's daily lives for the overall policy and direction to be determined by statutory processes alone.
2. New forms of community engagement need to be developed that reach out to and include the hard-to-reach groups within communities.
3. A wider range of channels should be employed to reach all segments of target communities and facilitate conversations instead of just question and answer exchanges. As well as digital techniques and social media, text messaging and small focus groups could be used.

Focus group participant observations

Satisfied residents, to some extent

Parks and associated facilities in Bexley were thought to be excellent and this was probably a contributory factor to the view expressed by several people that Bexley “is quite a nice place to live”. Another area that attracted positive comments was the “very good” town centre library, as did road cleansing in the borough.

“Overall the idea of regenerating this area is good as it was getting very run down.

However, once it has been agreed, the lives of ordinary people don't seem to matter”

“Some people in Thamesmead felt very isolated so Crossrail is making people feel that they are able to travel across the area better, and therefore decreasing the feeling of isolation.”

In the Bexleyheath area crime was regarded as not a serious problem, with the crime rate thought to be very low.

General comments

In looking at regeneration and its effects, it was expected that this study would generate a large amount of negative comment. What is interesting is the consistency of experiences across the groups and the strength of feeling expressed. One positive conclusion that can be drawn from this is that people are passionate about their neighbourhoods and feel a close connection to their communities. The issues on which people held the most strongly felt views were communications, engagement and involvement. The following comments help to highlight this:

- Consultation results and residents' petitions do not command the appropriate attention by the Council and so do not appear to be acted upon.
- Certain parts of the borough – the north in general and specifically Welling – are areas where residents feel least involved in local regeneration and more unlikely to benefit.
- Most residents want more information from the Council and other agencies involved in regeneration including local developers, via a wider range of communication methods, such as engaging with local amenity associations, using focus groups and highly visible notices in local newspapers. Equally strongly felt is a desire for a spirit of dialogue which could be summarised by “this is what we are considering, what do you think?” rather than late in the process asking “this is what we intend to do – do you object?” when plans are already very advanced.

Infrastructure and transport

- Public institutions appear to suffer a severe lack of connection with the wants and needs of residents, for example, local authorities' traffic designers imposing “shared space” roads and junctions which were almost unanimously regarded as potentially dangerous and do not achieve the claimed results.
- Bus services are an essential form of public transport for most people in this study. A common complaint was that at the end of the school day buses were already too full on arrival at some stops to allow people to get on. This overcrowding, coupled with the poor behaviour of school students, meant frequently having to wait for a later service. A number of people thought that certain busses need to be better managed, or even policed.
- Implementing dedicated cycle lanes on certain roads, without any consultation, was seen as unnecessary, wasteful and detrimental to road users generally in that they reduce the easy flow of vehicles and create tailbacks. There is a view that such schemes result from local authorities and Transport for London having to use up surplus funds at the end of their financial year.
- New infrastructure invariably causes housing prices to rise making it more difficult for young local people to afford their own home. The view that infrastructure investments are good for property investors but not for people who want to live here was very consistent and strongly held.
- During the construction phase infrastructure projects often create environmental issues such as dust and noise pollution. When roads, walkways and other public spaces are used for long-term storage of materials, and so are left in a poor state, it makes these areas a target for illegal behaviour such as fly-tipping.
- It was said that the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders to enable infrastructure projects to proceed causes anger where this results in a loss of local amenities.
- A number of people felt that communities are left on their own after projects are completed - that there is no follow-through and that the lives of ordinary people do not matter.
- For some people Crossrail is not seen as particularly beneficial, even when viewed purely in terms of improved transport, because a lack of north-south bus connections limits their ability to access the service. One respondent commented that added capacity is towards central London rather than north-south.
- Crossrail was also singled out as a particular cause of noise from site operations.



Streets and the urban environment

Road layout, urban design and safety

- People with a visual impairment depend on specific and well understood arrangements for them to navigate their environment, so changes to street layouts have a very significant impact on their quality of life. The introduction of so called 'shared spaces' - such as in Bexleyheath - where there is no distinction in level between pavement and roadway came in for deeply felt criticism.
- Even for those without disabilities, shared spaces create uncertainty, confusion about who has right of way and is “confusing for older drivers who learnt to drive a long time ago”. Many felt that the shared space design was imposed without consultation. However, we did encounter some positive views: one from a former bus driver: “Drivers and pedestrians have to think more carefully before crossing the space. It slows drivers down. Accidents are decreased and drivers are slower, overall the traffic moves faster through the junctions”.
- Several comments were made stating that little or no thought is given to pedestrians who suffer from impaired sight. The example of 18 inch high short spherical stone bollards that blend into the paving slabs instead of simple and contrasting metre high posts, such as installed outside Christ Church, illustrates this point most graphically. Similarly, uneven pavements and walkways that present a trip hazard came in for considerable adverse comment.
- Controlled road traffic crossings with phase timings are a problem not helpful to elderly pedestrians, leaving them too little time to cross safely, especially for people with physical mobility issues.
- Aligned with the positive comments referenced earlier about Bexley's parks, the need for more green spaces and community areas was on some people's wish list.



Crime and antisocial behaviour

- A number of our participants expressed concerns about crime and disorder, especially in the north of the borough. There is a general consensus that low-level, antisocial behaviour and minor crime leads to a worsening sense of security and a general degradation in the appearance and “feel” to an area. By contrast, respondents in the south of Bexley felt quite safe and that crime was not a major issue.
- One cause of disturbance that is an exception to this is school children and youths “hanging around” in Bexleyheath town centre. Problems of vandalism and general bad behaviour were also mentioned.

Shopping and parking

- It was felt that parking is not properly considered when new projects are planned. Parking charges are too high, and with the loss of short-term parking has the effect of discouraging visitors which reduces the viability of shops, impacts local small businesses, and leads to fewer facilities and choice.
- Whilst for some, Bexleyheath shopping centre does not reflect the wants and needs of people who shop there (they felt that the Council is trying to make it like Bromley, i.e. move it more upmarket), for others it needed to raise standards and to be more upmarket.



Housing

- That social housing is special and unique, and that it needs protecting is a strongly held view of a large number of the study participants. The view that when it is lost e.g. through redevelopment and regeneration, it should be replaced on a one for one basis was also supported. Add these concerns about availability to a fear that rising private rental rates will have a knock-on effect into the cost of social housing rents and it is easy to understand why many working age Bexley residents are looking at a very uncertain future.
- There is a view that the current high level of property values is encouraging short-term private lettings and not supporting those who want to set up a long-term home in the borough. A related concern, shared with many other Londoners, is that housing is seen simply as just a capital investment by overseas investors who never use their properties, nor even rent them out.
- For the most vulnerable, “to feel safe in their own home” is the most important issue. It was believed that new developments do not include 'safe housing' to enable independent living for people with these needs.
- At the same time it is thought that a major reason for councils to view redevelopment favourably is because of the greater receipts from council taxes.
- Concerns were also expressed that the community infrastructure – doctors' surgeries, schools, local transport – needed to support the amount of new housing being built just isn't there.
- It was interesting to learn that many people are interested in the visual impact of new housing. They believe it is important - but often poor, with boxy houses and architecture that is uninspiring.
- Despite it being one of the largest and most far-reaching redevelopment programmes in London, there was little or no knowledge of the work by Peabody Trust to regenerate Thamesmead.

Education and opportunities

- There were some concerns expressed over the lack of investment in education services in the north of the borough and frustration that this issue was slow to be addressed.
- A thought expressed by a majority of those in the working age category is that there is an increasing need for life-long education – but that Bexley lacks sufficient good information provision about adult education services. It is “hard for those who need help to know where to get it”.
- Retraining has costs for some people that act as "a barrier to getting on".

Communities, neighbourhoods and social cohesion

- In our study the most open-ended and wide-ranging discussions took place over what constitutes **community** and what social cohesion looks and feels like. In all of the focus groups we found a deeply felt need for strong and cohesive communities, and there was no shortage of views on the features and facilities needed to achieve this end.
- Too many places have closed that used to provide a place for anyone to go and the inclusive social surrounding facilities that pubs, restaurants and cafés cannot. Communities need facilities like libraries, community centres and a “Pop-in-Parlour” – places that are quiet for older people to enjoy.
- Many lamented the loss of services by e.g. Age UK and other providers, that gave sports and other facilities to young people. Numerous people commented that “nobody seems to think about what the young people want, they don't have any facilities.”
- Regeneration is also about arts and culture. Suggestions included a film festival, an art centre with rolling community projects, and physical arts as well as visual and performing arts, e.g. martial arts and means of self-expression that will “keep kids off the streets and out of gangs” and “where there are empty shops these could be used as gallery spaces, or to run art projects for the community”.
- Many people alluded to social isolation and the issues arising from it, but did not want to go into detail on the matter – it is still something of a taboo subject!
- Property developers and housing investors are pushing local people out of the area. At the same time rented accommodation discourages community formation and cohesion due to everything from not being able to hang pictures on walls to having constantly changing neighbours to the extent that there is no point getting to know them!
- Properties that are available for part-buy, part-rent are popular, both because of their greater affordability and because they encourage investment and engagement in the community.
- The social and cultural heritage of housing estates, particularly that of Thamesmead, needs to be recognised. One observation came as something of a surprise, but should be given due consideration: “there is more vibrancy, character and life in the run-down areas - this will be lost through regeneration and 'sanitisation!'”.
- Finally, a comment that reflects the concerns of most people, both within Bexley and across London generally: the need for more community policing is felt more strongly than ever.

Involving local people

A necessary evil?

Most people recognise that sometimes changes have to be made to the places they have to use or value, but that does not mean they welcome the accompanying disruption. In addition to outward communication about what is going to happen, people feel that systems should be provided to allow them to suggest improvements or to find ways to mitigate immediate problems. This simple action would benefit both the regeneration agencies and the people whose lives are disrupted. Interestingly, it was a private housing developer who provided this sort of arrangement that generated a positive comment.

Talked at and done to... but not involved!

People felt that communication on these issues could be greatly improved. Often the message isn't getting through, or, if it is, then its one-way nature is a long way short of people feeling they have a real opportunity to shape the world around them. Communities are not homogenous so in order to reach a representative cross-section of views there needs to be active engagement with neighbourhood groups, community organisations and people representing special interests.

"We were not consulted on what we would like to see in Bexley."

"Communities are difficult to build; trust has to be established - as well as a culture of wanting to support each other."

In addition to lack of knowledge about regeneration plans and projects there is also scarce understanding of the planning application and consent process itself. As highlighted in *The Raynsford Review of Planning*, roles and responsibilities of local authorities and other agencies are complex and confusing.

To quote from **PROPOSITION 4: A new covenant for community participation of The Raynsford Review**, it states that to be effective, planning must have public legitimacy and that this legitimacy is under intense strain, with a broad disconnect between people and the wider planning system. It goes on to say that restoring legitimacy is a long-term project, requiring action in four areas:

"I spoke to a local building company who listened to my concerns and changed how they were going to plan the new road layout."

- democratic renewal;
- clear citizen rights;
- a significant new approach to helping communities to engage in the planning process, with a focus on engaging groups who do not currently have a voice; and
- a new professional culture and skills set directed at engaging communities.

Winners and losers

In this study particular efforts were made to engage with, and ascertain the views of, some of the most hard-to-reach sectors of the community. It became clear that people from these groups felt strongly that not only were they excluded and ignored, but that their needs have never been properly understood.

For young people looking to set up a first home of their own the law of unintended consequences was felt to apply especially painfully, with both purchase prices and rents driven up because of new transport infrastructure, but with no compensating action by public authorities to provide affordable and social housing. This concern was also consistently echoed by parents and grandparents.



Detailed recommendations

Why, how, where and with whom you engage makes a difference

Public engagement should be more than an automatic “turn the handle” process, but quite often that is how it is perceived by the few people who attend consultation events and statutory meetings. Changing the location and setting for such events and adopting a less intimidating and off-putting process would help reach a wider audience at planning meetings.

Engage to mitigate the negatives

Recognising that members of the public have local knowledge and specific experience that can be usefully brought to bear, and using these resources, is an essential part of engagement. Regeneration and redevelopment usually generates undesirable side-effects, albeit temporarily, so taking steps to mitigate the negative effects of regeneration that come from the communities that will be affected will generate goodwill and engender positive relationships through the length of the project.

Intermediaries can help

Consider using arms-length intermediaries to facilitate contact and maintain more effective relationships with communities, and ensure anonymity is respected. Doing so will encourage honest and unconstrained comments / engagement of / gain buy-in from local communities.

Raynsford Review and doing Planning better

The Raynsford Review has just finished final consultations on its draft recommendations. It recognises that there are serious shortcomings with the current way that planning permission is sought, consulted on and given approval. It might benefit Bexley Council, future applicants and the communities that will be affected if the proposals were anticipated and preparations made in advance to adopt them.

Policies for communities

Although it is well understood that funding for councils to provide new homes has been severely limited, there is still a role for local authorities to play in ensuring that existing communities are protected and that new neighbourhoods become functioning ones. For example, adopting housing policies that encourage a long-term settlement and using planning conditions to ensure that peoples' needs are met.



Background and vision

Founded in 2006, **Future Communities** is a community engagement and consultation organisation that is volunteer led and works across London to support community development and regeneration at neighbourhood level and to work in partnership with other community organisations, agencies, public bodies and local communities to achieve this.

Our mission is to:

- Bring people and communities together
- Develop and support community initiatives, projects and proposals
- Build more cohesive communities and increase social capital
- Utilise new technology for the benefit of local communities
- Link neighbourhood development, diverse local communities and community groups.

For more information or to volunteer for our project, please contact us:

Email: info@future-communities.net

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Meet the team

Gary Parker BA (Hons), MIOF, MIED – Director



Gary is a qualified trainer who has developed & delivered fundraising programmes for many community organisations, businesses and social enterprises. He regularly delivers funding proposals for community groups, local authorities, social enterprises, SMEs, and universities and colleges. Gary presents programmes on two community radio stations.

Previously a visiting lecturer in Community Regeneration and Health at the University of Central Lancashire, he has also worked for Enterprise plc. He was also formerly an associate for several years of the Community Development Foundation which helped to launch **Big Local** and has significant experience of social enterprise and business development.

John Tidy MBA, BSc (Hons), ARCS, FRS, MCMI – Principal Consultant



John is an experienced and multi-skilled consultant with a wealth of experience in public services and the not-for-profit sector. His highly pragmatic approach has helped in many public sector assignments where complexity, a need for collaboration and consensus, and delivering value-for-money are constant challenges.

With a particular specialisation in information use and exploitation, John's previous roles also cover project and programme management, programme assurance, information strategy development, process improvement, technology exploitation and technical design.

John has delivered training for City University (now Cass) Business School and in his 1994 Masters thesis is an originator of the *Information Value Chain*.

Fiona Miller BA (Hons) DCG DMS MA - Senior Consultant



Fiona is an experienced management graduate currently working as a consultant.

In her previous role as Deputy Principal of an adult education college, she worked closely with local organisations and community groups to improve the lives of individuals by offering support to access education and training.

She was responsible for managing resources and upgrading accommodation through regeneration funding to improve its suitability as a learning environment.

Fiona is qualified to deliver information and advice on various subjects including Careers Guidance, Health & Safety, Prevent, Safeguarding and Equality & Diversity.

She has been a Director and Chairperson of local organisations and charities and is currently Chair of the college's charity, supporting students in hardship to enable them to succeed.

Caroline Skelly BA (Hons) – Director



Caroline is a highly experienced professional manager with extensive experience in administration management, research and event management in the private and voluntary sectors.

She is accomplished in developing partnership and stakeholder relationships having worked on a wide range of consultancy projects.

Caroline also provides essential administrative support to all of our clients, is highly organised, confident and diplomatic.

Future Communities is grateful for the participation of all the groups and individuals who contributed to this report.

We particularly value and appreciate the contribution of those people with disabilities, learning difficulties and mental health issues, or who are socially isolated and value your input.

