

## The reality of social exclusion on housing estates

The Government has put tackling social exclusion and neighbourhood renewal near the top of its agenda. Increased resources are beginning to come on stream but it is a race against time to prevent already troubled social housing estates from deteriorating further, according to a new study by David Page. The study investigated the reality of social exclusion on housing estates in three diverse settings, exemplifying different social and economic conditions common in post-industrial Britain. It found:

- f** **There is strong evidence that the adverse social effects of disadvantage - neighbourhood crime and vandalism, drug trafficking, poor educational attainment, family breakdown, and disaffected young people - are linked.**
- f** **Residents identified as 'vulnerable to social exclusion' were likely to be poorly educated, low skilled and demotivated, with low aspirations and expectations. Young people who had not worked since leaving school were extremely likely to have experienced an unstable family life.**
- f** **Despite those vulnerable to social exclusion being in a minority, the norms and values of this group were perceived as defining an estate culture which dominated the common areas of each estate, and coloured its reputation in the neighbourhood.**
- f** **In each area, the biggest single issue identified by residents was the anti-social behaviour of young people. Concerned parents tried to prevent peer pressure involving their children in crime and drugs. Some thought their children's life chances would improve only if they left the estate.**
- f** **Public services can play a crucial role in preventing social exclusion by:**
  - keeping vulnerable people connected to mainstream society;
  - maintaining a visible physical embodiment of civil society in areas where community safety and mainstream values are breaking down;
  - providing vital support to vulnerable families and children at risk.
- f** **The researcher concludes that these estate communities are 'in the balance': if conditions fail to improve, households who mind most - and have the choice - will leave, making renewal more difficult. Housing investment, the quality and availability of public services, and lettings policies are the critical issues that can tip the balance.**

### The social exclusion debate

The term 'social exclusion' is now widely used to describe how some forms of disadvantage, including unemployment, poor skills and poverty, can interact to push people out of mainstream society. Social exclusion is about more than disadvantage: it is about the effect that lack of income and lack of work have on people's ability to participate in society.

The social exclusion debate is also about how local communities can be isolated by the interaction of wider policies and events. One consequence of the shift from manufacturing to service industries over the last two decades has been a steady drift of able populations away from old industrial areas in search of jobs, and away from deprived estates and urban neighbourhoods in search of better homes in safer suburbs. That exodus increased still further the spatial concentration of disadvantage and social exclusion in already deprived neighbourhoods.

This research examined the causes and consequences of social exclusion, from the perspective of residents and front line staff on housing estates in three such neighbourhoods.

### Listening to excluded people

Most respondents identified as 'vulnerable to social exclusion' were content with where they lived and spent much of their time close to home. Their main concerns were with getting by from day to day and their main problems centred on social relationships with family and friends. Estate life was important because it occupied such a large part of their lives and provided most of their social contacts. They did not perceive high rates of joblessness or disrepair on their estate as significant problems, nor did they regard themselves as 'poor' or socially isolated. Although poorly connected to wider society, most were well connected locally to supportive peer networks.

They described an **estate culture** which:

- tolerated crime, drugs and antisocial behaviour;
- accepted low personal achievement and educational attainment;
- had low aspirations and expectations;
- held estate norms that were different from mainstream society; and
- exerted strong pressure from peers to conform to them.

Low levels of aspiration and morale and a lack of motivation characterised the **attitudes to work** of jobless young males: - *"we've been on the dole so long it's hard to get back into the swing of things, so you end*

*up sleeping all day"*. More positive attitudes to work were apparent in young people whose parents were working or had worked for most of their lives. Only a few unemployed young people identified advantages other than money to having a job, such as greater independence, self-esteem, stimulation and social contact. A high proportion had regularly truanted from school, been suspended, not taken their exams or left school before the age of sixteen; as a result they were poorly qualified and skilled, with low levels of literacy. Significantly, the very few jobless young people who were engaged in training, or were serious about their further education, mentioned the positive influence of their parents, especially their fathers.

The research identified a serious lack of **support for children and families** under stress: vulnerable families on the study estates were exposed to conditions in which even families with much better resources would find it difficult to thrive. Most of the young people who had been jobless since leaving school had also had a troubled upbringing and an unstable family background; most came from broken homes and had been brought up by multiple adults, usually one or other birth parent with a succession of partners. The correlation of these characteristics with low educational achievement supports the likelihood of connections between childhood experience of family dysfunction and social exclusion in later life.

In each area, and across all age groups, the biggest single issue identified by respondents was the antisocial behaviour of young people, including **crime, vandalism and the use of drugs**. Many younger respondents said they were themselves regular drug users; some young men admitted involvement in crime, including stealing cars, dealing drugs, theft and violent behaviour. There was toleration of a level of non-personal crime, within limits which had little to do with the law.

### Front line workers' perceptions

Front line workers involved day to day with the estates - from housing, health, social services, police, education, employment, youth and community services - were familiar with the problems families faced:

"What are the problems on the estate? Well, we've got drugs, youths on streets intimidating families, known families going around and causing trouble to everyone else, poverty and the benefits trap, truancy, exclusion from schools, teenage pregnancy, poor

parenting, lack of pre-school facilities, lack of child care facilities. Oh, and low expectations."

Front line worker

Some thought that social exclusion was to a large degree **a product of estate life**, and that when councils allocated families to such estates, they were setting them up to fail.

Front line staff felt their ability to tackle these problems was severely constrained by **resource limitations**. Gaps in service provision existed, they said, not because providers failed to understand the needs to be met, but because resources were spread so thinly. Even where SRB topped up resources for some services, council budget cuts were causing the withdrawal of other services from the same areas.

One consequence was that many front line public service workers were demoralised. The organisations they worked for had been repeatedly restructured to cope with reduced levels of staffing. Many believed they were losing the battle on troubled estates: things were getting worse, not better; problems like drugs and crime were not being contained; and the life chances of successive generations were being damaged.

Front line workers in each area thought their council was held in low esteem by estate residents because of its past inability to provide services of quality. True **community involvement** was proving elusive: the majority of residents were neither involved nor represented. Many thought that the people who were most excluded had least access to services. There was a widespread **lack of trust** in service providers, and estate residents were often suspicious that the providers worked to 'their own agenda', rather than to meet the actual needs of residents.

### Community perspectives

Community workshops drew a demographically representative sample from each estate population; their participants' views differed significantly from those of groups vulnerable to social exclusion in many important respects. They were more likely to believe estate problems could be tackled, given the will and the money. They were much more critical about the appearance, state of repair and unmodernised condition of their estate.

There was considerable concern, particularly among older residents, about the ineffectiveness of the council and police in dealing with antisocial behaviour and the widespread availability of hard

drugs. Parents said they found it difficult to instil positive social values in their children when the authorities appeared unwilling or unable to prevent the **crime, vandalism and drug dealing** that took place openly on these estates. Some concerned parents adopted protective strategies to prevent peer pressure involving their children in crime and drugs. And some felt that the only solution was to move off the estate.

Participants were highly critical of the **lack of engagement** of public service providers with estate communities. They felt that decisions were imposed by managers with little understanding of their circumstances, and that they had no say in decisions about their estate. As a result, local authorities had become associated with the arbitrary exercise of power on estates, rather than being seen on the side of residents.

Service cutbacks, the failure to engage local communities and the **breakdown of trust** between residents and service providers appeared to reinforce one another and contribute to a vicious circle of disaffection. The strong perception of these communities was that public services to estates had declined in volume and quality at a time when the number, and needs, of disadvantaged households had increased.

### Communities in the balance

While residents in all three areas thought that their estate was 'going downhill', most remained broadly content to live where they did and many saw their estate as a friendly place. But on all the estates, residents' commitment to stay was by no means absolute. People weighed positive and negative factors in deciding whether to stay in, leave, or return to, areas which had once been good places to live but were now in decline.

- Inertia, lack of better alternatives, and staying with 'the devil you know' were reasons for staying put;
- Lack of safety and security, poor education for children, poor job prospects and a worsening environment, were all reasons to move away.

Whether these estates, and others like them, continue to decline or begin to revive will depend critically on the cumulative personal decisions of many households. If those with choice decide to leave, the difficulty of renewing estate communities will become much greater.

" I grew up here, I've lived here all my life. I like the estate. But if it gets any worse, I'll have to move out."  
(Young mother, estate resident)

The responses of residents suggest that good public services are vital to the future of these estates. The local perception is that services have been cut back, and there is no sign from this study that this process has yet begun to change. At the time the fieldwork for this research was concluding, councils in all three areas were seeking fresh service cuts in order to achieve budget reductions. The Government's modernising agenda may have begun to change the organisational model at the town halls, but the estate residents in this study had not yet begun to feel the benefit of any improvement in services.

### Conclusions

The evidence from this research is that social exclusion, often addressed at the level of individual households, has structural causes and a strong community and neighbourhood dimension. The collapse of blue-collar work in traditional industries contributed directly to the increasing concentration of poverty and disadvantage on social housing estates. This was reinforced by the use of lettings policies as a welfare 'safety net'. And the underfunding of public services over the last two decades led to the withdrawal of services from housing estates at a time when the number of people vulnerable to social exclusion was increasing, making the need for effective public service support even greater.

The outcome is that social housing estates have become poorer places with more jobless households, fewer in work, poorer services and a poorer physical environment. Poor areas require constant attention, and seriously disadvantaged and vulnerable families need consistent support. Yet this study found that resources were not getting through to provide the scale and quality of services required to tackle social exclusion. Two decades of tight budgetary constraint and internal restructuring have left public services in poor shape to make the step change needed to turn troubled estates around.

The National Strategy for Area Renewal proposals are moves in the right direction but this research shows that there is a long way to go. The problems faced by individuals, communities and public services on troubled estates are long standing and deep seated, and unlikely to be quickly solved. It will

take time, commitment, and adequate resources to put things right.

### About this study

This study by David Page was carried out in 1998-99 on large council estates in three districts: one northern industrial area suffering from loss of traditional industries; one medium sized town enjoying its full share in rising national prosperity; and one London Borough in which relatively rich and poor people are housed in close proximity. The research was organised in three stages:

- Seventeen discussion groups, where disadvantaged residents talked about their views, aspirations and experiences of social exclusion.
- Discussion groups of front line public service workers, working on the same estates from a range of services, discussing their perceptions of social exclusion and how it should be tackled. These were supplemented by in-depth interviews with key workers with special knowledge of the estates.
- Daylong community workshops in which cross-sections of local residents gave their views on social exclusion and possible solutions.

Discussion groups were recruited and moderated by Oakes, McKee and Opinion Leader Research (OLR). Community workshops were facilitated by OLR. The three local authorities supported the study and provided information and assistance.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Communities in the balance: The reality of social exclusion on housing estates** by David Page, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 008 3, price £16.95).