

***Strategy Unit “Communities Project”***

***Questions on People and Place, and Place-  
Based Effects***

**For NCRA Panel  
Notes from Ivan Turok**

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### **Questions on People and Place, and Place-Based Effects**

#### **Notes from Ivan Turok**

*Question 1: What are the dynamics between people and place, what causes these and how consistent are they across areas?*

1. Starting with **definitions** and distinctions, ‘place’ in relation to residential communities (rather than businesses or investors) covers a bundle of amenities, services and relationships in an area that can profoundly affect people’s lifestyles and living standards.

- The quality of the housing stock and surrounding environment
- Shops, schools, health centres, transport and other services
- Access to jobs and other sources of income generation
- Friendships, acquaintances and other social networks
- Sense of security, stability and identity/status

2. Place can be seen as a **reservoir of resources** for people and may serve different functions at different **scales**. For example, the vicinity of the home fosters familiarity, place attachment and social connections; the neighbourhood provides access to a suite of everyday services and facilities; and the district affords access to wider economic opportunities and high order civic services and cultural amenities. Absence of any of these resources can be debilitating for individuals and communities. Administrative boundaries are often arbitrary and unhelpful in understanding how places really function for people.

3. Places operate in different ways for different kinds of **people**, so generalisation is difficult and consistency across areas is limited beyond some broad principles outlined below. People have distinct patterns of everyday life and seek different things from place depending on their:

- Stage in the life cycle, gender and family structure (young people, students, single adults, lone parents, pensioners etc)
- Socio-economic circumstances, income and wealth
- Ethnicity, faith and cultural affiliations

4. Place-based communities can be contrasted with **communities of interest** that have little or no spatial reference point, but are organised according to some shared purpose or common values, such as a concern for the environment, a specialised social interest or hobby, or a work-related network. There is debate about whether place-based communities are becoming less important in the context of rising personal mobility, a more diverse and fragmented society, and new technologies such as the Internet. Even though it is very difficult for places to meet people’s diverse requirements and rising expectations, research suggests that place still matters greatly for most people, albeit not for the same reasons.

5. The **dynamics between people and place** are highly complex because of their multiple dimensions and interactions in both directions. People 'consume' the resources available in places and their life chances are shaped by many of the attributes of place (schools, social relationships, economic opportunities etc). But they also 'produce' places through individual and collective action, including investment in the housing stock, involvement in all sorts of community-based associations and wider mobilisation around public services and the environment. Some groups have greater capacity to produce and maintain highly desirable places than others through the varied economic, social and other powers at their disposal.

6. There is a widespread assumption that people have a **choice about place** (in terms of where they live) and that major social changes come about by people freely exercising this choice. Yet evidence shows many people have severe constraints on their choices as a result of restricted incomes, lack of information and strong social attachments to place. In some cases people are effectively trapped in poor quality, stigmatised places through the operation of the housing system, weak external networks and disadvantages faced in labour market. There is evidence that in the tight housing markets of the South East, low income segregation is being diluted by better-off groups moving into poorer neighbourhoods because of high housing costs elsewhere.

7. In terms of social connections (or 'social glue') there is a useful distinction, particularly within poorer and excluded communities, between strong social ties that enable people to 'get by' in their existing circumstances (through mutual support for subsistence and survival) and weaker, more numerous external associations that can enable people to 'get on' by widening horizons and extending their opportunities into mainstream society and economy. Communities may be a source of constraint rather than opportunity if initiatives and networks are predominantly inward looking.

8. There is considerable debate about the value of **density and diversity** in place-based communities. These qualities can create vibrant and dynamic neighbourhoods of enterprise, creativity and opportunity for upward mobility. However, they can also be a source of tension and conflict over scarce resources, including housing and public services. Much seems to depend on the pace of in-migration and the confidence and stability of the existing community. The quality of civic leadership is also vital in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding of social diversity, and extensive opportunities for social interaction and integration. Leicester offers a good example of a considered approach to community cohesion dating back over several decades.

9. Trust in local and national government is important for stable people-place relationships and effective community-based activity. The willingness of communities to engage in cooperative action to regenerate run down areas and to participate with partnerships with other agencies depends upon confidence that government will provide sustained support. It also relies on a belief that conditions can improve and are indeed getting better.

10. Issues related to **economic opportunity** are often considered separate from people and place, and couched mainly in terms of regional (or city-region) economic development. Yet, changes in economic conditions can have an overriding effect (positive and negative) on local people-place dynamics. In addition, access to employment is a fundamental issue influencing people's attitudes to place, particularly for lower income groups who find it difficult to compete for jobs the further away they are and who typically travel much shorter distances to work than professionals, managers and technical workers. The growth of mixed-use development ideas (housing, jobs and leisure) offers opportunities for a more integrated approach to regeneration.

*Question 2: What causes place-based effects, how do these manifest themselves and how significant are they compared to other factors that impact outcomes?*

1. The notion of **place-based effects** is a broad one, covering a range of attributes of an area that influence people's capacities, resources and life chances. They are also known as area-effects or neighbourhood effects. They are typically distinguished from influences arising from people's past experience or social backgrounds, independent of where they are currently living. These other factors that shape life chances may include people's education, occupation, socio-economic status, family structure, gender, disability, ethnicity and cultural background.

Place-based effects may arise purely from **location**:

- The level of access (or isolation) an area offers to wider opportunities
- The area's position in the local housing market or social housing system
- Its access to major transport routes and attractiveness to private investment

And from **physical issues**:

- The quality of the housing stock and surrounding environment
- Aspects of urban design that affect people's sense of security and well-being
- Environmental phenomena such as pollution, contaminated land and noise

Aspects of **public services**:

- The capacity and quality of public services and amenities – schools, health centres, public transport, sports centres, youth clubs, police etc. They may be stretched by more intense pressure from concentrations of poverty and large-scale in-migration.

And the **social environment**:

- The strength of local social relationships and the extent to which they help or hinder access to external resources and opportunities
- Socialisation and peer group effects, particularly on children and young people who are more receptive to such influences
- External perceptions of the area and the potential for stigma and territorial responses

2. The issue of **scale** is important to the scope of place-based effects. For example, if one was focussing on neighbourhood effects, the state of the wider labour market would probably not be included as a place effect, but rather as a contextual factor. With a broader definition, it might well be included.

3. It is extremely difficult to **assess** the extent to which people are advantaged or disadvantaged by where they live, i.e. how far living in a place opens up or closes down opportunities for residents. The available evidence is contested, partly because of the methodological problems. It is difficult to isolate different influences because they often operate in conjunction with other factors and reinforce each other, so it is problematic to try and separate them off arithmetically. In addition, there may be multiple stages of causation, or causal pathways, many with delayed effects and a long-term legacy.

4. To take a simplified **example**, in many poorer communities deindustrialisation gave rise to male worklessness, which caused hardship, stress and ill-health, which in turn contributed to family breakdown, which led to behavioural problems among children and low educational attainment, and created community dislocation. In addition, the effects of economic change and widening income disparities may be reinforced by other systems, particularly the housing market. Residential sorting of low skilled, low income groups into the lowest quality, least desirable housing may

lead to concentrated poverty and a sequence of other adverse social outcomes, depending on the potency of place effects.

5. Place-based effects may be **manifest** in many different ways from the immediate living environment to people's employment prospects, long-term life chances and life expectancy.

- Quality of life: e.g. extent of stress, ability to relax, vulnerability to crime
- Children's behaviour and exposure to positive/negative influences
- Educational outcomes: school attendance, levels of educational achievement
- Occupations and incomes: position in the labour market and potential for progression
- Social attitudes: sense of disaffection, voting turnout, views of work and wider society
- Strength of social relationships: durability of families, external connections
- Level of health and well-being: happiness, morbidity and mortality
- Quality of the physical environment: public spaces, extent of litter, graffiti, vandalism

6. The **significance** of place-based effects is hotly disputed. Certainly it is difficult to generalise across such a wide range of social outcomes and in the absence of a systematic evidence base. The strongest evidence is from the United States where there is a longer tradition of research on this theme and where conditions are more likely to foster such effects because of the degree of income inequality and the extent of racial and social segregation in US cities. But even in the US there are many experts who argue that place effects are minor in relation to wider economic and social processes.

7. The received wisdom in much of **Europe** is that adverse neighbourhood effects are mitigated by a redistributive welfare state and social housing systems. Nevertheless there is qualitative and case study evidence in the UK to suggest that neighbourhood effects are not trivial. This is one of the arguments for mixed communities, and indeed for area-based initiatives. The importance and intensity of neighbourhood effects also seems to vary between different parts of the country, depending partly on the regional context and the extent of demographic and economic dynamism. For example, such effects appear to be weaker in London than in some northern cities.

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