

Kensington Regeneration

Lessons from Kensington New Deal for Communities



Introduction

This paper reflects on the findings of the final evaluation of the Kensington Regeneration New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme and tries to draw out some lessons for policy makers and practitioners. It focuses in particular on what the experience in Kensington can indicate about the strengths and weaknesses of neighbourhood level interventions. It does not describe the Kensington Regeneration strategy and programme although it will give a brief introduction to the area and its challenges. Rather it will comment on the principles that were intended to underpin the NDC programme in the light of developments in Kensington and makes reference to other related research. It is timely to look at this neighbourhood-focused approach given the amount of interest there is at present in the spatial levels that are appropriate for different sorts of policy intervention and in neighbourhood governance structures.

The Government committed approximately £2bn to the 39 NDC Partnerships over a 10 year period. The goal was to close the gap between the selected neighbourhoods and the rest of the country in relation to five outcome areas: housing and the physical environment, worklessness, crime, health and education. The programme was a significant component of the Government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR), designed "to tackle the unacceptably bad conditions in this country's poor neighbourhoods"¹ and ensure that within 10-20 years "no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live".² The NSNR recognised that neighbourhood decline had been fuelled by a combination of factors including economic change that led to joblessness, the declining popularity of social housing and a greater concentration of vulnerable people in certain neighbourhoods. The NSNR saw the solution in a longer term and more comprehensive approach than had been attempted previously. A key dimension of this approach was to have better local co-ordination and greater community empowerment.

¹ *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*, Cabinet Office and Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, January 2001, p.12

² *Ibid*, p.8



Five main principles underpinned the NDC Programme:

1. *Creating dedicated agencies for neighbourhood renewal.* The programme was to be driven by Partnerships to co-ordinate and manage delivery and be accountable to key stakeholders and the local community.
2. *A commitment to community engagement.* Local communities were to be at the heart of the renewal process.
3. *Engaging partner agencies.* Effective renewal and the improvement of service delivery required collaboration with key agencies.
4. *A learning Programme.* NDC Partnerships were to base their interventions on evidence about 'what works' and the NDC experience was to inform neighbourhood renewal more widely.
5. *Achieving strategic transformation.* NDC Partnerships were to develop, implement and review 10 year delivery plans to achieve transformational change in the five key outcome areas.

The Kensington area

Kensington was amongst the most deprived of the NDC areas in England at the start of the programme. A long and wedge-shaped area, situated immediately east of Liverpool city centre, it was difficult to confine the targeted area in the bid to the required size for NDC. Various debates took place over boundaries that would correspond to a natural community with which people identified. When designated in 2000, the area had 4,200 households and 5,050 homes. It was primarily residential, mainly developed between 1830 and 1914, with 83% of the stock terraced housing in dense blocks sandwiched between three arterial routes between the city centre and the motorway network. The housing was in mixed ownership: 40% owner occupation, 30% Registered Social Landlord (RSL), over 20% privately rented and 10% Local Authority.

Although called 'Kensington' for NDC purposes, it actually spanned neighbourhoods that did not think of themselves as Kensington and, when first selected, there was some local opposition to the name both from residents within the NDC area and those in adjacent ones. Boundaries were always going to be a problem, not only for the residents of immediately adjoining areas, but because this was just one slice of a much bigger problematic area. In any case, the NDC area needed to be seen in the context of the Liverpool district which ranked as the seventh most deprived in the extent of deprivation, the second for local concentration, second for employment deprivation and second for income deprivation.



Liverpool City Council chose the area for the NDC bid for a mix of reasons, partly because of its inherent problems and its lack of previous regeneration funding, but also because of its key location on the edge of the city centre and as a major gateway into the city. Kensington had the classic problems of the inner core of many cities: low housing values, poor access, degraded public amenities, high levels of crime and fear of crime, high unemployment, low skills and educational attainment, high mortality and morbidity, high levels of alcohol and drug dependency and high numbers of teenage pregnancies. Part of the challenge was to deal with the wreckage of an area that was once successful but had seen fairly rapid decline. The housing market was especially undermined by the 1980s' recession in a way that affected its social composition and took the economic heart from the area. High turnover and void levels locked Kensington into a cycle of decline. Fragmented housing management resulting from the high number of RSLs meant there was no coherent attempt to deal with the social problems that were as much a deterrent to new residents as the number of unfit homes.

Despite these problems, there was a strong community spirit amongst the longstanding residents. However, there was also a high level of transience in the area and from the late 1990s onwards, the BME population grew from around 5% to over 20% as a result of large

numbers of asylum seekers, some movement into Kensington from other parts of Liverpool and the arrival of migrant workers. At the outset of the NDC programme, crime was the greatest concern amongst local people. There were high levels of drug-trafficking, violence and criminal damage offences and burglaries from homes. Vandalism, squatting and arson were major problems in empty properties. Unlit back alleys aided crime and prostitution. Fear of crime and anti-social behaviour was as much a barrier to boosting housing demand as the condition of properties. Environmentally, the area was characterised by neglected and rundown open spaces and rubbish-filled alleyways. Litter was another significant concern for local people. For these reasons, although there were some anxieties about it being stigmatised by being described as a 'poor neighbourhood', local people thought that the area was the right one to choose for NDC.

Kensington Regeneration adopted a neighbourhood approach and identified five neighbourhoods that were "*distinguished by community perception, physical barriers and neighbourhood character*"³. Each was analysed in terms of the quality of the public environment, stock condition, open space, sites, access and linkage as well as the percentage of voids and turnover rates. There was quite a lot of territorialism within and between them, which increased the scope for competing concerns and priorities.

³ Kensington Regeneration Housing Delivery Proposal, January 2001.

Stabilising and changing the housing market was seen to be the key priority and about half the £62m NDC grant was directed towards housing. In the event, the Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) was introduced soon after the start of NDC and Kensington was one of its four 'zones of opportunity' in Liverpool. In addition to the physical programme, other programme areas in the NDC programme were environmental improvement, lifelong learning, employment and enterprise and quality of life covering community safety and crime.

The following sections of the paper will look at the lessons from the Kensington experience in the light of the NDC principles.

A dedicated agency for neighbourhood renewal

The critical issue in relation to having a dedicated agency for neighbourhood renewal is whether this has any advantages over other means of directing additional resources into the area, such as channelling them through mainstream agencies. The purpose of focusing the resources is to enable a real difference to be made in the targeted area. In the case of NDC, the intention was also to use the initiative as a laboratory for testing new models of working. Adding the funds to mainstream budgets might have risked their diversion or dissipation and would have been less likely to lead to innovation. Of course, the funding was a substantial factor and it helped to bring organisations to the partnership table. However, the advantages were not solely financial.

A major part of the added value of a dedicated agency for neighbourhood renewal is that, whereas most organisations have to be led by their own agency agenda and priorities, its thinking starts from the needs of the area and its residents and the vision and aspirations for its future. The overarching strategies of NDC partnerships could integrate all the different outcome areas and take a long term view. They could pick up on cross-cutting issues that do not fall squarely into any other organisation's sphere of responsibility. They had the benefit of multi-disciplinary Teams for whom partnership was part of the 'day job', and whose work included behind-the-scenes work liaising with partners and supporting projects. Boards, comprising public, private and voluntary sector partners and community representatives, introduced wider perspectives and the involvement of residents gave a listening ear on the ground.

It is clear that whilst neighbourhood working is appropriate for some policy domains, it is less so for others. For example, it is difficult to promote economic development at neighbourhood level. *"Issues of demand operate at a higher spatial level. Some supply side actions, such as wider labour market analysis and forecasting skill needs and sectoral change, similarly need to happen regionally or sub-regionally."*⁴ However, there is a distinctive role at neighbourhood level, which is *"engagement with marginalised groups, bringing an understanding of the very specific needs of different groups and individuals and*

⁴ Hilary Russell, (2007) *Neighbourhood Management and Neighbourhood Economic Development*, Research Report 34, CLG.

providing more tailored support for them than is generally supplied through mainstream provision.”⁵

The NDC neighbourhood arrangements spanned regeneration activities, work with services deliverers and enhanced citizen engagement. It was an appropriate size of area for the planned interventions. Other research⁶ has shown that the costs of neighbourhood working are high for populations below 5,000. There are economies above that threshold, but they peter out for neighbourhoods in excess of 15,000-20,000 people and, in any case, the nature of community engagement changes at that scale and the connection between service providers and local people is less easy to achieve.

Some key messages emerged from Kensington Regeneration’s experience. The first is about the need to *manage expectations* inside and outside of the area. Consultation especially leading up to, and during the early stages of, the programme is important, but it needs to be done in a way that does not raise over-inflated expectations. Asking open-ended questions when really only limited choices are available leads to disillusionment. Consultation also needs to be disentangled from information giving. Large public meetings are not necessarily appropriate for either. They can be manipulated by individual attendees and they are, in any case, unsuitable for answering the questions of individuals concerned about the potential implications of the programme for them. Another frequent source of frustration is associated with unfocused consultation. If there is no feedback, people do not know whether

their views have made any difference or, if not, why not. Keeping people informed is just as important during lulls in activity as when there is progress to report because any news vacuum will quickly be filled by speculation and misinformation.

Closely linked is the importance of a multi-faceted *communications* strategy that recognises the interests of different audiences and uses different forms of communication. This can serve various purposes: accountability; sustaining and widening involvement; fostering community cohesion; changing perceptions and raising local morale; and linking the regeneration with local people’s own stories and histories.

A third message is about the *importance of relationships* and establishing the *processes* and *mechanisms* that will encourage good relationships. Partners will not always agree with one another. The Board needs to be able to resolve conflicts without them jeopardising future personal or working relationships. It needs to ensure that its transactions are transparent and to guard against conflicts of interest. Similarly, relationships with NDC-supported projects required a clear framework setting out respective roles and responsibilities. However, NDC has also shown that, beyond structures and processes, *individuals matter* in the way they carry out their role. This has been illustrated both positively where people have gone beyond the call of duty in their commitment and negatively where others used their position as intermediaries and gatekeepers in an obstructive way.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Exemplars of Neighbourhood Governance*, (2006), CLG.



A commitment to community engagement

Early statements of government policy raised unrealistic expectations about the precise role of community representatives in NDCs. Initially it was said that NDCs should be 'community-led', but this was fairly quickly modified to being 'community-influenced'. This caused some disappointment at first but, in retrospect, many representatives in Kensington saw the backtracking as appropriate and probably inevitable. First, they realised that it is impossible to have a free hand. Managing the programme had to take account of – and was constrained by – other decisions affecting the area. They also came to recognise that regeneration requires different sorts of knowledge and that, therefore, partnership is required not only between different organisations but also between professionals and residents. Local people bring knowledge of the area, its strengths and weaknesses and the way public policy has impacted on it in the past. They have a role as advocates on behalf of their community and in articulating their vision for the area. But they are less likely to be equipped for determining the route map for getting from the area's starting position to where they want to be. This is where input from officers and partner agencies is required. One of the challenges in community-influenced initiatives is to get the right balance between these different sorts of expertise.

In practice, NDC was a huge learning curve for community representatives. Not only did they have to steep themselves in policies and programmes, but

they had to become more practised at working with others. At the start of the programme, the community representatives are all in the same position of having to become familiar with the jargon and technicalities of regeneration. As the programme progresses, however, it can become more difficult for individuals to get involved when everyone else seems to be talking a foreign language. This reinforces the tendency for many of the main roles to be confined to a relatively small core group. Despite the wide range of people involved in more limited ways, there has been considerable reliance upon a few people.

Securing representative community views is challenging. A hostile vocal minority can drown out rather than speak for the silent majority. Similarly, having a set of community representatives who represent a cross section of people in the area is not necessarily easy. In Kensington, care was taken to achieve a good geographic spread by having elections for two representatives from each of the five neighbourhoods. This had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it showed that the differences across the area were acknowledged and taken seriously and it meant that there were community representatives close at hand who could explain what was happening and answer people's questions. On the other hand, it possibly led to a more partisan approach by some representatives and the different balance of activity in different neighbourhoods gave scope for continuing competitiveness.

Elections, in any case, could not guarantee the inclusion of all the various potential interest groups. Although there was a good gender balance, they were mainly older people. They were also owner occupiers so that, at least at Board level, the voices of people in other forms of tenure were not heard. Separate arrangements were made at different times for having both young people and people from BME groups on the Board. The time commitment and the timing of meetings can inhibit the involvement both of more younger people and ones who are working. Other regeneration initiatives have had similar experience and found that it is unrealistic to expect many people willing and able to take on these roles.

Membership of the Board and associated committees and task groups as well as attendance at Neighbourhood Assemblies involves a major commitment. As well as taking up a huge amount of time amounting to several meetings each week, it is not an easy role. Community Board members can be the ones most exposed to questions and complaints from other residents. This means there is a need for ongoing training and support and for some means of demonstrating that their role is appreciated.

Various other general messages emerge from the experience in Kensington. First, involvement mechanisms need to evolve during the lifetime of a programme and, at every stage, balances need to be struck between:

- breadth and coherence;
- turnover and continuity – broadening the base whilst retaining expertise and experience;

- a focus on processes and delivery.

Secondly, strengthening the community infrastructure needs to be one of the key outcomes from the regeneration both through individuals who are better equipped to participate in their neighbourhoods and through stronger and more connected organisations. As well as contributing to ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ social capital, this also has implications for community cohesion. It is important to ‘hear the stories’ of the local community and to try to connect the regeneration with the history of the people in the area. A number of events in Kensington served to value its past, but also to make connections between the experiences of different racial and religious groups – some new to the area – and build bridges between diverse groups.

Engaging partner agencies

One of the questions that might be asked is whether Kensington Regeneration could have made better use of mainstream agencies. Some agency representatives take the view that perhaps there should have been more pressure on NDCs generally to partner the mainstream rather than establishing alternative services, which may ultimately be too small to survive without NDC funding. Although there is a strong argument for this in terms of sustainability, Community Board members tended to want to set up their own initiatives, rather than exploiting existing city-wide provision or listening to and making full use of existing local organisations such as RSLs. This seemed partly to be a matter of



ownership but also one of being influenced by their preconceptions of the agencies concerned. Nevertheless, some of the projects initiated or supported by NDC were characterised by additional outreach and tailoring of services to local needs which did bring added value and lessons for mainstream agencies.

Another issue is whether Kensington Regeneration should have developed better links with partner organisations through Liverpool First, the Local Strategic Partnership. This could have given NDC greater potential influence, a higher profile in the city and secured more informed and sympathetic support. In other areas, where the NDC was the flagship regeneration initiative in the locality, the NDC often had a representative on the LSP, just as they frequently had the Leader of the council or another senior elected member on the NDC Board. The position in Liverpool was rather different. The number of other regeneration initiatives in the city meant that NDC was not singled out as a special case and, to some extent, the opportunity for integration and seeing the potential of NDC for testing new approaches was missed. On its side, Kensington Regeneration probably did not do enough early on to position itself in the city and enlist senior and strategic involvement. The first few years were focused on developing a cohesive partnership and this almost inevitably meant a preoccupation with process issues. The community involvement dimension took a huge amount of time and tended to be at the expense of external relations and creating

closer links with mainstream agencies. Although the NDC grant may have been enough incentive for agencies to join in particular projects, something more was required to secure a position of influence in relation to mainstream policies and practices.

Prior to the NDC programme, there were some apparent contradictions between the perceptions of local people about the area's problems and their views about agencies. For example, despite the widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the local environment, the initial household survey conducted by Liverpool City Council showed high levels of satisfaction with services such as street cleansing, bin collection and street lighting. One possible reason for this seeming anomaly is that the conflicting findings partly reflected the low level of expectations amongst local people. Overcoming low morale and aspirations is a key challenge extending across all the policy themes in regeneration programmes. However, insofar as 'success' in this means creating more discerning and assertive citizens, their higher expectations could result in a decline in satisfaction levels irrespective of whether there has been an improvement in service provision. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the 2008 MORI Household Survey conducted as part of the National NDC Evaluation showed that although there were far fewer concerns about issues such as the local environment and community safety, levels of satisfaction with agencies were unchanged.



A learning programme

There were two aspects to the 'learning' principle: the NDC interventions were to be evidence-based and the experience of NDCs was itself to be used to inform neighbourhood renewal more widely. Kensington Regeneration combined various sources of evidence to profile the area, identify key problems and measure change :

- Baselines about social and economic conditions;
- Performance and monitoring data;
- Survey findings about people's experience in and perceptions of the area;
- Direct feedback from residents;
- Using consultants and Neighbourhood Renewal Advisors and others to help develop their strategies, carry out feasibility studies and conduct independent evaluations of different projects or programme strands.

Responding appropriately to the particular conditions in Kensington has been a keynote of many of the interventions, but it is not always easy to reconcile the priorities emerging from these different sorts of evidence. For example, statistical data may point to the need to focus on specific problems or groups that do not feature at all in the findings from community consultation. There can be tensions between tackling symptoms and causes, trying to ameliorate immediate problems and seeking long-term change. The idea of NDC as a test bed for different approaches tended to recede once the initiative was underway.

A counterpart of experimentation is risk and it was quickly apparent that the national management of the programme remained fairly restrictive and did not encourage any significant departure from the established routines. Within Liverpool, it was not evident that there was any organised way of learning from NDC experience. However, although the Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy scarcely mentioned the NDC programme, some of the learning arising out of the NDC experience was taken on board, for example, by LCC, HMRI and the Police, and is now being applied more widely. Kensington Regeneration has also shared its experience with people from outside Liverpool through participating in conferences and hosting visits.

Achieving strategic transformation

Any regeneration programme is based implicitly or explicitly on some 'theory of change'; that is, concepts and principles it is assumed will lead to the long-term change they are seeking. In the case of NDC, these include the need for:

- activities to promote the economic, social and political inclusion of residents;
- social development and empowerment activities to develop a stronger community;
- interventions in key outcome areas in order to bring about improvements in social and economic infrastructure and more effective or appropriate services;

- joined-up governance bringing together key local actors to work in Partnership on a range of policy initiatives.

The NDC programme had different sorts of outcome: socio-economic changes, effects on residents' feelings about the area, improvements to the public realm, more tailored services going into the area and strengthened community infrastructure. Some of this change is not very evident. Even the new facilities are not visible from the main roads through the area, whereas there are still boarded up properties in full public view. Despite this, there are strong signs that local people recognise that progress is being made and that, although decades of decline cannot be rectified in ten years, the tide has turned.

If there has been a considerable measure of transformation, has it been strategic? It has certainly affected the five key outcome areas of housing and the environment, lifelong learning, employment and enterprise, community safety and health and, as far as possible, there has been an attempt to tackle the causes of decline, not just the symptoms. The next challenge is for the change to be sustainable. This partly depends upon the wider economic climate. The area would still be more vulnerable than some other parts of Liverpool to deep and long lasting recession and to public service budget cuts. Sustainability also depends upon a continued focus on, and voice for, the area and mainstream agencies continuing to tailor their services to local needs.

It can reasonably be asked whether progress in Kensington has been at the expense of other parts of the city. Targeting deprived areas and vulnerable groups was fundamental to NDC. This inevitably raises questions of fairness especially if nearby areas are also disadvantaged and it requires the business case to be made for the channelling of extra attention and resources. Clearly, the NDC grant has brought benefits which were not available to neighbourhoods that did not have the same level of investment. People in adjoining neighbourhoods in particular will have been very aware of the frustration – common to all area-based initiatives – of being ineligible for spend because they live just outside the boundaries. However, it is not apparent that there have been major issues around the displacement either of activity or problems and there is no evidence of unemployment or crime levels rising in the surrounding areas. It is the case that, partly as a result of the pressure that local people have been able to apply, NDC has had a positive effect on the services in the area and the way they are delivered, but there is nothing to suggest that this has actively disadvantaged other parts of the city. Rather, there have been wider benefits. Learning from experience in Kensington can influence service provision elsewhere. Some of the new facilities open to people beyond the NDC area. The city as a whole stands to gain from the improvement of one of its main gateways. Although this is not yet achieved along the main route into the city centre through Kensington, the process is well in train.

