

# New Deal for Communities

## The National Evaluation

### Research Reports

#### **The Involvement of NDC Residents in the Formulation of Strategies to Tackle Low Demand and Unpopular Housing**

Research Report 40

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

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*Sheffield Hallam University*

**The Involvement of NDC Residents in the  
Formulation of Strategies to Tackle Low  
Demand and Unpopular Housing**

Research Report 40

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## Executive Summary

A study was undertaken of how NDC residents have been involved in the formulation of plans to tackle low demand and unpopular housing in their area. The study comprised two principal elements: a telephone survey of 10 NDC Partnerships; and in-depth case studies in three areas: Liverpool; Knowsley; and Hull. In each of these case study areas, resident focus groups and key stakeholder interviews were undertaken.

All the Partnerships surveyed involved residents in formulating plans to tackle low demand and unpopular housing in their area. Resident involvement was centred on three main tasks:

- the production of an outline framework for renewal in the area, often comprising a series of options and linked to a broader housing strategy
- the 'ratification' of this strategy by the wider resident population
- the application of the agreed plan at the local level

A variety of initiatives, both collective and individual, were used to engage residents. A number of Partnerships had developed innovatory techniques for involving their residents.

Demolition is a highly sensitive aspect of plans for neighbourhood remodelling as part of a programme to tackle unpopular housing. In each case study area, residents had been involved in drawing-up plans for demolition as part of the broader strategy formulation process:

- a number of residents said they had found the process distressing
- several felt uncomfortable making decisions that would affect not only themselves, but the broader resident population
- despite this, many respondents felt strongly that residents should be involved in devising demolition plans for their area

Views differed about the power dynamic between residents and the NDC:

- some residents felt 'empowered' and that they had been treated as equal partners by the NDC
- others were less convinced, and many residents felt strongly that strategy formulation was agency (and NDC) led. A number of officers also shared this view

Officers and residents expressed disquiet about the 'scale' of participation in their areas and were frustrated that they had been unable to engage more residents in the process, in particular members of minority groups. Concerns were also expressed about the representativeness of those tenants who did engage in the participation process.

Several reasons were put forward to explain the reluctance of many residents to engage in the participation process:

- residents' frustration at their perceived inability to influence the housing plans of local housing providers
- generalised resident distrust of local housing providers, and to some extent the NDC
- consultation fatigue, which appeared to be a problem in a number of the Partnerships in the survey

Several explanations were put forward for the lack of residents' trust in NDCs including:

- the apparent failure of many residents to distinguish between the NDC and local social housing landlords involved in the regeneration process
- the perceived failure of the NDC 'to deliver'

On the other hand, many residents appeared to recognise the limited scope some NDCs had to shape the housing plans for the area.

Several officers and, perhaps surprisingly, residents were frustrated with the apparent inability of many residents to think strategically and to see the 'big picture.' Respondents suggested a number of factors that appeared to have contributed to this phenomenon, such as the enormity and complexity of the low demand strategy task and the understandable desire of residents to engage with the most pressing (invariably local) housing problems in their lives. Few officers were critical of the perceived 'short-sightedness' of local residents.

A number of respondents reported that the involvement of residents in the planning process sometimes resulted in unnecessary delays. Although this caused some frustration amongst officers, most of those interviewed recognised the importance of effective resident involvement. Officers also reported that the participation process in their areas had sometimes been punctuated by conflict and power struggles.

Consultation processes over issues as sensitive and disruptive as stock demolition are likely to be fraught and controversial. In one sense these NDCs can be seen as 'trailblazers' for other agencies, not least the emerging Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder. If there is the basis of trust in the first place, realistic timescales and a capacity among both residents and officers to rise above the immediate and the parochial, and take the longer and wider view, consultation can be a positive and empowering process. However, if these elements are not present mutual suspicions can be exacerbated. There is a lot to learn from those exercises that have been viewed positively - but a lot depends on the initial state of play between the main parties involved, and the quality of ongoing relationships, as about specific techniques or resources. Considerable attention has to be paid to preparing the ground before the formal process of consultation begins. Most NDC Partnerships are well placed to contribute to this.

# 1. Introduction

This report from the Housing and Physical Environment Team of the NDC National Evaluation examines the involvement of NDC residents in the formulation of strategies to tackle low demand and unpopular housing. As such, it represents the second in a trilogy of reports to be produced by the team on the key theme of low demand and housing market change.

In year one of the National Evaluation attention focused on NDCs' strategies for low demand and a research report was produced on the issue entitled, *Research Report 19: A Review of NDC Strategies for Tackling Low Demand and Unpopular Housing* (a copy of this report can be obtained from the following website: <http://ndcevaluation.adc.shu.ac.uk/ndcevaluation/Reports.asp>). In the third year of the evaluation, which commences in April 2004, attention will turn to assessing housing market change in NDC areas and in December 2004 a final report will be forthcoming on the issue.

The report is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief policy context to the study and highlights the research approach. The second considers the nature and scope of community involvement in the strategy formulation process and examines *when*, *where* and *how* residents were involved in the process. In doing so, particular attention focuses on the extent to which residents have been able influence the strategy process. The third section highlights several key issues to emerge from the research while the last identifies a number of key messages for Partnerships and local residents engaged in the participation process. Interspersed throughout the report in boxed format are examples of good practice to emerge from the study and more information about three Partnerships studied in detail as part of the research.

## 2. Policy Context and Research Approach

### 2.1. Policy Context

In recent years the Government has introduced a number of initiatives to tackle the problem of low demand and unpopular housing. These include the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (NSNR) (SEU, 2001), the New Deal for Communities Programme, the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003), which outlined plans for Housing Market Renewal Fund (HMRF) areas, and more recently the *Northern Way* (ODPM, 2004), which presented a vision for growth in the north of England, and reviewed measures to tackle low demand in the region.

Central to Government thinking on the issue of tackling low demand has been the centrality of residents to this process. For example the NSNR (SEU, 2001) notes that the:

*“Government is committed to ensuring that communities’ needs and priorities are to the fore in neighbourhood renewal and that residents of poor neighbourhoods have the tools to get involved in whatever they want.”*

In a similar vein, the Government hopes that communities will also be actively involved in the activities of HMRF Pathfinders although it appears to foresee the scope of resident involvement to be largely confined to the ‘bottom’ rungs of Arnstein’s ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969), and in particular to ‘information’ and ‘consultation.’ Unlike, the NDC programme, which the Government planned to be community led, it appears that HMRF programme will be driven by Pathfinders and local agencies with residents being consulted on an ‘as and when’ basis. The words of Yvette Cooper, the Junior Minister for Housing and Regeneration, speaking at the *Market Renewal Pathfinders 2003 National Conference* in Manchester, appear to support this assumption:

*“Effectively engaging communities would be vital to the Pathfinders’ success”, she (Yvette Cooper) stressed. The purpose of the exercise was not to surprise the community: “It is vital that they are listened to and are committed to your plans. Residents often have some of the best ideas about what will work. Sensitivity is something to bear in mind on the issue of gentrification as it can polarise opinion.”* (Dwelly, 2004)

There have been a number of studies in recent times which have explored the issue of low demand and unpopular housing (Lee and Nevin 2003; Cole *et al* 2003, Bramley and Pawson 2002; Bramley *et al* 2000). In a similar vein, there is a growing body of literature on the subject of community participation (Audit Commission 2004; Taylor 2003; Beckford *et al* 2003) However, relatively little is known about the involvement of residents in strategies to tackle low demand and unpopular housing.

Given the magnitude of some of the issues involved - such as, is it reasonable to ask residents to be involved in making decisions that may involve them losing their homes? and do residents want this responsibility? - there is perhaps need for further study in this area. However, this robust if small-scale study does provide some insights and raises issues that are perhaps of wider relevance to the HMRF Pathfinders.

## 2.2. Research Approach

The research comprised three key stages:

- a review of all Partnerships' Delivery Plans and, where available, their housing plans to ascertain how they planned to tackle the issue of low demand and unpopular housing
- a telephone survey of representatives from ten Partnerships. Interviews, which lasted on average one hour, explored a range of issues including how and when residents were involved in the strategy formulation process and potential barriers to their involvement. Interviews were conducted with officers from the following Partnerships: Middlesbrough; Hull; Hartlepool; Liverpool; Manchester; Sheffield; Islington; Knowsley; Kings Norton; and Hackney
- in-depth case studies of three Partnerships: Hull; Knowsley and Liverpool. Case studies comprised three main elements: a review of relevant documentary evidence; interviews with key local actors including representatives from the NDC Partnerships, local housing providers, and community groups (in all 20 interviews were conducted); and resident focus groups in each of the case studies. These were attended by residents who had been actively involved in the low demand strategy formulation process in their areas and by residents whose involvement had been on a more limited or ad-hoc basis. Focus groups explored respondents' experience of the community involvement process

The data gleaned from this study has been subject to robust qualitative data analysis. Given the sensitive nature of many of the issues addressed in the report, many of the quotes presented within it have been anonymised in order to protect the anonymity of respondents. This means on occasions that the analysis inevitably lacks specificity.



### 3. The Nature and Scope of Community Involvement

#### 3.1. The mechanics of engagement

Analysis revealed that five NDCs had devised a strategy for tackling low demand (Hackney, Hartlepool, Knowsley, Liverpool, and Manchester) while five had not (Hull, Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Kings Norton, and Islington). However, some NDCs' plans had not been approved - for example, Liverpool and Knowsley reported that their proposals were out to public consultation.

Partnerships published their strategies for tackling low demand in a range of different forms including a *Masterplan* (Kings Norton), an *Outline Plan* (Knowsley), and a *BluePrint* (Liverpool). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the presence of housing providers in many NDC areas with a broader spatial remit than the Partnership area itself, five reported that their housing strategies formed part of a broader housing plan for their area (Kings Norton, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, and Knowsley).

Analysis revealed that in all ten NDCs surveyed as part of the study, local residents had been involved in the low demand strategy formulation process. Residents were involved in a variety of ways and a number of mechanisms were used to harness their input. They were also involved at different stages of the process, but overall resident involvement in the process centred on three tasks: the development of an outline framework for renewal in the area, often comprising a series of options and linked to a broader housing strategy; the 'ratification' of this strategy by the wider resident population; and the application of the agreed plan at the local level.

Analysis revealed that relatively few residents appeared to be involved in the drawing-up of low demand strategies in their area. While a variety of forums were used to engage with residents on this issue, it appeared that participation was often confined to a core of resident activists, many of whom were members of the Partnership Board, or who were involved in other community involvement initiatives.

In two of our three case studies - Liverpool and Knowsley - it appeared that Partnership Board Members had provided the principal resident input into developing housing plans. In the third case study, Hull, initially this did not appear to be the case, as the creation of a citizen's jury ensured that a wider spectrum of the local population was involved in the low demand strategy formulation process.

Having formulated initial plans for tackling low demand, most Partnerships sought to canvass the views of the broader population base, in order to seek approval for their overall plans and to ascertain how local residents wanted them applied in their area.

In **Shoreditch**, resident involvement in drawing up housing plans for the area was centred on a Housing Task Group, comprising elected representatives from each of the four parts of the NDC area, and tenant board members. In addition, residents have been engaged in the process through local conferences (200 residents attended a conference in March 2003); 'dummy' housing management inspections and mystery shopping exercises.

They employed a range of collective and individual mechanisms to do this. For example, door-knocking exercises were undertaken in Hartlepool and Manchester while in Liverpool, through the *BluePrint* framework, consultation occurred via neighbourhood forums. Some Partnerships used innovative techniques to consult their residents. For example, Hull had set-up a consultation caravan while Shoreditch ran local conferences.

The low demand strategies of the ten Partnerships we studied have evolved in different ways. So too have the nature and scope of resident input into the process. This point is perhaps illustrated by reference to the Hull case study. As noted earlier, the initial forum for resident input into the housing strategy formulation process was the NDC-created citizens' jury.

However, after Hull City Council decided to go back on its initial decision to support the citizen's jury generated plan for the area, the city-wide tenants' federation - HURAT - has become the focal point for channelling resident input into the strategy formulation process, despite the reformation of the citizens' jury.

In **Kings Norton** residents have been involved in Master Planning and Planning for Real exercises, as well as at a strategic level through the Partnership Board. An Options Group has also been established, whose remit has been to look at different management options for the area. One local officer observed that the group has been resident led, but strongly supported by the NDC. The group recommended the establishment of a Tenant Management Organisation and in November 2003 the first step was taken towards establishing one in the area, with residents expressing their (in principle) support for the initiative via a residents' ballot.

One officer felt that the involvement of Hull NDC residents in HURAT had for the first time given them significant influence over the strategy process:

*"Until recently residents have had very little influence; that changed because of HURAT...HURAT are now sitting opposite people in the council who a couple of years ago would have said it's going to be demolition, like it or lump it!"* (NDC Officer, Hull)

Given the obvious sensitivities associated with the housing renewal process, and in particular stock demolition, most of the Partnerships in the survey appeared to have gone to great lengths to ensure that all local residents were kept up-to-date with plans for housing in their area. A range of dissemination mechanisms were employed. For example, some partnerships, including Knowsley and Liverpool, had developed a system of street representatives, while a number, including Manchester, Knowsley, and Middlesbrough, published newsletters on a regular basis. In addition, street or neighbourhood meetings were a feature of many Partnerships' communication strategies including those of Liverpool, Hartlepool, which at the time of the research had held 60 street meetings, and Manchester.

In **Middlesbrough**, a steering group, which was set up to develop the Delivery Plan, has been responsible for developing housing plans in the area. The group comprises three resident board members, six other residents and nine officers.

### 3.2. Resident input into stock demolition strategies

In all three of our case study areas, demolition was a significant feature of housing plans to regenerate the area. Residents who had been involved in drawing up these plans were asked a series of questions about their experience:

- were they comfortable making decisions about demolition?
- did they want to be involved in taking decisions about demolition?
- did their involvement in the process present them with any conflict of interests?
- and, overall, how did they find the experience?

Not unexpectedly, a number of residents in all three case studies reported that they found taking decisions about stock demolition traumatic and emotionally distressing:

*“It was traumatic being involved in demolition decisions, even when I could see the sense of it.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Some decisions are just too hard. Like losing your home.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“It (being involved in the demolition decision making process) felt very upsetting...It was absolutely devastating.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Some resident directors were afraid of the come back from their neighbours.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

One officer noted, that as a consequence some residents wanted to disengage from the participation process:

*“Some people did want to walk away, but they came back with reassurance from staff.”* (NDC Officer)

Several residents felt that it was unreasonable to ask local residents to be involved in decisions concerning stock demolition:

*“When we were shown the (demolition) options... we just did not accept it...I could not believe I was being asked to make these decisions.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Community reps on the Board felt they were there to represent the views of the community not to make (demolition) decisions on their behalf.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“When we saw the plans we never came to a decision (about demolition). We did not like the expectation that we would have to make the decisions. They (the local housing provider) would have used that to say residents had agreed to the plans.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

One officer shared a similar view:

*“It is quite unfair to expect people to be involved in the strategy for housing and things like demolition because it is at such a high level and because of the implications and time scales involved.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

Most residents did not feel that their involvement in drawing up demolition plans had resulted in any conflicts of interest and most felt that they had been able to separate their own interests from those of the community as a whole. However, a number did remark that they had made ‘sacrifices’ as they did not want to be accused of ‘feathering their own bed.’ A number also felt under pressure due to the need to uphold confidentiality:

*“It’s really difficult to keep things to yourself when friends and family are involved...I mean it’s their homes we’re talking about and we’re going to knock them down.”* (Resident, Focus group)

*“I am loath to speak out about other areas.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“I have to tread a fine line with confidentiality.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

While most officers we spoke to felt very strongly that residents involved in the demolition process had not abused their positions of responsibility, three were less convinced:

*“There were problems getting resident Board Members to decide on any plan. Some did not want radical change. People were very territorial and were afraid about where they would end up living and giving up.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“People are only interested in their own front door.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“Residents only focus on their area.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

Resident opinion on the overall merits of the involvement of local people in the drawing-up of demolition plans was, not unexpectedly, divided. While most, as highlighted above, found the process trying and fraught with difficulties, some felt that all ‘the pain and effort’ had been worthwhile. Most officers interviewed appeared to value resident input into the demolition strategy process. One felt that they had a duty to be involved:

*“With power comes responsibility. They (resident Board Members) need to be able to stand up as a board and put these (demolition) proposals to other residents.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

Another felt that the involvement of residents in decisions over demolition resulted in ‘better’ decisions being made:

*“It is a cop out to say that residents should not be involved (in making decisions about demolition). It is the poor standard of delivery in local government that has led to the situation we have. So let’s not pretend that officers know best.”* (NDC Officer, Knowsley)

### **3.3. The extent of residents’ influence over the strategy process**

Previous studies of community involvement have noted that, although residents have been increasingly involved in the regeneration process, the extent to which they have been able to influence policy and practice has often been limited (Taylor 2003, Cooper and Hawtin 1998, Cole *et al* 2000). Our analysis provides an interesting insight into the power relationship between local residents, the NDC, and local housing providers.

Most officers felt that residents had been able to directly influence the low demand strategy process:

*“People have been empowered - they are being spoken ‘to’ not ‘at’ and their views are being taken seriously.”* (NDC Officer, Knowsley)

*“Resident consultation is at the core of neighbourhood planning.”* (NDC Officer, Manchester)

*“Residents have had 100% involvement all the time”* (NDC Officer, Middlesbrough)

*“Efforts have been heroic to get as much input as possible.”* (NDC Officer, Hull)

*“Resident involvement has been central to what we’ve done. People understood the importance of being involved and were cooperative right from the start. NDC came along at the right time.”* (NDC Officer, Hartlepool)

In Knowsley, the 'power' of residents, one officer noted, was clearly demonstrated in the decision of resident Board Members to reject the first three renewal options presented to them. The same officer commented:

*"Residents were able to really influence the process and change the Outline Plan."*  
(Housing Officer, Knowsley MBC)

When interviewed, most officers felt that the involvement of residents in the low demand strategy formulation process had added to the process and resulted in the production of a better end product. A number welcomed the 'reality checks' that residents brought to the process:

*"It (resident involvement) is a good mechanism to check we are doing the right thing and not going down a blind alley...it keeps our feet on the ground."* (NDC Officer, Manchester)

*"They (residents) made us grounded, practical and realistic."* (NDC Officer, Shoreditch)

*"They (residents) challenge everything and they keep us on our toes - we have to prove everything."* (NDC Officer, Knowsley)

One officer noted that resident involvement had another benefit - enhanced community ownership:

*"In the end it (resident involvement) probably creates a better process and in the end they (residents) are more likely to stick with it (the housing plan for the area)."*  
(NDC Officer, Liverpool)

Some officers were not convinced that residents had been able to exert real power in the strategy formulation process and officers in two of the case studies observed that the process had not been led by local residents:

*"Senior officers end up making decisions and taking them to the Board for rubber stamping. They will be guided by us."* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*"They (resident Board Members) were not able to take a lead (formulating the low demand strategy) because they lacked the experience and market knowledge."*  
(Officer, Social Housing Landlord, Case Study)

Some residents, in all three case studies, also believed that the strategy process was agency-led.

*"Residents feel to some extent that they have been pulled along."* (Resident, Focus Group)

*"The community has been led by the nose (by local agencies)."* (Resident, Focus Group)

*"There is no (resident) involvement in plans for demolition or future new build. The council is a closed shop."* (Resident, Focus group)

Two respondents, from different case studies, were concerned that residents were not driving plans for housing in their areas but merely rubber-stamping officer-generated strategies:

*“They (NDC and local housing provider officers) always came to us with a map with areas marked on it. They always came to us with a plan.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“We have not been involved in drawing up the plans, we have been involved in objecting to the plans.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

However, not all residents felt the same way and many spoke in a very positive light about their experiences.

*“It (the strategy formulation process) has been very resident led and influenced. We (the residents) have pushed it through ourselves.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Residents have got more assertive. They (two local social housing landlords) did not want to relinquish power. But empowerment is a dangerous thing and we have become empowered.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

A number of residents noted that the power dynamic between residents and local agencies had changed in their area. For example, a Hull social housing tenant felt that residents' influence over the strategy formulation process had grown:

*“At the beginning resident involvement was not strategic but that has developed over time and we get more say now.”* (Resident, Hull Focus Group)

However, conversely, a resident in another case study felt that the power of residents had been eroded:

*“There was a willingness at the beginning to be community led - that's not the case now.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

Given the differing views on the nature and extent of residents' influence over the low demand strategy process it would be risky at this juncture to provide an overall assessment of the power dynamic between residents and local agents. However, while many residents were clearly unhappy about their involvement in the housing renewal process, it is worth noting that our analysis did reveal a number of instances where residents had been able to exert tangible influence over housing plans for their area. These included:

- pressure from resident Board Members in Knowsley resulted in the formulation of new options for the area
- the housing strategy in Shoreditch was borne out of local residents' unhappiness with stock transfer as a vehicle for housing renewal in the area. Resident involvement in the strategy process has *“pushed the strategy in a different direction, making it more innovative in looking at the options, for example for a self funding regeneration vehicle.”* (NDC Officer, Shoreditch)
- vigorous and vehement protests by Hull residents resulted in the Hull City Council dropping its plans to demolish 400 properties in the area

### **Figure 1: Hull (Preston Road) NDC**

Preston Road NDC lies three miles to the east of Hull City centre. Most of the estate was built before the Second World War. 63% of the housing stock in the area is owned by Hull City Council with 17% being owner occupied (most of this stock is former council properties purchased through the Right-to-Buy initiative), and 1% private rented. The area is divided into four neighbourhoods and is dissected by a dual carriage way and waterway.

Some demolition work was undertaken in the area shortly after the NDC was established. This was seen by a number of officers and local residents as having a stabilising affect on the area and it was noted that the programme had boosted demand for the area. When the NDC was created in the area, a housing strategy for the neighbourhood was drawn up with a newly created citizens' jury being the principal mechanism for involving residents in this process. The jury's plan for the area, which was to take eight years to implement and cost £54 million, comprised demolition and improvement elements. The plan was approved by both the NDC and Hull City Council.

However, when the local authority decided to withdraw its support for the Preston Road housing strategy after it reviewed its overall housing strategy in light of the creation of a HMRF in Humberside, the improvement plan for the area was abandoned. Understandably, this created a high degree of resentment towards Hull City Council from amongst local residents. The decision of the City Council to withdraw its support for the area presented the NDC Partnership with a significant challenge. It is currently working closely with the Humberside HMRF Pathfinder in an attempt to develop a housing strategy for Preston Road which links to plans for broader sub- regional housing market renewal. In the meantime, the area has been subject to an ad-hoc demolition programme.

Renewed impetus for community participation in the strategy formulation process has been provided by the engagement of Preston Road tenants in Hull City Council's city-wide tenants' federation: HURAT. HURAT has been working closely with the council to draw-up housing renewal plans for the city as a whole, and NDC residents have played a pivotal role in the process. It is hoped that the reformation of the citizens' jury will also encourage local residents to engage in the strategy formulation process.

## 4. Key Issues

This section highlights some of the other noteworthy findings to emerge from the study. Particular attention focuses on a number of key research findings:

- a number of officers in the research had expressed concern about the ‘scale’ of participation in their areas and were frustrated that they had been unable to engage more residents in the process, in particular members of minority groups. There was also some concern about the representativeness of those tenants who did engage in the participation process
- a number of reasons were highlighted to explain the reluctance of many residents to engage in the participation process. These included resident frustration at their inability to influence the housing plans of local housing providers, resident distrust of local housing providers, and to some extent the NDC, and consultation fatigue
- a number of officers and, perhaps surprisingly, residents were frustrated with the apparent inability of many residents to think strategically and to see the ‘big picture’
- many respondents felt that involving residents in housing plans often delayed the process
- a number of officers reported that the participation process in their areas had sometimes been punctuated by conflict and power struggles

### 4.1. The apparent reluctance of many residents to participate

Although most Partnerships felt that they had managed to engage with most residents in their area by employing intensive participation techniques, there was some frustration about the scale and nature of community involvement. A number of officers were disappointed that more residents in their areas had not been involved in the low demand strategy formulation process:

*“The task group reaches out to people in the community but there are still people who don’t know the NDC and don’t get involved.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“It is a few people involved in everything.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“Our concern is about getting more people involved.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

Officers were also concerned about the representativeness of those residents who had engaged in the strategy process:

*“You get the same faces (resident representatives) at the xxx (the forum established to draw-up the low demand strategy) and at the NDC Board, I am not sure how representative they are.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

*“They (resident representatives) are not representative on a geographical basis...50% of the estate is not represented by the Resident Association.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“(Resident) Activists do have their voice heard. I am not sure how representative they are... even though there are reps on the Board and residents’ associations for all areas there are still some people who don’t know who the NDC is.”* (Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord, Case Study)



Several respondents were particularly concerned that relatively few black and minority ethnic (BME) residents had engaged in the participation process. The view of one officer was typical of many:

*“There were no BME residents within a mile of the xxx (the forum established to draw-up the low demand strategy).”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

A number of officers also questioned how effectively resident activists reported back to the tenants they represented. The views of three officers were typical of many:

*“I worry about their (resident representatives) ability to report back to their tenant and resident associations.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

*“There are some gaps in areas covered by street reps and I’m not sure how well street reps share their information with the community.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“It is the same (resident) faces - the stronger willed ones. Once they are in place they feel mandated and they don’t check back with the community.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

A number of reasons were offered for the apparent reluctance of many residents to engage in the participation process. For example, one officer attributed this to the nature of the meeting environment:

*“It can be off putting for other people to speak against them. It may also put people off going to meetings, if they don’t like their style. It can create a barrier to other people being involved.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

The **Liverpool** NDC team have made efforts to engage with difficult to reach groups through specialist groups such as KLASS (a private landlords accreditation scheme). A member of staff in the Liverpool NDC has been appointed to work with young people through the Community Roots Project; while another is responsible for engaging with the BME community and specifically with the growing refugee community. Special events have been targeted at BME and refugee communities.

Other officers and several residents felt that the complexity of the planning process also deterred many residents from participating:

*“How can you expect residents to engage when they don’t have all the knowledge and background for policy decision making.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Unless you are skilled in ‘housing’ it is hard to get in. The xx and xxx (the structures established to draw-up the low demand strategy) are very sophisticated and it is difficult for new people to break in.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

*“People who get involved know what is going on - other people don’t understand.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

In Hull NDC, a number of officers attributed (in part) the difficulties they had encountered engaging local residents to the area’s (and city’s) lack of tradition in community participation. This, it was argued, clearly had an impact on the ‘capacity’ of the ‘community’ in the neighbourhood to participate:

*“There was a non-existent base for tenant participation in the city and I think we had the lowest community capacity of any NDC...this has made a task much more difficult.”* (NDC Officer, Hull)

*“Community capacity is a major missing building block here” (NDC Officer, Hull)*

A range of other reasons were offered for the reluctance of some residents to get involved (and stay involved). Three re-occurred: resident frustration at the reticence of local housing providers to take on-board their views; lack of trust in the NDC and housing providers; and consultation fatigue. These issues are now considered in turn.

In an effort to ensure that more residents engage in the participation process, in **Manchester** and **Hartlepool** resident involvement has been centred around street meetings and door to door exercises.

#### **4.2. The perceived reticence of local housing providers to take-on board the views of NDC residents**

Our analysis revealed that, in many of the Partnerships in the survey, ultimate responsibility for drawing-up and sanctioning low demand plans appeared to lie with local housing providers. When they were perceived as not listening to the views of NDC residents, many of whom had been actively encouraged to participate because their ‘views would make a difference’ and had committed significant time and energy to the process, this understandably created a good deal of animosity and frustration. This was clearly the case in several areas studied such as Liverpool, Hull, Knowsley, Kings Norton and Middlesbrough, and there was hostility, to varying degrees, towards local housing providers in these areas.

In Hull, NDC residents were particularly suspicious of the local council, whose decision to back-track on its original regeneration plan for the area appeared to have evoked considerable anger:

*“Residents have no confidence in the council’s commitment to the area, that they will invest (in the area) or keep their promises.” (NDC Officer, Hull)*

*“People are disappointed and cynical of the council.” (NDC, Hull)*

In a similar vein, it appeared that some residents in Knowsley and Liverpool were also frustrated at the reluctance of the main local housing providers fully to take on-board their views:

*“People are angry at the broken promises (of one local social housing landlord)...People felt let down because they have been byal but promises have not been kept (by the landlord).” (Resident, Focus Group)*

*“There is distrust of xxx (a social housing landlord). People felt the xxx is responsible for the decline of the area in the 1990s and the withdrawal of services and change in tenure patterns...tenants must feel abandoned by xxx. Xxx has stopped investing in the area.” (NDC Officer)*

*“They (residents) will engage with the NDC but not the council or xxx.” (NDC Officer)*

*“Xxx (a social housing landlord) don’t have the same commitment to resident involvement...xxx is very product led. The focus is on achieving their outputs and meeting the promises they made to tenants in their offer document.” (Resident, Focus Group)*

A representative from a housing provider in one case study was acutely aware of the distrust that had emerged between her organisation and local residents:

*“There is a history of mistrust that is difficult to overcome. This is an ongoing problem as the (neighbourhood housing) plan may continue to change as circumstances change. (Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord)*

A number of NDC officers interviewed felt that the apparent failure of local housing providers to take on board the views of residents had had an adverse affect on their own relationship with residents, many of whom were disenchanted *“with the NDC’s failure to deliver.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study). However, many residents recognised that in isolation the NDC could do only so much to influence the housing policy of local providers:

*“We (residents) can only voice our wants through the NDC. The NDC can advocate for us but they have no power.”* (Resident, Hull Focus Group)

*“NDC have no money. They have to find a partner to work with but the partner may not like the NDC plan.”* (Resident, Liverpool Focus Group)

*“It is difficult to get the agreement of agencies and partners and there is disagreement about who pays for what.”* (Resident, Liverpool Focus Group)

The perceived failure of local housing providers to incorporate the views of NDC residents had, many residents felt, had a negative impact on community participation. Residents were discouraged from getting involved, or continuing to be involved, because they felt disempowered and disengaged:

*“It is difficult to get people involved when you can’t give any firm commitments about how and when things are going to happen.”* (Resident, Knowsley Focus Group)

*“The number of people involved is dwindling because they feel disillusioned.”* (Resident, Liverpool Focus Group)

### **Figure 2: Liverpool (Kensington) NDC**

Liverpool Kensington NDC is a wedge shaped, primarily residential area of inner Liverpool, located immediately to the east of the city centre. The neighbourhood lies between three main arterial routes which run from the city centre to the motorway network. The area's housing stock was built mainly between 1830 and 1914. 83% of the stock is terraced housing.

The area is a mixed tenure neighbourhood, with 36% of the local housing stock being owner occupied, 24% private rented (the number of private landlords in the area has grown in recent times), and 40% owned by social housing landlords. From March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004, the area will have only one principal social landlord, Community 7, as on this date Liverpool City Council will formally transfer its housing stock in the area to the association. The neighbourhood has a number of homes in multiple occupation and has a significant asylum seeker and refugee population. The neighbourhood has a relatively high void rate (across all sectors) and comparatively low house prices, although there is some evidence to suggest that these have risen in recent times.

Community involvement in formulating plans for tackling low demand and unpopular housing in the area has primarily focused on two structures: the Partnership Board and Neighbourhood Planning Groups (NPGs). Resident members of the board have played a key role in drawing up a housing renewal plan for the area. Deciding upon the form of this plan at the local, sub-neighbourhood, level has been the responsibility of the NPGs.

### **4.3. The difficulties of fostering trust between local residents and the NDC**

A number of respondents reported that many residents appeared distrustful of their NDC. The views of two were typical of many:

*"We (the NDC) still struggle with credibility (amongst our residents)." (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)*

*"People don't trust NDC...People have not been enabled to make a positive contribution." (Resident, Focus Group)*

There appeared to be a number of reasons for this phenomenon. For example, for some residents their mistrust of the NDC was an extension of their lack of faith in some local housing providers, especially as some residents did not appear to distinguish between them and the NDC.

*"People are not aware of the distinction (between the NDC and local housing providers)...there is also a perception that NDC money covered housing when it is only for the environment and therefore they (the NDC) have only been able to fund improvements to people's gardens." (Resident, Hull Focus Group)*

*"(The) NDC is not the council but it has taken two years trying to convince people of this." (Resident, Knowsley Focus Group)*

*"We (the NDC) need to be obviously delivering to win over the doubters. They cast doubt on our relationship with the council. As a Community Development Trust we are outside the council, but it is the perception that we are part of the local authority, that is difficult." (NDC Officer, Kings Norton)*

In a number of areas - including Kings Norton, Liverpool, Hartlepool and Knowsley - this had clearly had a negative impact on how the NDC was seen by local residents:

*“This (the perceived failure of local social landlords to take on-board the views of local residents) has had a major impact on our credibility with local people... We get tainted with the same brush as the council, and more, we get the blame... we are accountable for things that are not our responsibility.”* (NDC Officer, Liverpool)

Resident frustration with the apparent failure of the Partnerships always to provide answers to their questions also appeared to erode trust in two NDCs:

*“We cannot be as clear and honest with residents as we would like to be. This feeds mistrust, but sometimes we don’t have the answers. I am not sure we are overcoming that.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

*“You can’t develop trust if you can’t give people answers.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

Officers from a number of NDCs offered a range of ways of countering distrust, and most were optimistic that the problem was improving in their area. One felt that being ‘honest’ with tenants helped to earn their trust, while another noted that regularly repeating the message that the NDC could change things could achieve the same goal.

*“We are getting better at saying when we are responsible for improvements.”* (NDC Officer, Telephone Survey)

*“Some people have been involved from the start and are still around, but we need to let people know we really can have an influence and make a difference.”* (NDC Officer, Kings Norton)

#### **4.4. Consultation fatigue**

In all three case studies evidence suggested that many residents were suffering from what has been described as ‘consultation fatigue.’

*“People drop out because they get worn out.”* (NDC Officer, Knowsley).

*“Residents have been consulted to death. Now people are not turning up for consultation events.”* (NDC Officer, Hull)

*“It (resident involvement) is difficult because of the huge time commitment.”* (NDC Officer, Hull)

One Knowsley resident activist was clear about how demanding the life of a Tenant Board Member could be:

*“Everyone always wants something now. No one ever just says ‘hi-yah xxx.’ We are doing the PR thing all the time, being nice to people. I have started taking another route (home) just to get out of the street. Sometimes I just think: ‘Do I really need all this?’ then something else comes up and I think: “Yes” because no one else is going to do it.”* (Resident, Knowsley Focus Group)

However, she was unsure that she could sustain this level of commitment:

*“I believe in NDC and the programme so I am still willing to do it. I may not feel the same in twelve months time, though.”* (K Focus Group)

Most NDC officers we spoke to were aware of the issue of consultation fatigue but recognised that there was no quick fix for the problem. However, one reported that in his NDC community participation structures had been configured so that residents were unable to be members of more than one group:

*“We try to structure things so that the same people cannot be on all the groups...”*  
(NDC Officer, Case Study)

As a result:

*“So far, no one has walked away but there has been a lot of frustration.”*

#### **4.5. The perceived inability of local residents to think strategically**

A recurring theme to emerge from analysis of data gleaned from this study was that many officers (and some local activists) were frustrated at the apparent inability of some residents to think strategically when thinking about how to respond to the problem of low demand. A commonly held view was that many were only interested in their own area, i.e. their immediate locale, whether this is a block of flats or a street:

*“People can’t step back from their immediate issues to think strategically.”*  
(Resident, Focus Group)

*“I go with the intention of talking about the housing plans. But individuals focus on the little things like trees and mice. The council love that, because it distracts from the big issues.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“They (resident Board Members) really struggled with strategic decisions.”*  
(Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord)

Although many officers were frustrated by this, most were not critical of the perceived ‘short-sightedness’ of some residents, and recognised that the enormity of the task being required of them:

*“When you are working with people who have never been involved in housing it is a big thing to take on the Masterplan first. It is difficult asking people to think about the big picture first.”* (NDC Officer, Knowsley)

*“The Neighbourhood Planning process has encouraged people to look at small areas. The area is naturally broken down into small areas so we have worked with that. It’s obviously hard then, to get them (residents) thinking more broadly again.”*  
(NDC Officer, Liverpool)

Other reasons were offered to explain the failure of many residents to engage with strategic issues. For example, one respondent argued that an inevitable and understandable consequence of poor housing conditions was that residents would be inward-looking and focus on their own housing circumstances:

*“It is difficult to get residents to think about the bigger picture. Their issues are immediate.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

An NDC officer in Liverpool seemed to suggest that the geographical composition of NDCs might also have an impact on residents’ ability to ‘see the big picture’:

*"It is difficult to get people involved in the big picture...people come with their own agenda...but some people have never been to some parts of the area." (NDC Officer, Liverpool)*

Other respondents attributed the phenomenon to the complexity and the enormity of the task associated with strategic decision making. One Resident Board Member questioned whether residents had the capacity to think strategically:

*"People were involved in the xxx (street level) strategy (events). Now it is the bigger picture and people don't understand the issues...they don't see the relevance and they don't engage. They don't have the capacity." (Resident, Focus Group)*

One officer doubted whether resident activists fully understood the key issues associated with low demand:

*"There is a lack of awareness (amongst resident Board Members) of the bigger issues facing low demand...there is a lack of conviction and understanding of low demand." (Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord)*

However, the same officer was quick to point out that a failure to offer training to residents in this area had not helped:

*"There has not been the time to give people full training on low demand and strategy issues." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

#### **4.6. Delays brought about by consultation**

A number of respondents felt that resident involvement in the strategy process sometimes resulted in (unnecessary) delays.

*"Some people want to go back over things again and again." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

*"In a meeting 50 residents can have 50 different solutions. That slows the process down." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

*"You can't make decisions fast enough." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

This caused some frustration:

*"It is not just a case of agreeing and getting on with it. There is still a high degree of frustration at the lack of progress." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

*"It (community involvement) slows the process down. People change their minds and rumour-mongering is a problem. We cannot reassure residents because we don't yet have the answers." (NDC Officer, Case Study)*

*"It has been difficult and it has been slow. They (residents) have not always done as much as we would have hoped" (Housing Officer, Social Housing Landlord, Case Study)*

However, several officers noted that it was important for sufficient time to be allowed for the participation process:

*“If you are going to do this (community involvement) you have to do it thoroughly and give people time. Enabling people takes time.”* (NDC Officer, Manchester)

*“It took time to build up understanding and to reassure people. At the beginning no one realised what decisions the Board would have to make.”* (NDC Officer, Knowsley)

#### **4.7. Conflict, disharmony and power struggles**

A number of respondents from a range of Partnerships reported that on occasions the participation process had sometimes been fractious. As three respondents noted:

*“It (the involvement process) is constant wrangling. It is like wading through treacle.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Plans are on and off all the time, it (the participation process) is difficult. It is on a knife edge all the time.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Things can get a little bit heated and voices raised (at meetings).”* (Resident, Focus Group)

Conflict had occurred in strategic forums responsible for drawing-up outline plans, and at the local participation structures. For example, in one case study, neighbourhood planning groups set up to canvass the views of residents within different parts of the NDC had not worked effectively as officers had hoped, as they appeared to have become a focal point for residents to express their dissatisfaction with the regeneration process:

*“Neighbourhood Planning Groups are a positive approach but people respond in a negative way to all proposals. They never make positive suggestions.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“You get nut cases (at the Neighbourhood Planning Group meetings). Whatever you do is wrong in their eyes.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

One Resident Board Member in the area noted that part of the reason that meetings were not working as planned was that many local residents did not know how to conduct themselves in this environment, as many had never attended a meeting before:

*“Sometimes the neighbourhood meetings have become slanging matches...part of the reason for this is that some of the people turning up have never been to a meeting before in their lives...and they don't know how to behave.”*

It appeared the efforts of the strategic bodies responsible for developing low demand strategies were often hampered by in-fighting, personality clashes, power struggles, and political machinations. There was evidence of such problems, albeit to varying degrees, in each of the case studies. It was noted that ‘politics’ sometimes had a negative impact on the strategy formulation process:

*“The political context underpins the approach to housing and effects the plans for the area. This is not always helpful.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“You get political points scoring on the Board.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)

*“The political issue is Councillors wanting things in their area. Nothing will change until that is tackled. That is very frustrating.”* (NDC Officer, Case Study)



In one case study, the attitudes and actions of one high-profile Resident Board Member had created considerable animosity amongst other resident activists. This person was perceived as being aloof and unwilling to take on board the views of other Resident Board Members:

*“I felt gutted; I felt members of the Board were xxx’s nodding dogs.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Xxx thinks he is elected to represent resident views. He thinks consulting people confuses them.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

*“Resident leadership at the Board level is difficult.”* (Resident, Focus Group)

### **Figure 3: Knowsley (North Huyton) NDC**

North Huyton NDC is situated in the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley and consists of six ‘sub-area estates’, comprising predominantly two storey terraced or semi detached family homes. Most (73%) of the housing stock within the NDC area is owned by social housing landlords, the biggest being the stock transfer housing association, Knowsley Housing Trust (KHT). The remaining stock is owned by home owners (25%) and private landlords (2%).

The NDC area is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England and has an Index of Multiple Deprivation score which places it amongst the 10% of most deprived wards in England. Demand for housing in the area is relatively weak and in parts of the neighbourhood empty properties are a very visible manifestation of this. However, the demolition of a number of empty properties appears to have had a stabilising affect on many parts of the neighbourhood.

Responsibility for drawing-up a NDC strategy for tackling low demand in the area has been the domain of the Partnership board, where residents are in the majority. The area’s low demand plan is inextricably linked to KHT’s renewal strategy for the broader area as a whole. It appears that the NDC has been successful in establishing an effective partnership between itself, local residents, KHT and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. The NDC Partnership board rejected the first three strategic options produced for the area and has worked in partnership to develop a more acceptable option to be presented to the local population as a whole. This consultation process is currently under-way.

## 5. Conclusions

This analysis has shown that many Partnerships have gone to great lengths to involve residents in the formulation of plans to tackle low demand and unpopular housing. However, many have encountered difficulties doing so. Clearly there are no easy answers or quick fixes to these problems and securing effective community involvement is a goal that has eluded many landlords and housing agencies. However, this report can highlight a number of key messages for Partnerships to emerge from the research:

- Partnerships should identify the key messages to emerge from the plethora of good practice guides that have been written on the issue of community participation and look to learn from initiatives undertaken elsewhere. An easy and quick way for Partnerships' to do this is by accessing the user friendly and comprehensive internet site, renewal.net (<http://www.renewal.net/>)
- Partnerships need to think about *new* ways of involving residents if they want to engage with more residents. Some of these techniques may be technologically driven or have their origins in the private sector. Innovative participation methods are detailed on the website of the ODPM sponsored initiative, *Innovation into Action* (<http://www.innovationintoaction.org/>) and renewal.net. The Good Practice Unit of the Chartered Institute of Housing (<http://www.cih.org/>) and the Tenant Participatory Advisory Service (TPAS) (<http://www.tpas.org.uk/>) are other useful sources of good practice
- Partnerships also need to think about developing participation structures that allow residents greater flexibility to engage as and when they please, and that place fewer demands on their time. Partnerships perhaps need to develop a range of involvement structures which spread the participation load amongst more residents, thereby lessening the chances of consultation fatigue
- it is essential that Partnerships devote significant resources to training both their staff and local residents for participation. Residents should be familiarised with some of the basic tenets of regeneration and housing renewal and be taught basic participation skills. In a similar vein, *all* staff should be trained about the best ways of involving and interacting with residents. The responsibility for engaging with residents should not be seen as solely the task of only one individual or team, but more a collective responsibility
- it is vitally important that Partnerships are clear about what they can and cannot achieve. They should clearly spell out to tenants what their responsibilities are and those of key local agencies such as social housing landlords
- as the most problematic area of community involvement in the low demand strategy formulation process appeared to centre on the key (and highly sensitive) issue of demolition, Partnerships should critically review how they engage their residents over this matter. In particular, they should consider broadening responsibility for this issue away from a small group of key activists to the wider resident population, perhaps through a local referendum
- in a similar vein, Partnerships should seek to identify *when*, *where* and *how* residents would like to participate, and not 'encourage' residents to participate against their wishes. This thinking is in line with the rationale of Tenant Participation Compacts, a mandatory participation 'agreement' drawn-up by (English) local authorities and its tenants together, which clearly states *when*, *where* and *how* the latter party will be engaged in the housing service. For example, if residents are not comfortable making decisions about demolition, they should not be coerced into doing so

- our analysis suggests that more residents will engage with the participation process if they feel that they have real influence over the decisions being made in their areas. Some Partnerships need to do more to empower their tenants and need to be prepared to relinquish more control to them

As community participation is a two-way process, the research findings suggest a number of issues for local residents engaged in the participation process in NDC areas:

- residents need to be clear about what NDC Partnerships can and cannot do to drive plans to tackle low demand and unpopular housing in their areas. As NDCs are not housing providers, their ability to shape housing plans for their areas is limited and is (to a great extent) dependent on the goodwill and actions of local social landlords
- residents should seek to exert greater control over the 'rules' of the participation 'game', to borrow from Clegg's description of power (Clegg, 1989), and be more prepared to assert *when*, *where* and *how* they would like to be involved. If residents are not comfortable being involved in making decisions about highly sensitive issues such as demolition they should be able to exempt themselves from being involved

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