

Neighbourhoods that work

There has been a plethora of studies about neighbourhoods in Britain, principally about neighbourhoods that do not work. What is needed are studies about neighbourhoods that both work and include a significant proportion of social rented dwellings. This study, by researchers at the universities of Birmingham and Central England, obtains such information from six neighbourhoods comprising the Bournville Village Trust in Birmingham. It has been facilitated by the Trust as part of its Centenary celebrations and funded jointly with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The study finds that:

-  Neighbourhoods with a high proportion of social rented housing and neighbourhoods with mixed tenure can be successful and can provide areas of housing choice. Integrated forms of tenure mix are the most effective but do not necessarily ensure successful neighbourhoods.
-  Successful neighbourhoods have problems nonetheless, and face challenges associated with absorbing change – for example, related to demographic change and conflict.
-  The popularity and sustainability of Bournville is based upon the successful application of several key principles: a high quality natural environment, an imaginative and coherent overall planning framework, the high architectural quality of the built environment, a socially mixed community, a sustained estate management capacity and the positive involvement of the community in the management of the neighbourhood.
-  As a charity, Bournville has not been obliged to sell properties under the Right to Buy, and this has enabled it to retain attractive homes for rent and to achieve a significant mix of tenures.
-  The collective value of social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks for people to help each other ('social capital') is an important dimension of neighbourhoods and their resources. It is closely related to both housing dynamics and economic wellbeing. This has implications for strategies to strengthen and build social capital.
-  Neighbourhoods permanently change, but the experience of change and the tensions it creates differ for people of different ages and length of residence. This impacts unevenly across neighbourhoods developed at different times. Residential turnover is slow and ethnic heterogeneity is low.
-  Two problems in Bournville are a lack of facilities for young people, who experience a form of exclusion and are perceived as a threat by some older people, and the low turnover of population, which is likely to create future tension.

Introduction

In recent years, several debates have focused on deprived neighbourhoods in British cities. There has been a renewed interest in area-based and neighbourhood-based policy interventions. These include, for example, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and a series of government initiatives aimed at countering social exclusion.

Alongside these initiatives there is a long-running concern with trends affecting social housing and with large housing estates. When data which links deprivation and dissatisfaction with housing variables is considered, a variety of neighbourhood types emerge. A significant type is large housing estates built for rent. These areas have increasingly been seen as dysfunctional and as contributing to the problems experienced by households and individuals. Much of the literature has become preoccupied with these failing estates, but if we are to seek policy-relevant information, it is helpful to study more successful neighbourhoods and ascertain those attributes which account for their relative success.

These were the issues underlying this study of Bournville – a popular residential suburb in Birmingham that clearly works. Bournville contains a series of neighbourhoods that differ in character and work in different ways and extent. The aim of the study was to ascertain why some of the neighbourhoods work better than others and to identify those characteristics which account for this relative popularity and success.

Analysing attributes at neighbourhood level in Bournville

In emphasising the importance of several attributes at estate level, the first conclusion of the study is a cautionary one - not to overstate the importance of the neighbourhood, housing tenure and factors such as the built environment above other social and economic factors. Not everything is determined by the quality of the neighbourhood. People's employment and wealth are associated with their work and their skills and qualifications. The neighbourhood and its attributes are also determined by who chooses to live in the area. It is logical to acknowledge that the quality of the built environment and the management and maintenance of the neighbourhood both influence why people might choose to live there. But they are only effective in conjunction with other factors that determine the nature of the neighbourhood.

Secondly, the findings of the study might confound people who believe that the success of a neighbourhood is predominantly affected by its tenure composition. Bournville has up to 40 per cent of its housing in the social rented sector and yet it is an area of high design and environmental standards, with a very stable community and high levels of satisfaction with local services. Differences exist between neighbourhoods and some areas have more problems than others, but it is important to avoid an artificial dualism that divides neighbourhoods into those with problems and those without. Bournville is a high demand, popular residential suburb with neighbourhoods that work and achieve high levels of satisfaction, but it is not without a range of problems. Significantly, however, these problems do not upset the balance of advantage currently associated with the various neighbourhoods.

Positive drivers at the neighbourhood level

Historical factors

The study demonstrates that historical factors play an important role in contributing to the sustainability of the neighbourhood. The popularity and sustainability of Bournville is based on the successful application of several key principles: a high quality natural environment, an imaginative and coherent overall planning framework, the high architectural quality of the built environment, a socially mixed community, a sustained estate management capacity and the positive involvement of the community in the management of the neighbourhood. At the same time, the richness of this legacy varies in the different neighbourhoods.

Tenure mix and social mix

Tenure mix as a means of achieving a social mix has been an important element of the management of the Bournville estate since the inauguration of the Trust in 1900. A detailed analysis of tenure mix in the different neighbourhoods revealed that some forms of tenure mix, and the integrated approach in particular, were more effective than others in achieving social cohesion. The main reason why this worked was found to be because it was associated with decisive management and with the quality and design of the properties and the neighbourhood.

In analysing the impact of housing mix in Bournville, however, it is important to acknowledge a major factor which has insulated the Trust, and the

social rented sector associated with it, from the changes which have affected social housing more generally. Bournville Village Trust, as a charitable organisation, has not been obliged to sell properties under the Right to Buy. The extent to which the social rented sector remains intact in an attractive, high demand area is therefore unusual.

The issue of tenure mix as a way of achieving social mix may have been treated too simplistically in recent debates. Where housing is seen to be attractive, irrespective of tenure, households will want to stay longer in the area or will commit themselves more to the neighbourhood, thereby ensuring greater social cohesion.

Social capital, identities and cohesion

'Social capital' is now a widely adopted term representing 'the collective value of social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks for people to help each other'. The social survey data was analysed to evaluate the different dimensions of social capital (bonding, bridging and linking) and to ascertain strengths and weaknesses within the different neighbourhoods. In respect of each of these dimensions the responses did not correspond with the literature that exists. The strongest links with the bonding dimension of social capital were age-related, suggesting that the longer one expects to be in the community, the more likely a person is to invest in the wellbeing of that community. The longer people have lived in the community, the more they knew their neighbours and have an association which develops into trust.

The discussion of bridging social capital demonstrated that the more wealthy residents and owner-occupiers were more likely to be involved in residents' and tenants' associations. But this also related closely to age and life-style. Residents in council housing tended to have been in the area for a shorter time and were more likely to assume they will move on as their circumstances change. In contrast, older and middle-aged households among owner-occupiers and Bournville Village Trust tenants were more likely to be involved in neighbourhood activities.

Overall, the conclusions relating to social capital suggested that it was misleading to believe that it could be built effectively in different economic and housing environments by using the same capacity-building and community development devices.

Time and status

Although the research concluded that Bournville 'works', residents often said that things were getting worse and that there were few, if any, improvements. These 'narratives of decline' offer differing perceptions of change in the neighbourhood, especially in relation to time. One dimension of time relates to the life cycle of the neighbourhood itself. It may be argued, for example, that a new estate changes from one which houses newcomers, and passes through a stage of maturation to old age or obsolescence. This is particularly complicated in Bournville, where a succession of developments over time has meant that there are different processes of maturation or even obsolescence taking place in different parts of the same neighbourhood.

People's perceptions also change because of the length of time they have lived in an area. Long-standing residents are much more likely to have experience of change and 'narratives of decline'. New residents are more likely to evaluate their new surroundings in comparison to the place they have just left, and their narratives are much less likely to refer to change within Bournville.

The third element of time relates to the age of the individuals living in the area. Personal experience, expectations and aspirations will differ. The implication of this is that people of different ages invariably perceive the same activities differently.

The status of residents also varies in that they have different expectations and resources to accommodate change. All these elements mean that there are differences of interpretation and expectation amongst different groups and indeed conflicts between groups with different attributes and understanding. Thus there is no common value system by which the factors contributing to a 'successful' neighbourhood may be evaluated. Neighbourhoods where measures of satisfaction are relatively positive could therefore exhibit dramatically different characteristics. Any notion that a formula could be applied to achieve a universally positive outcome is flawed.

Cohesion and exclusion

The evidence about residential mobility demonstrates that Bournville draws its population from the rest of Birmingham and beyond. Some parts are essentially reception areas while others are where current Bournville residents aspire to move to. But the majority of Bournville is an area of final destination;

once there, residents tend to want to trade-up within the area or to stay. Bournville appears to work because it is both attractive and offers housing choice.

This situation is understood to arise because the mix of property types, tenures and house values provides variety, opportunity and choice but does not create a highly polarised community where these differences become a source of conflict and fragmentation. However, the levels of variety, change and disorder are able to be absorbed without causing major fractures and continuing problems within the area. The capacity to absorb change is a fundamental issue in the sustainability of the community.

Such is the attractiveness of Bournville, however, that residential turnover is slow. In the most desirable parts, it is very slow - in both the rented and owned sectors. This raises some uncomfortable propositions, one of which is that the degree of heterogeneity in neighbourhoods where people stay may be less than in society as a whole and less than is desirable. Over the last four years, only 15 per cent of all incoming households who have been allocated a Bournville Village Trust tenancy for the first time have been from an ethnic minority. This suggests that in parts of Bournville the pace of change may be too slow and that at some stage in the future there will be a more rapid phase of change associated with a skewed demographic structure.

Neighbourhood problems

Whilst Bournville is a high demand, popular residential area, it also has a range of problems associated with crime and the fear of crime, young people, anti-social behaviour, vandalism, traffic, litter and tidiness.

The first of two important problems is the lack of facilities for young people, who tend to consider the area as 'boring' and have more negative views than other residents. They could be regarded as experiencing exclusion and are perceived as a threat by some older people.

The second problem is the low turnover of population arising from the attractiveness of the area. The area is particularly at risk in the future as demographic change generates a much higher rate of turnover and social change following death and household dissolution. This is likely to create more tensions than would a steadier rate of change and absorption of younger households. To some extent,

this problem is already apparent in parts of Bournville where rapid intergenerational change is a source of tension. At present, however, none of these problems are sufficient to upset the balance of advantage associated with the area.

About the project

The project was undertaken collaboratively by staff from the Universities of Birmingham and Central England. Staff involved in the project from the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham included Professor Alan Murie, Rick Groves and Kerry Revell. Professor Alan Middleton and Kevin Broughton were the representatives from the Centre for Public Policy and Urban Change at the University of Central England.

Two reports of the study have been prepared, a fuller version for the Bournville Village Trust and the report summarised above which sought to draw some conclusions from the study for the wider debates currently taking place on neighbourhood change and renewal.

How to get further information

The full report, **Neighbourhoods that work: A study of the Bournville estate, Birmingham** by Rick Groves, Alan Middleton, Alan Murie and Kevin Broughton, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 538 0, price £14.95).