

Neighbourhood agreements in action: a case study of Foxwood, York

The current policy agenda has prompted growing interest in the use of 'neighbourhood agreements', or estate contracts, as a way of promoting greater resident involvement in service delivery. Such agreements can offer a means of making service providers more accountable and resource allocation and target setting more transparent. An independent evaluation over three years developing the Foxwood Neighbourhood Agreement in York, undertaken by the Centre for Economic and Social Research, found that:

-  The Foxwood Agreement extended well beyond housing management issues and its scope and emphasis proved amenable to modification over time, as local priorities ebb and flow. This sense of flexibility has helped to spawn innovation and change.
-  The neighbourhood agreement was initially developed, and is now monitored by, a formal partnership of residents, service providers and elected members; all parties were positive about the initiative and its sustainability. However, changing the relationship between residents and service providers needed perseverance, commitment and sustained support for the principles of open exchange and partnership.
-  Members of the Foxwood Community Action Group involved in the initiative reaped various benefits, through training, personal development and the ongoing experience of working with service providers in developing and monitoring the agreement.
-  There was little evidence that many residents – especially owner-occupiers – in the wider community wished to be more involved in the formal development and management of the agreement.
-  For the City Council, the development of the neighbourhood agreement linked into thinking on the 'modernisation' of local government. The experience might be particularly useful for the development of Best Value plans and local tenant compacts in the coming years.
-  The researchers conclude that:
 - neighbourhood agreements can effectively promote service accountability to local communities and develop dialogue between residents and service providers. Residents' involvement, however, is likely to require continuing, if modest, levels of support, especially if this role is to develop into more advanced forms of scrutiny and participation;
 - the ideas behind neighbourhood agreements can help form a basis for the development of local service partnerships and community plans envisaged by the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, and are potentially applicable to many areas, not just the most 'stressed' housing estates.

The operation of neighbourhood agreements

The essence of estate agreements or contracts is to provide a vehicle for a formalised arrangement between residents and those responsible for delivering local services over standards, response times, targets and resources. Many of the agreements introduced recently have been developed by social housing landlords, or as an element of a wider programme of neighbourhood regeneration.

A brief review of neighbourhood agreements elsewhere revealed considerable diversity in their origins, scope and purpose. However, few had covered the range of services covered by the Foxwood Agreement, and few attempted to involve owner-occupiers alongside tenants. Many were, in effect, an extension of existing tenancy agreements. In several cases, these arrangements are now being eclipsed by the development of local tenant compacts.

The Foxwood Agreement was developed following the experience of an estate agreement on the Bell Farm estate in York. Bell Farm differed as it was predominantly a council estate and the agreement was developed alongside a major programme of capital investment. Foxwood provided an opportunity to assess whether such agreements could be developed in a different funding and housing context. Increasing concerns had been expressed about vandalism and the lack of adequate youth provision on Foxwood, and these issues lent themselves to the inter-agency approach fostered by the neighbourhood agreement.

The Foxwood area

Foxwood is a mixed tenure area of 1,362 properties. The estate grew from a nucleus of local authority properties twenty years ago, with more recent private and housing association development. The area does not have clear-cut community boundaries, and the mixed tenure nature of the estate meant that groups of residents related to different parts of the estate, rather than sharing a common identity for the neighbourhood. The relatively modest resources behind the Foxwood project made it a valuable testing ground for applying the principles of local contracts between service providers and residents - not just for those 'flagship' schemes receiving special levels of resource support.

Foxwood is not a particularly 'stressed' neighbourhood, but has traditionally had a poor reputation elsewhere in York. In interviews after the launch of the agreement, the majority of local residents were positive about their neighbourhood, and indicated high levels of satisfaction with services. Subsequent interviews with stakeholders and residents suggested that the overall reputation of the estate had improved over the study period, especially

in terms of press coverage. The agreement had provided a focus for a large number of new initiatives in the area and, while it is difficult to attribute improvements to a single factor, the cumulative effect had improved the overall popularity of the neighbourhood.

Residents also reported an increase in community spirit over the study period. Stakeholders and residents agreed that a strong sense of community had developed among those involved with the Foxwood Community Action Group (FCAG), and that the activities of the group had led to increased community spirit in the area as a whole.

Developing the agreement

The Foxwood Neighbourhood Agreement began life as a community safety and crime initiative. The Citizens Support Group in the City Council Chief Executive's Department led the project, and this added strength and independence, focusing solutions on inter-agency working and community empowerment.

The David Liggins Company (which had previously worked on Bell Farm) was appointed as a broker between residents and service providers in developing the agreement. The appointment of a community development worker for the area in 1996 was also vital in developing community involvement. These were the two main additional resource requirements of the initiative.

A Foxwood Partnership was established to bring the agreement to fruition - involving residents, service providers and elected members. After eighteen months of development for individual service agreements, the initiative was formally launched in November 1998. Services initially covered by the neighbourhood agreement included community policing, street and environmental cleaning and refuse collection, jobs, training and enterprise support and housing. Agreements for welfare benefits and services for young people were added a year later in response to identified needs. Youth provision and policing were consistently seen as the most important issues in the area.

The production of individual service agreements revolved around a network of meetings and discussions between residents and service providers, facilitated by the David Liggins Company. The meetings would work through ideas and formulate proposals that were then agreed by the project steering group, chaired by a senior local authority officer. The agreements were succinct statements of background information, targets, response times and contact points. In April 1999, the steering group passed responsibility for overseeing the future monitoring and development of the agreement to the Foxwood Partnership, which is chaired by a resident.

Monthly monitoring statements from the service providers and performance against targets or commitments are now reviewed at meetings of the Foxwood Community Action Group. This comprises residents only, although specific service providers may be invited if this is thought necessary. The overall operation of the agreement is discussed at quarterly meetings of the Foxwood Partnership. The Partnership involves members of FCAG, representatives of the City Council (currently housing, welfare benefits, environmental cleansing, youth service and citizens' support group), three housing associations operating on Foxwood, Future Prospects (a non-profit agency concerned with employment and training), the police, and a local councillor. Particular service areas are selected for discussion at each meeting, and all services in the agreement are covered in an annual cycle of partnership meetings.

No formal sanctions are invoked if targets in the service agreements are not met, but partnership meetings enable service providers and residents to discuss the reasons behind any apparent changes in service delivery. They also provide an opportunity to assess any underlying trends over a number of meetings – such as incidents involving the police, or waiting times for council homes on the estate.

Participation

It was difficult to generate and sustain widespread resident participation in the project. Two particular barriers were the difficulty of generating interest around issues and services rather than more tangible physical improvements, and the problems of encouraging residents to identify with a relatively large and diverse project area.

Foxwood Community Action Group had been established by the community development worker to develop the agreement and help break down barriers between existing local groups. FCAG had managed to develop a fairly broad base, but no owner-occupiers were active in the group. The involvement of several members in a community work skills training course was a key element in developing their effective participation in the agreement. Stakeholders and other residents became more positive about the ability and capacity of members of FCAG, who showed growing confidence and competence in managing the agreement and dealing with service providers.

Concerns about the Group focused on the heavy workload in maintaining their scrutiny of service standards and delivery in the neighbourhood. Stakeholders saw it as a priority to involve more people in the work of FCAG, both to share the workload and more generally to increase representation and involvement in the issues covered

by the agreement. The research found a fairly limited knowledge of the neighbourhood agreement across the Foxwood area as a whole. While most residents assumed it would help raise service standards, many did not know much about it and few wanted to be involved formally in the work of developing and monitoring the agreement.

The impact and sustainability of the neighbourhood agreement

The long-term impact and sustainability of the neighbourhood agreement depends a lot on members of FCAG, who have now developed a package of practical support and funding ideas. This includes future budgetary provision, a training strategy, a strategy for continuing to develop the relationship between FCAG and service providers, and continuing community development support, at least in the short term.

There are several areas where the agreement has had a significant impact so far:

- *inter-agency working* has been a major achievement, originating in the Foxwood Partnership and following through to the monitoring procedures adopted. The local authority needs to consider how the benefits of inter-agency working can be extended to other areas, and the implications of the Foxwood Agreement for its overall approach to neighbourhood renewal, Best Value and community support;
- *empowerment of local residents* has been encouraged, at least among those involved in FCAG, due to the strong community work focus and training offered in the project;
- *some services had been improved* as a result of the agreement, although many felt it was too soon to judge impact. The agreement needed to be a flexible tool for addressing the needs of residents in the area and raising service standards. In the long term it will be important for FCAG not to get bogged down with monitoring and to be able to focus their efforts on current issues of concern rather than spreading themselves too thinly;
- if the agreement is to be a *dynamic instrument* capable of identifying the need for change in local services, monitoring has to be rigorous, and service providers need to be open in their dialogue with residents and encourage them to engage more fully in the issues affecting service provision.

There are inevitably potential difficulties with the agreement – residents losing interest, the risks of being swamped with heaps of paper and lots of

procedures, the difficulty in identifying a tangible pay-off for getting involved, the lack of sanctions and leverage for change, and so on. These problems had also been raised earlier for the Bell Farm Estate Agreement, which may have led to more measured expectations about how many residents were likely to be actively involved for the duration on Foxwood.

The development of neighbourhood agreements, and similar forms of local contract, places the onus on service providers to maintain, and where possible improve, standards, but continuous resident input is required to keep this system fresh and alert to change. Members of FCAG were keen to continue managing the agreement. Stakeholders felt that a sense of pride and ownership of the project had developed, from a relatively modest budget. As significant as the improvements already achieved was the greater willingness of residents to bid for extra resources to sustain their activities, thereby attracting more investment in the estate. The extent to which the agreement had captured the imagination of the wider community was, however, more debatable.

Conclusion

The wider applicability of the neighbourhood agreement model, moving beyond 'pilot' schemes, remains an important question, particularly with the onset of tenant participation compacts, growing interest in neighbourhood management and inter-service liaison, and support for resident consultation. The agreement may provide an important launch pad for creating a more open relationship between service providers and residents. A sequence of 'one-off' local experiments, however, can feed accusations of 'special treatment' and render schemes vulnerable to changing priorities.

The critical challenge is to build the ideas behind agreements into a broader rethinking of service delivery, accountability and resident involvement across all local areas. This objective chimes with current policy interest in inter-agency work, local management and community planning, though cases where these principles have entered mainstream practice are as yet few and far between.

Overall, the Foxwood experience suggests that neighbourhood agreements can offer a valuable channel to ensure broad-based resident involvement cutting across artificial service boundaries, and they can be readily adapted to meet changing needs and issues. But they are difficult to maintain on a self-sustaining basis, without modest but continuous levels of additional support to keep the process on track.

About the study

The research was based on an independent evaluation of the Foxwood Neighbourhood Agreement, undertaken over three years by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

Interviews were carried out with stakeholders (three phases), residents on a household panel (two phases), and, towards the end of the project, an estate survey of 152 residents on the estate. In addition, members of the project team attended the Foxwood Project steering group and Foxwood Community Action Group meetings during the study period.

How to get further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood Agreements in action: A case study of Foxwood**, York by Ian Cole, Emma McCoulough and Janet Southworth is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 86 5, price £12.95).