Community-led regeneration: can it really exist?

Thoughts and insights
Community-led regeneration: can it really exist?

In June 2016, Renaisi brought together a diverse group of people whose work influences community-led regeneration. Our aim was to create a space for sharing the learning and experience of those with a range of perspectives on the subject, from front-line community engagement specialists to funders. Our objective was to gain a snapshot of the issue, particularly in London; and explore current challenges and opportunities.

Debbie Ladds, the chief executive of Local Trust, kicked off the meeting by sharing experiences from her time overseeing the work of Big Local. It is a community-led development initiative funded by the Big Lottery which is providing £1 million each to 150 local communities throughout England to enable them to realise their ideas for improving their areas. You can read an overview of her arguments here.

To encourage a free and open exchange of views, the subsequent discussion was conducted under the Chatham House rule. Here, we present the key themes that emerged. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of all the issues relevant to community-led regeneration nor a presentation of all potential viewpoints. Rather, it brings together perspectives from some key sectors, highlighting shared challenges and showing where participants felt more work and investment is needed to empower communities to lead regeneration in their areas.

Who took part?
24 participants representing funders, regeneration specialists, developers, architects, community organisations, local authorities and community housing and land specialists took part in the discussion.

What is Renaisi’s Friends Network?
Renaisi’s Friends Network is a platform to discuss and find solutions to the challenges facing communities – especially Londoners – now and in the years to come. It is centred on a programme of networking and learning events, free to attend for Network members. These help facilitate the exchange of ideas, insight and best practice, and create opportunities for new business and collaboration. To find out more and join, visit www.renaisi.com/friends
Overview: empowering communities to lead regeneration

Who has power?

Land and property owners
In London, with its acute housing crisis and concerns around gentrification, the vital assets of land and property - which could be developed or improved to benefit communities – largely belong to investors, wealthy individuals, housing associations and public sector organisations, such as local authorities.

Decision-makers
By providing homes for many of society’s most deprived communities, allocating land for development, and enabling local economies, local authorities and housing associations can be crucial enablers of community-led regeneration.

Developers
With funds to invest in acquiring land and creating affordable homes and the infrastructure for economic opportunity, developers can be hugely influential on the prospects of local communities living among or near these developments.

How can communities get it?

Community Land Trusts
Community land trusts and community housing initiatives can give communities crucial influence over land.

Neighbourhood planning
Neighbourhood planning lets local people define local planning policy. In so doing, it can enable them to define and shape their local built environment.

Community consultation
Many organisations have statutory obligations to engage communities as part of proposed regeneration and development initiatives.

Community self-help
By providing funding and technical support to local communities to realise their own ideas to develop their areas, initiatives like Big Local are enabling community-led regeneration throughout the country.

Funders
Charitable foundations and private donors possess funds which are essential enablers of community-led initiatives. And there is an increased readiness among funders to give power away.

What’s stopping them?

A disempowering property market
The property market, particularly in London, is disempowering to communities. Residents simply don’t believe it is possible to have any influence at all over the use of land and property.

The difficulty of thinking beyond the doorstep
Residents often focus on the immediate problems on their doorstep during consultations, rather than the big issues. This means opportunities to truly shape development are missed.

A lack of time and the ‘right’ skills
A major barrier to uptake of initiatives such as neighbourhood planning is the time investment communities need to make in order to realise them, as well as a lack of a particular professional skillset.

Failure to measure the right success indicators
Some power brokers and programme managers measure the wrong indicators, giving them a false sense of success.

Limited ability of local authorities to intervene in the property market
The current policy environment limits local authorities’ ability to intervene in the property market to the benefit of more deprived communities.

Austerity and the policy environment
Funding cuts and government policy have reduced services and programmes available to deprived communities.
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Who has power?

Land and property owners

In London, with its acute housing crisis and concerns around gentrification, the vital assets of land and property - which could be developed or improved to benefit communities – largely belong to investors, wealthy individuals, housing associations and public sector organisations, such as local authorities.

As one participant noted:

“In this country, land and power have always gone together, and in many communities there is a very visceral connection between a sense of power and land ownership”

Participants agreed, therefore, that the ability of communities to lead regeneration is bound up in the extent to which they have, or perceive to have, influence over land and property.

Decision-makers

By providing homes for many of society’s most deprived communities, allocating land for development, and enabling local economies, local authorities and housing associations can be crucial enablers of community-led regeneration. As one participant from a housing association said:

“Housing associations are really key because they have a direct line into some of the people that will benefit most by [regeneration] programmes”

All participants from housing associations and local authorities expressed a desire to engage communities more in the development of their areas, but acknowledged that more could be done:

“How much is community-led? We’re still trying to work on it. We don’t exist on big estates so we don’t have a lot of presence in communities - we’re very spread out over nine boroughs, 7,000 homes. So it’s something we need to do more of”

Participant, housing association

“Where we do have big estates, we’re trying to get people involved in the decision making process - we haven’t really embraced it until now, but now we’re really trying to get it up and running”

Participant, housing association

Developers

With funds to invest in acquiring land and creating affordable homes and the infrastructure for economic opportunity, developers can be hugely influential on the prospects of local communities living among or near these developments.

Better homes, local shops and shopping centres all have the potential to benefit more deprived communities. But if they price out local people and existing businesses, remove community spaces and resources, or fail to create jobs for local people, developments can be at best missed opportunities and at worst actively detrimental to local people:

“There’s an area where a parade of shops is being redeveloped. It will make it look better - there’ll be better housing, better shops. But those local shop keepers probably won’t be able to afford the rent. They’ve served that community for 30, 40, 50 years. And they’ll be gone”

Participant, regeneration specialist
How can communities get more power?

Community Land Trusts

Community land trusts and community housing initiatives can give communities crucial influence over land. As one participant put it:

“Community Land Trusts are primarily about self-starting, self-defined communities of place or interest who are trying to take some kind of autonomous action, and creating mechanisms for local-controlled, democratic institutions that regulate themselves”.

Funders

Charitable foundations and private donors possess funds which are essential enablers of community-led initiatives. Participants who represented funders noted an increased readiness on the part of funders to work in partnership with communities and other players, such as local authorities, to ensure greater community representation in funder decision-making:

“In the independent funding world there is a sense that the role of foundations has got to shift. So if I’m a big funder based in Kings Cross and I’m putting money into Newcastle, I’m likely talking to people in Newcastle about what I’m doing with my money. So there are real opportunities to look afresh at how from the bottom up, communities can work with foundations and funders and critically, with local government being the enabler to bridge some of those relationships”.

Another participant agreed:

“We’ve been thinking a lot about power and we have realised that we have to give a lot of it away”

Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning lets local people define local planning policy. In doing so, it can enable them to define and shape their local built environment. The neighbourhood planning process also gives communities access to funding which can be spent on community engagement activities and expert support in addressing the technical needs of the process.

Participants who have been involved in supporting communities to take up neighbourhood planning perceived good potential in its ability to empower communities:

“What was interesting about working on neighbourhood planning in a deprived, urban area was that with bit of support, people were really interested”
Community consultation

Many participants shared experiences of community engagement and consultation activities that were designed to enable local people to influence decision-making by power-brokers such as local authorities, funders and developers. These included door-knocking and community events. Some participants talked of incidents where these activities had been successful:

“We’ve had events where we take our grantees away and they have said they didn’t need to bring their beneficiaries because they can speak for them. And we’ve said we don’t agree, and we’ve had a very different conversation, because we’ve had beneficiaries, local authorities and community organisations all in the same room, and they all set the agenda together.”

Participant, funder

Another participant gave an example of a successful initiative run by a community organisation to engage the community about use of a plot of council-owned land:

“They had this £1 share idea, which I think was really clever and people really got. They would do lots of public events talking about their aims, where they said to people, if you pay £1, you become a shareholder in the scheme. And a lot of people really bought into that and I think they’ve got close to 2,000 members now. This enabled them to position themselves as a group with a real representational base. That gave confidence to councillors to say to council officers, here’s a group we want you to work with.”

Participant, local authority

However, many participants also expressed frustration at the limitations of more traditional and statutory community engagement exercises.

Community self-help

By providing funding and technical support to local communities to realise their own ideas to develop their areas, Big Local is enabling community-led regeneration throughout the country. Outside London, this includes resident ownership of land and property.

However, in the capital, where high property values place land ownership out of reach of many communities, initiatives have tended to focus on social-economic issues such as employment – or have involved communities mobilising to oppose development which they perceive to be gentrification:

“Outside of London, local people are doing things with buildings. Some are buying and refurbishing houses and renting them to local people. Some are looking at marketing, others at parks: the things councils can no longer afford to refurbish and maintain.”

Participant, regeneration specialist
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What is stopping communities from gaining power?

A disempowering property market

There was consensus among participants that the property market, particularly in London, is disempowering to communities. Participants who work with communities attested that residents simply don’t believe it is possible to have any influence at all over the use of land and property:

“Housing is driving people’s decisions but it’s so far off their radars, they don’t have the capacity to engage with it. They don’t know where to start. So community regeneration is often in a little box of things people think they can manage, rather than putting everything out on the table”

Participants also highlighted the difficulty of getting residents to attend engagement events:

“We’ve done research recently where we have asked people what they want out of housing, and they want all the things that community housing organisations are offering, but they have no idea who they are, and more importantly, they’ve got no idea it’s even possible. So in a sense the way the property market works is such a disempowering mechanism in every way”

The difficulty of thinking beyond the doorstep

Participants described the difficulty of enabling a conversation with residents in which the ‘big issues’—such as economic development or wellbeing—can be discussed productively. Residents often focus on the immediate problems on their doorstep:

“I worked on a housing development involving 10,000 new homes. That’s how money and investment is coming in, so that’s the vehicle through which communities and practitioners need to access finance and influence. However, at engagement events all people wanted to talk about was problems on their doorstep. So it’s up to us to put our plans in the context of how they affect people’s lives”

Participant, developer

The first thing people say when we ask them what is important to them is their boiler or their tap. Then our [internal] funders say, why are we paying you to do things that aren’t important to residents? You ask them a second time and they’ll say jobs etc, but you have to prompt them”

Participant, housing association

However, participants also acknowledged that it can be the terms of the debate, or the way in which activities are conducted, which could be barriers to resident engagement:

“[In a new development] their CSR people tried to engage the communities but they weren’t able to answer any of the local people’s questions, which then leads them to think that they aren’t being listened to – and are less willing to engage in future”

Participant, regeneration specialist
I agree there is a disconnect between community engagement and development – it’s never, shall we build? But, we are building this, what do you think?”
Participant, housing association

Some participants highlighted that community engagement can also be a tick-box exercise, where residents are engaged in order to satisfy legal requirements rather than to truly enable resident influence:

“Yes people don’t always turn up to engagement opportunities but if they do they’re not always listened to either – so it’s also about the power brokers being genuinely open to engagement”
Participant, architect

A lack of time and the ‘right’ skills

A major barrier to uptake of initiatives such as neighbourhood planning was felt to be the time investment communities need to make in order to realise them, as well as the need for a particular skillset:

“[Neighbourhood planning] assumes people are giving up lots of time and energy and...there isn’t a package of support that’s available to support them to apply for funding, so the real community development, facilitation and other skills that can support residents who aren’t experienced – they may be full of energy and have some skills but maybe not the legal or professional skills required”
Participant, regeneration specialist

One result of this is that uptake has been unequal and mostly concentrated in areas with higher socio-economic indicators, meaning that areas which have most to benefit from neighbourhood planning are missing out.

A similar challenge was highlighted in relation to accessing funding:

“If people can’t engage with the system, then we need to change the system, we don’t need to change them. This is something that we’ve also found with our grant funding – our grant process was too complicated, and the only people who could get funding from us had great fundraisers. So we have closed our programme and are going back out to find new ways to get funding out”
Participant, funder

Failure to measure the right success indicators

Some participants felt that regeneration initiatives can lead power brokers to a false sense of success when they fail to measure the right indicators:

“[An agency] set the challenge to raise five areas to the same level as the rest of London, and they continue to measure these indicators – and they are showing amazing success on these indicators, but that is because of people moving into the areas with better education, health etc. But this fallacy gets reported up to senior levels”
Participant, developer
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Limited ability of local authorities to intervene in markets

Participants agreed that the current policy environment limits local authorities’ ability to intervene in the markets to the benefit of more deprived communities:

“The housing and transport markets enable people to live where they do and influence house and property prices. It’s the extent to which London’s government is willing to intervene in these markets which influences who gets to go where and the gentrification process. It seems to me that it is the ability and confidence of local authorities and the public sector to work with communities in a way that is economical given austerity and the powers they have been given to do so. This importance of ownership of land is why community land trusts are so important – most local authorities and have one hand tied behind their backs in this respect”
Participant, developer

Austerity and the policy environment

Participants noted that funding cuts and government policy have reduced services and programmes that aim to benefit communities, and have placed the burden of responsibility for socio-economic development increasingly onto individuals within deprived communities. The result is that agencies’ ability to support deprived communities has been curtailed:

“Some housing associations that had really dynamic community regeneration departments no longer have them. And their rationale was they want value of money. And it really is now being led by the whole development model. Lots of housing associations now have employment and training programmes where that wasn’t the case before, and that’s all about making sure tenants can pay their rent. But we still have people in communities that suffer on a day-to-day basis that don’t have direction and they don’t feel their landlord is interested”
Participant, regeneration specialist

“Our team is now half as big as it was last year... it’s quite frustrating for us to constantly have to show our value. Within the organisation we are seen a separate part of the organisation”
Participant, housing association
What next for community-led regeneration?

Participants saw some major challenges to the ability of local communities to develop their neighbourhoods for the better. But there were also areas where participants saw potential and opportunity: self-help and community ownership of land and housing through community land trusts, for example; or community rights mechanisms, such as neighbourhood planning.

But this raises a set of new questions which our discussion couldn’t answer. How can we encourage better take up of these opportunities? How can we ensure they resonate with and appeal to local people? And how can they be refined and developed to maximise their benefit?

If you would like to contribute to this conversation, visit www.renaisi.com/friends

There, you can join our Friends Network, contribute an article or project idea, and help move the debate forward.
About Renaisi

Renaisi is an award-winning social enterprise whose mission is to help people and places to thrive. We do this by:

• Supporting people who are long-term unemployed on their journeys into work
• Helping minority language families to become more resilient and integrated into their communities
• Enabling local communities to determine and address their own needs, through our role as a delivery partner for Big Local, a ground-breaking £200m community regeneration programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund
• Helping organisations to deliver better outcomes for people and learn what works through our research and learning service
• Supporting local government to resource major projects and programmes, by providing experienced, high-quality consultants and interim managers in the areas of economic development, inward investment and major capital schemes

Renaisi
21 Garden Walk
London
EC2A 3EQ

020 7033 2600
www.renaisi.com

Company Registration No. 3532867