

## The Historical Context of Civic Engagement: From the National Community Development Project to the Big Society and Beyond

*If we are thinking about improving places, we need to ask why areas are as they are. We need to divest ourselves of the idea that local people have made them as they are. Citizens have a right to get knowledge back. The role of social sciences is to say how things can change. People know their area best.* (Recommendation from roundtable on co-production, *Imagining Benwell* Workshop, Jan. 2016)

### Background, key issues and approaches

This briefing summarises key issues arising from *Imagine North East* and *Coventry*, part of the ESRC Connected Communities research project, *Imagine – connecting communities through research* (2013-17). The starting point for these historical research projects was the national Community Development Project (CDP), a Home Office-funded experimental, anti-poverty initiative of the 1970s, located in 12 areas in the UK. Three CDP areas are the focus of our study: Benwell (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), North Shields and Hillfields (Coventry).

While starting with the past, this research looks at the process of change over the past 40 years, including issues facing communities today in a climate of economic austerity and welfare cuts. A programme of research and related activities was undertaken by researchers from Durham and Warwick Universities, with 15 community partner organisations. Over 100 interviews were conducted during 2014-15 with former and current residents, community activists/workers, politicians and policy makers, seeking their views on the CDP, community participation and changes over time. Information on regeneration and community engagement following the CDP was collected, along with census data showing social, economic and demographic change, 1971-2011. A range of projects was undertaken by community-based partner organisations, from inter-generational graffiti art in North Shields to community history and arts projects such as 'Never Felt So Good' (a series of colourful pictures of Benwell made in felt) and a Hillfields photography project culminating in exhibitions at The Herbert Museum and Art Gallery (November 2014) and Fargo Village (August 2015) in Coventry.

### Emerging findings

- **Legacies of the CDPs** included: organisational structures (e.g. Coventry and Newcastle Law Centres developed from Coventry Income and Legal Rights Service and Benwell Community Law Project); networks of people who moved into local/national politics, academia, community work and activism; new ways of thinking about poverty (challenging the 'blame the victim' orthodoxy of the time); a body of research-based literature still influential today in community/social work education.
- **The radical analysis of the CDPs** in the 1970s that community-based solutions to poverty can have limited effect in a context of structural economic and social change is borne out in the subsequent 40 years of area-based regeneration in these neighbourhoods, which are still some of the relatively deprived areas of their respective cities according to national indicators.
- **The importance of improvements in living conditions** – nevertheless, living conditions (especially housing) have significantly improved. If we look behind the 'bigger picture' analysis by asking local organisations about the details of people's everyday lives, then for some there is a big difference in terms of improved public spaces and neighbourhood safety, for example. Neighbourhood management schemes were regarded favourably.
- **Impact of austerity** – some community organisations struggle to survive in a context of economic austerity and increasing needs, while others have risen to the challenge and expanded their remit (for example, food banks). Many are keen to play a role in designing and delivering services, but this requires support from local and central government. Many community organisations feel 'left in the lurch' – given tokenistic funding to take over liabilities of dilapidated buildings (under the guise of 'asset' transfer) and create plans for services with no resources to implement them (e.g. the 'Our Place' initiative).
- **Reclaiming the past** - the CDPs understood the value of historical research and importance of documenting 'hidden histories' of local working people to counter histories of the powerful. In Benwell, North Shields and Coventry today groups of local people are keen to write their own histories to challenge stigma associated with the areas, thus strengthening and empowering these community groups. For example, a facebook page dedicated to the history and memories of 'The Ridges' an estate in North Shields (now known as Meadowell, and 'famous' for riots in 1991) gained thousands of followers in a short space of time, while the Hillfields photography project, which generated a book (*Imagine Hillfields*) and 2000 visitors to an exhibition, created a physical and visual statement of the value to people of community knowledge.

### Further information:

**Blogs:** [www.imaginenortheast.org/](http://www.imaginenortheast.org/) [www.kyneswood.com/Imagine\\_Coventry](http://www.kyneswood.com/Imagine_Coventry)

**Website:** [www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/imagine/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/imagine/)