

Community-based regeneration

A model for village and community renewal?

Amanda Smith and Anthony Schlesinger examine the Wingate and Station Town Regeneration Project in County Durham – a pilot community-based scheme in two former mining villages which may offer a regeneration model for settlements in similar circumstances of decline elsewhere.

The continuing growth in the number of community-based regeneration projects is a response to dissatisfaction with existing regeneration strategies, whether led directly or indirectly by central government, or local government. Central and local government policies have, in essence, provided top-down measures to tackle regeneration problems. They have been criticised for an over emphasis on 'development' and 'bricks and mortar', and for neglecting the needs and interests of local communities.

Community-based initiatives are essentially a process of enabling and empowering. Policies and the associated financial and administrative mechanisms are established which enable and empower communities to directly influence, improve or create their own environment and meet local needs. They are also a means for engendering a spirit of 'ownership' because communities need to have a stake in their own environment for any improvements to be self-sustaining.

Current regeneration practice

The main impetus behind community-based initiatives has been the perceived failure of the state, at all levels, to deliver services and facilities to an acceptable standard and, quite specifically, to achieve effective and sustainable area-based regeneration.

Central government has been pre-occupied with private/public sector partnerships and market-led strategies, essentially using the private sector as a vehicle for regeneration. The urban development corporations (UDC's), whose successes and failures are much debated, best illustrate this approach. UDCs were, in effect, imposed upon local authorities, and have been described, in a typical comment, by David Donnison as 'loose cannons running around your cities'. The lack of local accountability has resulted in a loss of the resources, skills and local understanding that local government can provide.

However, the greatest failure of the UDC's has been the failure to involve local communities: 'Deprived local communities are often treated as an irrelevance or, at best, long-term beneficiaries through some mysterious 'trickle-down effect'. At worst, local communities are regarded as irritants which have to be either bought off, or sometimes literally bulldozed away in the name of progress.'

Local authority practice is equally open to criticism. Local authorities are dominated by a departmental style of operation and an associated professionalised culture. Their activities are legitimised by a system of local political representation. As a consequence local authorities find it difficult to target and co-ordinate their regeneration activities; to attempt fresh approaches to problems that lie outside mainstream professional thinking; and to actively involve local residents in the regeneration process.

These problems need to be overcome if sustainable and effective regeneration is to be achieved. Regeneration needs to reflect the needs of local communities and

to generate a sense of 'ownership' while at the same time fully exploiting the contribution that can be made by local government.

The Wingate and Station Town Regeneration Project in County Durham is one particularly interesting response to these shortcomings in regeneration practice. It incorporates the main guidelines for innovative practice — community-based regeneration, a lead role for local government, arms-length partnership arrangements, and an attempt at targeting, albeit at the village level. Furthermore, it operates outside the conurbations and therefore has not had the advantages of the financial boost and general 'hype' that comes with inner city initiatives, and in particular with city Challenge, the latest regeneration initiative.

Wingate and Station Town

Wingate and Station Town are two villages which are typical of the East Durham coalfield area. Like many of the villages in the area they owe their very existence to the coal mining industry; specifically as settlements to house workers and families in the immediate vicinity of the Wingate Grange and Hutton Henry Collieries. The latter only had a short life, but the Wingate Grange Colliery closed comparatively recently.

In the 1930s and 1940s when the coalfield was flourishing, Wingate was the social, cultural, and business centre for a wider sub-region, with two cinemas, two railway stations, a department store and many other amenities. However, this period of prosperity was short lived. By the 1950s it was clear that the mines days were numbered, and in 1962 it finally closed with a loss of 600 jobs.

The decline of the coal mining industry in general throughout the county has left many villages with severe physical, economic and social problems. In physical terms the villages were built for the pits, and as such very little consideration was ever given to layout, landscaping or blending into the countryside. As a Civic Trust report put it: 'The uncompromising prominence of Durham villages in the landscape, their blunt edges, harsh contours and rows of monotonous terraces bear witness to these origins.' In this respect the environment in Wingate is typical, giving a 'relentless impression of decay'.

But the main problem is unemployment. In 1984 male unemployment was 40% and there has been no significant decrease since. Depopulation caused by migration has been very high. The population fell from 6,000 to 4,800 between 1961 and 1981, and now stands at approximately 4,500. It is generally the younger and more skilled that have left. There are also problems of low academic attainment in local schools, and the Easington district has a poor health record.

The two villages, like many more in County Durham, have multiple problems more usually associated with the inner cities, but with the disadvantages of a relatively isolated location and the non-availability of inner city monies which might have been used towards their regeneration.

The policy content

The policy response to the closure of the Wingate Grange pit was to classify Wingate as a 'Category D' village in accordance with the controversial policy based on settlement categories contained in Durham County Council's 1950 County Development Plan and supported by the former Easington Rural District Council. This categorisation in effect meant no further development or investment in Wingate and Station Town, and exacerbated the sense of

hopelessness in the villages. Unemployment, environmental and social problems intensified.

In the late 1960s restrictions were eased when the County Development Plan was reviewed and some development and investment ensued. Both Durham County Council and Easington Rural District Council and its successor, Easington District Council, have carried out land reclamation and environmental improvements. In the early 1980s Easington District Council reclaimed the Wingate Grange Colliery site and spoil heaps and built an industrial estate offering employment for about 60 people.

'Regeneration needs to reflect the needs of local communities and to generate sense of ownership'

However by the mid-1980s it had become clear that such responses were not sufficient and that many parts of the former East Durham coalfield were suffering the consequences of multiple deprivation. A report by the consultants ECOTEC made a number of recommendations for a 'strategy for renewal', one of which was for a rolling programme of settlement renewal schemes, starting with Wingate and Station Town.

The direct consequence of this recommendation was the preparation of a feasibility study, at the request of the district and county councils, by the Civic Trust Regeneration Unit. The Civic Trust adopted an integrated approach to the regeneration of the settlements of Wingate and Station Town by means of community-based partnership initiative. In the early 1990 Easington District Council and Durham County Council accepted the Civic Trust report as a basis for a village renewal project.

The Wingate and Station Town Project was also adopted by the East Durham Task Force, which was established with the support of central government in 1990. The project is intended to be the first of a comprehensive rolling programme of village renewal schemes covering the entire East Durham area, so it is therefore very much a pilot exercise.

The first two years

The Wingate and Station Town Project is a partnership between the district and county councils with strong community participation. The project is overseen by a Joint Steering Committee and an Officer Working Party. A Project Leader with community development background co-ordinates the project and the East Durham Groundwork Trust has assisted with the necessary administrative support. The hope is to achieve focused, co-ordinated multi-agency activity with the full participation of the local community. The longer-term objective is self-sustaining and continuing regeneration.

The emphasis of the project's first two years has been on the implementation of a comprehensive programme of improvements to both the natural and built environments – not simply because such improvements are 'easy' and 'cheap' but because environmental improvement is viewed as the key to economic regeneration. The objective is to restore confidence in the villages, thus providing the conditions conducive to inward investment by the private sector.

In addition, progress has been made on a number of initiatives. The list is long and all-embracing, but examples include a facelift programme for village shops and pubs; a revolving fund for purchasing and converting derelict buildings; improved access to the countryside, with the help of a community-based

environment group and East Durham Groundwork Trust; two new sites for children's play areas, which have been supported by parents and community members; a most successful community summer festival; a community resource centre; and a vocational skills training initiative in environmental management ('The Green Gang').

Rolling the programme forward

As the first of a rolling programme of village-based projects, the Wingate scheme inevitably has a learning and experimental component. It is important that the right lessons are learned at an early stage, so that they can be applied both to the Wingate scheme itself and also to further regeneration projects in East Durham.

Progress, although real, is proving to be slow, and it has been suggested that the life of the project should be extended from three to five years. The processing of individual schemes and the support that new community groups require make heavy demands for professional help. These demands will inevitably increase if the programme is to be successfully extended to other villages and if continuing support is to be given to communities after projects formally close.

A regeneration team with a variety of skills rather than a single project leader is needed to service the regeneration programme. The provision of more staff would require additional revenue expenditure from partners who are unlikely to be able to provide this in the foreseeable future. To raise the increased income, the project partnership is proposing to create an income-generating capacity by setting up a development company which would develop and manage land currently owned by the local authorities. The intended development company could concentrate on small-scale housing schemes, thus generating income and at the same time encouraging further investment by the private sector.

A 'village challenge' scheme to select further villages for inclusion in the regeneration initiative has been proposed, whereby parish councils will be invited to make bids on a competitive basis. A competition might secure commitment to the project from local communities and parish councils, generate ideas from local people at an early stage, and help ensure subsequent success.

After only two years of the project one can already start to evaluate experience from the Wingate scheme. Certainly it incorporates many of the ideas currently being proposed as a basis for successful regeneration — partnership, a firm community basis, targeting, a competitive element, and so on. But the most significant lesson is that the regeneration of deprived communities may best be undertaken at the neighbourhood scale — in this case, two linked villages with a combined population of 4,500. At this scale it is just about possible the necessary support for community development.

At Wingate the lessons learned on a small scale will, it is hoped, be passed on to other local communities within an overall strategic framework. In other words, a 'seedbed' approach has been adopted.

The Wingate approach offers a real opportunity to make contribution to the effective regeneration of the East Durham coalfield area, where collieries continue to close. The approach offers a model which could be applied to settlements elsewhere, and particularly to those settlements which have been affected by the recent spate of pit closures. If the Government were to recast the Action for Cities so that it applied to pit villages, then substantial additional funding would become available.

The experience at Wingate inevitably invites comparison with those City Challenge schemes which have adopted a community based approach. However, City Challenge's emphasis on large-scale regeneration, on outputs, on capital programmes and on speed makes one wonder whether it will result in successful community-based regeneration. The tentative lesson from Wingate is that smaller-scale neighbourhood-based schemes may work, and that considerable emphasis needs to be placed on support and learning mechanisms. That takes time and patience.

Notes

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3. F. Robinson and K Shaw: 'Urban regeneration and community involvement'. *Local Economy* 1992, Jan.
4. *Station Town/Wingate: A Village Renewal Project*. Civil Trust Regeneration Unit. Draft Report, 1989.
5. *The Potential for Investment Projects in the East Durham Coalfield: A New Future for East Durham*. ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd. 1988.
6. *Rolling Forward the Settlement Renewal Initiative*. Wingate and Station Town Regeneration Project. 1993.