

## How not to renew communities

**IF WE WERE** devising a strategy to tackle disadvantage at local level we would want to begin with an analysis of the problems facing the area and the strengths it has to overcome them. All local people would help to define the issues and solutions and a lot of effort would be put into ensuring they were empowered to give their input.

We would make government departments and agencies work actively with local representatives, including the voluntary and community sector, and with one another to provide the best possible public services. And we would ensure that, in addition to these normal services, money was available to fund the initiatives that were agreed locally.

So naturally voluntary and community groups welcomed Neighbourhood Renewal when it was launched in 2003 to help improve the 10% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland because it promised all these things. Its guiding principles and methods of operation were community development work at its best.

Of course, even then there were sceptics who agreed with the model but argued that it wouldn't work: civil servants who had accumulated power under Direct Rule wouldn't surrender any of it to local committees; departments would continue with their power struggles instead of co-operating with others and would hold on to their money to pay for their own priorities.

Almost five years on there seems very little belief that Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) can deliver much in the way of benefits for our most disadvantaged areas. In a powerful critique (pages 12-13) Mervyn Gibson goes so far as to say that if someone had to design a process to damage and demoralise the community sector they could not have done it better. The price is being paid in increasing disadvantage, poverty and deprivation being suffered by tens of thousands of people.

Gibson argues that one weakness of NR is that, apart from the Department for Social Development, the attitude of government departments ranges from indifference to outright resistance. Moreover, devolution has encouraged those who were dragged to the NR table to heighten their campaign of attrition.

This in turn is compounded by the emergence at Stormont of 'a party political silo administration at Executive level', an attitude that there is no merit in helping a Minister from a rival party.

On top of this, Gibson claims, investment was not what was expected originally and any additional money has to be generated by neighbourhoods with the help of the private sector.

Colin Devine (page 15) goes further on this last point, claiming that dwindling central funding means that NR is not even resourced to support existing levels of service delivery, much less providing community capacity for innovation or flexibility. In addition there has been little evidence of departments being able or willing to 'bend the spend' in favour of disadvantaged areas.

Gibson says there is no substantive mention of Neighbourhood Renewal in the Programme for Government and Budget and that it is 'fast falling off the government's radar'. In this context NICVA's comprehensive critique of the documents, summarised on pages 18-19, is essential reading for anyone interested in the social dimension of the Executive's plans.

NICVA welcomes many aspects of the PfG and Budget including the guiding principles, the acknowledgement of the issue of sustainable development and the emphasis on promoting health and wellbeing.

On the other hand it criticises the absence of a coherent response to *A Shared Future* and of policies to move towards a fairer and more equal society, as seen, for example, in the absence of the anti-poverty strategy. It argues, as does DETI Minister Nigel Dodds, that the economic development and social welfare agendas complement one another.

The PfG and Budget contain some good words but lack a rationale. To that extent they reflect the disparate views of the coalition that forms the Executive. For example, they do not appear to recognise that promoting health and wellbeing demands action against poverty, disadvantage and exclusion right across the board.

As SCOPE went to press, the PfG and Budget were on course for approval in the Assembly. The Executive can still build on them by adopting an anti-poverty strategy and, as part of that, breathing life and vigour into Neighbourhood Renewal so that we can prove the sceptics wrong.



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