

COMMUNITY REGENERATION AND COMPLEXITY

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Introduction

Over a period of 5 years, a remarkable process of change took place on the Beacon and Old Hill estate in Falmouth, Cornwall. Overlooking the gleaming boats in the multi-million pound marina below, by 1995 the estates had come, to be known to the other communities in Falmouth as 'Beirut'. One of the most deprived areas in Britain, the estate was blighted by violent crime, drug dealing and intimidation.

The process initiated within the community that we describe stands as one of the most extraordinary examples of neighbourhood regeneration in the whole of the UK. Perhaps most strikingly, it has led to a series of notable health outcomes. In this chapter we describe the regeneration of the Beacon and Old Hill estates and advance our initial hypotheses explaining how and why this process of regeneration occurred.

Background

In 1996, a Bristol University report¹ found that Penwerris, the electoral ward comprising the Beacon and Old Hill estates (having an overall population of 6000, living in 1500 homes), was the most deprived in Cornwall. The county is itself the most deprived in England. The report also found that it had the largest percentage of children in households with no wage earners and the second highest number of children living with lone parents. According to the Breadline Britain Index¹ [], it had the highest proportion of poor households of the county's 133 wards. More than 30% of households were living in poverty, well above the national average² []. Unemployment rates on the estates were 30% above the national average.³ Of 23 child protection registrations in the council district of Carrick, 19 were lived on the estates. More than 50% of the 1500 homes were without central heating. Its illness rate was 18% above the national average.

By 2000, the overall crime rate had dropped by 50%. Affordable central heating and external cladding had been installed in over 60% of the properties. Child Protection Registrations had dropped by 42%. Post-natal depression was down by 70%. The educational attainment of 10-11 year old boys – i.e., level 4, key stage 2 – was up by 100%. The number of unwanted teenage pregnancies had been significantly reduced to the extent that in 1999 there were no unwanted teenage pregnancies. And the unemployment rate was down 71% amongst both males and females. These achievements were recognised by central government when the community was awarded the Nye Bevan Award for excellence. The sustainability of the regeneration process was further recognised in the form of the presentation of a Queen's Jubilee Award in June, 2003.

The Regeneration Process

It is generally agreed by tenants and residents that, by 1995, the Beacon and Old Hill estate was in a state of terminal decline. It had the reputation of being a 'no go area' for the police. Crime and vandalism were spiralling out of control, and the community

had become dissociated from the statutory agencies. At that time, there were no residents' associations, in either Beacon or Old Hill, and therefore no place where people's voices could be heard.

This escalating decline was recognised by two local health visitors, Hazel Stuteley and Philip Trenoweth, to whose practice some two-thirds of the population of the estate were registered. Although this population group amounted to only a third of their overall caseload, they were devoting all of their time to problems arising on the estate. The turning point for the health visitors came in the form of a particularly horrific incident, which the author subsequently recalled:

The flashpoint came simultaneously for us both, literally in Rebecca's case, when she witnessed the family car ignite following the planting of an incendiary device. She was 11 years old then and although physically unhurt, she was deeply traumatised by this. she was already in mourning for her friends' pet rabbit and tortoise, which had recently been butchered by thugs from the estate, this was the final straw.

As family Health Visitor for the past 5 years, I was a regular visitor to her home. Her Mum was a frequent victim of domestic violence and severely post-natally depressed. My caseload had many similar families with multiple health and social problems. Seeing Rebecca and her family's deep distress, I vowed then and there that change must happen if this community was to survive. I had been watching it spiral out of control for long enough.

During May to September 1995, the health visitors therefore initiated a series of meetings with representatives of health, education, social services, local government and police. From the outset it was recognised that community involvement would be essential to the success of the project. Twenty key tenants were identified by the health visitors as having the necessary skills to engage their peers and were invited to work in partnership with the statutory agencies. Of these 20, five agreed to participate. Resourced by the local government housing department, they received training to become proficient in submitting grant applications, and forming and maintaining a constituted committee. This group subsequently established a formal tenants and residents association. They went on to produce a hand delivered newsletter, along with a "one to one" chat to all households informing residents of the plans for the estate. This proved to be fundamental in galvanising the community to articulate and prioritise their concerns.

A series of increasingly well attended meetings for residents were held, which were often stormy. This was interpreted as a good sign by the health visitors, who were convinced that, while an apathetic community can achieve little or nothing, an angry community has a potential energy that can be harnessed for positive effects. These meetings led the community to conclude that the main problems affecting their health were crime, poor housing, and unemployment, together with the historical failure of the statutory agencies to address these issues. These were followed by joint meetings between residents and the relevant agencies, resulting in the foundation of the multi-agency tenant and resident led Beacon Community Regeneration Partnership in January 1997. The Partnership began meeting monthly, as it still does to this day.

Among the outcomes initially achieved by the Partnership was a successful bid for £1.2 million of Capital Challenge funding, with a further £1 million funding from Carrick District Council. This money was used to fund the central heating and energy efficiency measures, and led to the installation of central heating in 300 properties, with a further 900 properties being re-clad. An old butcher's shop was converted into a Resource Centre, offering training courses and advice on welfare, benefits, as well as being an informal drop-in centre and hub for communication of news about the estate. Another disused building was converted into a health Care Centre, providing a range of health care such as physiotherapy sessions and health checks for over-65s, alongside confidential contraceptive advice and counselling, directly aimed at teenagers on the estate.

Over the last 7 years, the Beacon Partnership has achieved a series of dramatic health, educational, law and order, and environmental outcomes, as detailed in table 1. Today, a series of initiatives contribute to the ongoing maintenance of the regeneration process. A purpose built nursery is being constructed, alongside a new youth centre. There are plans for a sensory garden, money has been secured for landscaping the original Beacon site, from which the estate takes its name. A mosaic project for street names and signs aims to bring the young and elderly to work together with the long-term unemployed of the estate.

Table 1:

Health Outcomes	Environmental Outcomes	Educational Outcomes
Increased breast feeding rates by 50%	£2.2 million generated by tenants and residents	On site training for tenants and residents
Postnatal depression rates down 77%	Gas central heating to 318 properties	After School Clubs
Childhood accident rate down 50%	Loft insulation in 349; cavity wall in 199; external cladding to 700	Life Skills courses
Less incidence of asthma	Fuel saving estimated at £180,306	Parent and Toddler Group
Reduced fear of Crime	£160,000 traffic calming measures	
Beacon Care Centre providing on site health advice	Provision of safe play areas	IT skills
Sexual health service for young people	Recycling and dog waste bins	Crèche supervisor training
	Skateboard Park	100% improvement in boys SATS results

Setting the project in a complexity perspective

Our first motivation for seeking to understand this process of regeneration that from the perspective of complexity theory, emerged during a complexity workshop held in 2002. During the workshop, a presentation by Eve Mitleton-Kelly provoked the following response from the author:

Although the presentation was nothing to do with community development, I was mesmerized by it. What I heard being described was a process which, uncannily and exactly, which mirrored my intuitive responses to 'kick starting the Beacon Project'. It placed great value on widespread networking and the creation of relationships and dialogue based on trust. Conversations, humility and respect, I now realised, contributed hugely to the creation of that all important enabling environment, which released the resourcefulness of this community to become self organising and achieve such significant and dramatic outcomes. Sitting through that presentation was one of those rare, life-changing moments of self enlightenment.

The importance of receptive context

Prior to the regeneration process occurring, it is important to understand how the receptive context for change was created. Not only was the community isolated from the statutory agencies, it was also isolated from and within itself. The common response, when others suffered the effects of crime and vandalism in the community, was one of relief that it had happened to someone else. There was little or no communication, either between the community and the authorities, or amongst the members of the community themselves. Rather, as Bob Mears, the Police Community Liaison and Crime Reduction Officer was later to reflect, 'there was an attitude among us and other people that everybody who lived on the estate was a criminal. That's obviously not true, but there was no exchange of information.'

The success of the residents' associations, and then the partnership, consisted first and foremost in enabling relations to be formed amongst the members of the community, for people to begin to talk to each other again. As a consequence, vandalism and crime were no longer seen as other people's problems – rather, they were problems confronting the community as a whole. In turn, the formation of these relationships enabled relationships to begin to form with the authorities, such that chains of communication between the community and the statutory agencies started to emerge. As trust spread throughout the community, so the community began to be trusted by the authorities, and the community in turn began to trust the agencies. On the basis of the formation of such relations, therefore, we can talk of a co-evolution of trust between the community and its environment, consisting in the authorities and statutory agencies. An initial series of 'listening forums' ultimately led to the situation where the agencies began actively to glean the views of the people in the community. The change in attitude was captured by Grenville Chappell, the Chair of the Beacon Community Regeneration Partnership: 'You've got to get out there and find out what people want, not sit around and think you know best what people want.'

The importance of non-linearity

While these interrelations doubtless constitute a necessary condition for the regeneration process, the momentum for that process came from a different quarter, a quarter which bears all the hallmarks of non-linearity. In a linear relation, the cause is 'commensurate' with its effect. In non-linear relations, however, small causes can lead to disproportionately large effects. It is precisely this disproportion of effect that propels the regeneration process. In the case of the Beacon and Old Hill estate, perhaps the most striking example of this is the instance of dog-waste bins. The provision of dog-waste bins on an estate is calculated according to a ration based on the number of residents in the estate – not the number of dogs. If, as is the case on Beacon and Old Hill, the number of dogs *per capita* is higher than average, there is a consequent lack of dog-waste bin provision. On the Beacon and Old Hill estate, the environment was blighted by dog waste. The Partnership worked to deliver a dog-waste bin provision which reflected more accurately the number of dogs on the estate. Within a very short time, dog-waste became a problem of the past. In a subsequent survey of tenants and residents, which sought to determine the single factor that had the most impact on the estate, a large majority identified the provision of adequate numbers of dog-waste bins, and the resultant improvement to the living environment for the community. Here was clear evidence of a dramatic outcome following from a small intervention, and the momentum this gave to the change process was to lead, ultimately, to a community-wide commitment to the betterment of the environment.

Emergence through co-evolution

The most significant aspect of the regeneration process on the Beacon and Old Hill estate was that, from the outset, there was no initial funding, no hierarchy, no targets, no business plan, only a shared vision of what the community wanted to be, rather than an obsession with what it had to do. Thus, the regeneration process was not a result of a predetermined plan. Rather, the process emerged as a consequence of the interactions between the members of the community, and between the community and its environment. For example, the statutory agencies, the police, the council. As the community evolved, so also the agencies and professional bodies co-evolved with the community.

Localised self-organisation

A key element of complexity theory is the insight that, within a community or organisation, knowledge is distributed, and behaviour is necessarily localised. Macroscopic changes in the behaviour of the community or organisation as a whole are then classified as emergent phenomena resulting from the interactions between the localised changes in behaviour. This necessitates a conceptual shift from the assumption that change must be 'managed' from the 'centre'. A fascinating example of this notion of localisation occurred as a direct consequence of the award of the Capital Challenge funding. While this award provided further evidence to the community of its ability to achieve successful outcomes by working together, it also necessitated, as a stipulation upon which the funding was conditional, the formation of a formal Regeneration Partnership. The effect of the formation of this Partnership, not least in terms of the trust which it built up in the authorities, was a noteworthy break in the traditional working practices of local government. Rather than maintaining sole control of the budget and decision making processes, Carrick District Council agreed to delegate some of its powers, a process which empowered the Partnership, which remained a predominantly tenant-led body, rather than a council

committee, to make recommendations to the full council concerning the estate's progress. As Mike Owen, Senior Housing Officer for Carrick District Council at the time, said: 'It was quite brave for the authority to extend responsibility to a body controlled by residents.' While the decision may indeed have been brave, it had the effect of ensuring that it was the specific local needs of the community which were being responded to, with local, directed, changes being the result. Perhaps the most poignant expression of this localisation of the decision making progress is to be found in the way that the Partnership worked together with the tenants to determine the order of priority for the improvement work on the buildings enabled by the award of the Capital Challenge funding. Such localised self-organisation in turn ensured that, for the community as a whole, there was clear evidence of the fairness of the prioritisation of the recladding and heating improvement work to be undertaken.

Conclusion

The Old Hill and Falmouth Beacon estate are a living example of relevant order emerging out of what was in 1995 a chaotic system. The intricate web of interactions which have formed between the community and the agencies hold the Beacon Partnership at the edge of chaos and allow the exploration of adjacent possibles, where new projects can be tried out and new relationships formed. The self-organisation of these emergent, social structures pattern the behaviour of the Partnership and are able to adapt and respond to changes. There is a sense of agencies 'acting differently' in non-traditional ways, forging links outside of their organisational remit which contributes to this emergent order. The visibility of the change is captured in the wonderful gardens on the estate- where once prams and mattresses flourished, there is now a riot of flowers and shrubs, rockeries and raised borders. Work is ongoing to determine whether exchange visits, where communities beginning the regeneration process are brought to Falmouth to 'see' and share stories, are able to act as a vehicle for the possible transference of successful change.

¹ Poverty and Deprivation in West Cornwall in the 1990's, David Gordon et al, Bristol University

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