

Talking to Families in Leeds and Sheffield

-  Helen Bowman reports on interviews with 100 families in two low-income city neighbourhoods, one in Sheffield and one in Leeds. Kirkside East is a large, mainly white, council estate in Leeds. The Valley is a mixed tenure, mixed income, ethnically diverse area, stretching out of Sheffield city centre.
-  Three-quarters of the families in both areas felt that community spirit mattered. It made the areas better places to live in and it brought people together to fight problems. The large majority of families wanted to know that they could rely on their local community in times of need.
-  All families shared worries about their children, but most families valued their local community.
-  65% of the families were dependent on state benefit and 57% of all adults in the families were not working, studying or training. 43% were lone parents. A high proportion of the families had lived in the areas for only a short time. Over 40% of the families wanted to move out of their current accommodation. At the same time children, friends and finances often tied people into their neighbourhood.
-  Many residents thought that neighbourhood conditions were improving, but 40% of families were dissatisfied with the areas as places to bring up children. Many families felt that streets were unsafe play spaces and that they were surrounded by threats that they could not control. Parents remembered their own childhoods as generally freer from fear than their children's.
-  Most parents in The Valley brought up the subject of race spontaneously whereas in Kirkside East it was barely mentioned. Families in the area welcomed diversity and liked the Valley's multicultural character.
-  Parents knew that local schools often under-performed in national terms, but many preferred their children to go to neighbourhood schools. Parents of 86% of the children in both areas were satisfied with the schools their children attended.

Further information

A detailed account of this research can be found in *Talking to Families in Leeds and Sheffield: A report on the first stage of the research* by Helen Bowman (CASEreport 18). Copies are available from Jane Dickson, CASE, at the address below or can be downloaded from our internet site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case>

1. The Study

The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) is interviewing 200 families with children in four low-income areas in England. Through successive rounds of interviews we are trying to understand how area conditions and area changes affect people who live locally. We are exploring people's views of their neighbourhoods and of initiatives in the areas as well as their own experiences of how change impacts directly on individuals' lives. Our aim is to find out about and document the ways in which areas improve or decline as local families see it.

2. The Neighbourhoods

Kirkside East is a large, mainly white council estate in Leeds. The Valley is a mixed tenure, mixed income, ethnically diverse area, stretching out of Sheffield city centre. Both areas have high unemployment rates and high proportions of lone parents, children under 16 and working age adults not in work, study or training, compared with the national averages. Kirkside East continues to be a predominantly white, working class area. The Valley is much more ethnically mixed with over a quarter of residents from a minority background. It has some large, Victorian privately-owned houses, which attract young professional couples. Each area has around 20,000 inhabitants. Both areas are unpopular in the wider community, creating empty homes that allow people to move around the areas. People who need a quick solution to their housing problems, often in desperation, move in. This helps explain the higher than average moves around the areas. There was a strong sense of general untidiness in the areas, especially in Kirkside East.

3. The Families

65% of the families receive state benefit, 43% are lone parents and 57% of all adults in the families were not working, studying or training (General Household Survey for Britain 1998/99) and 75% of the parents have children under the age of 11. A high proportion of the families had lived in the areas for only a short time.

4. Families' views of the area

Both areas have rundown and empty properties, patchy public services, high fear of crime and drugs and high dissatisfaction with the areas as places to bring up children. But there are also new regeneration programmes, active community groups and local attempts to overcome the negative reputations that stigmatise the areas.

Most families identify with their immediate areas and feel familiar and safe immediately around where they live, but they are less confident about the wider area. 20% of the families in The Valley and 32% in Kirkside East were dissatisfied with their area as a place to live compared with 13% nationally. Boarded-up houses and half-empty blocks of maisonettes make parts of the area look abandoned and increase tenants' isolation and insecurity. Residents miss the lack of neighbours next door, along the street or in the rest of the block. Most empty property was council owned.

Council tenants in both areas are frustrated with repair problems and the conditions of their homes. Tenants in The Valley feel insecure because of the rapid deterioration of their properties, increasing abandonment and an uncertain future. Might this mean demolition and rehousing for the family? Parents simply did not know the answers to these questions.

36% of the families in Kirkside East and 48% in The Valley wanted to move out of their current accommodation. Tenants were more likely to want to move because of the state of their property, especially council tenants. But bad relations with neighbours, local decline and a desire for change often prompted people to move away from their immediate area. On the other hand, children, friends and finances often tie people into their neighbourhood.

5. Places to live in and bring up children

Many residents liked their immediate neighbourhoods and thought that conditions were improving, but 46% of families in Kirkside East and 34% in The Valley were dissatisfied with the areas as places to bring up children. Parents worried about how to offset negative influences and dangers in the area. Both areas have facilities and activities for children but they have more children under 16 than average. Local youth provision is under severe pressure. The shortage of supervised play activities in both areas compounded parents concerns about drugs, negative peer pressure and road safety. In both areas many parents felt that local provision was inadequate.

Many families felt that their areas were sometimes dangerous, that streets were unsafe play spaces and that they were surrounded by threats that they could not control. The areas they live in have particular intense problems of poverty, crime, and drugs. The communities that were once vigilant have dwindled and fractured and many now favour keeping 'themselves to themselves'. Parents remembered their own childhoods as freer from fear than their children's.

Parents struggled to offset negative influences on their children's behaviour. Many felt that in the past children had more carefree lives but were more disciplined. Now children are more restricted in their activities and have to be more aware of dangers like drugs. But they also felt that parental controls were often weaker and some children were "rough" and "rude".

6. Community spirit

Nearly half the families in both areas felt that community spirit existed whereas many more, three-quarters of the families in both areas, felt that community spirit mattered. Neighbours were the most important source of community belonging, often offering concrete help with children and many kinds of care. Community spirit promoted friendliness, trust and security and made the areas better places to live. Parents from some ethnic minority groups described how they felt a part of their own strong communities. In The Valley, people saw organised community activities as helping to tackle issues across the area. In Kirkside East, the informal exchanges of friends in community centres and within smaller community groups were important in some parts of the area.

Community spirit made the areas better places to live where people could come together to fight problems. The large majority of families wanted to know that they could rely on their local community in times of need.

7. Race

Most parents in The Valley brought up the subject of race spontaneously whereas in Kirkside East (a mainly white area) it was barely mentioned. Families welcomed diversity in the area and felt that The Valley's multicultural character was positive. But many also

talked about tensions between different groups, particularly with children in the area. Some families mentioned increasing segregation in the local schools and the lack of resources for pupils with English as a second language as major worries. Some also talked about how the area was stigmatised by racial stereotyping from the outside.

Only four of the 40 parents who commented on race relations had wholly negative views. All these were white British and resented changes in the area. The majority (24) had mixed views, feeling positive about the generally good relations between races but worrying about prejudice, friction and lack of resources. Twelve parents had a clearly positive view of race relations in the area but eight of these worried about wider racial attitudes and the pressures on schools to cope with language barriers and refugee problems. There was a general worry about the growing concentration of refugees in the area and whether this was becoming an unmanageable drain on resources.

Many parents feel more at ease because their children are being brought up in a mixed neighbourhood, whereas in other areas they might suffer from racism or be less racially aware. On the other hand, parents recognise the problems and tensions between different groups in the area, especially conflict between children. Parents of different backgrounds and races are worried about the same sorts of things – ethnic tensions, school segregation and high concentrations of disadvantage – but also value similar things – good race relations, understanding different cultural traditions, a sense of community, people being friendly towards each other.

8. Schools

Parents tended to use local information networks to make their school choice. Parents knew that local schools often under-performed in national terms, but they often preferred their children to go to neighbourhood schools and they liked the security and ease of contact this brought, especially at primary level. Parents of 86% of the children in both areas were satisfied with the schools their children attended. They praised their local schools for their neighbourhood character, their good facilities, their friendly environment, cultural mix, positive approach to children. They supported clear rewards and controls over behaviour and they liked links from the school to the local community.

At secondary level, the division between schools and parents, children and parents, is greater. Some parents send their children out of the area or move away because of secondary school problems but many parents still prefer local schools at this stage because they feel it is safer.

Most parents were confident about helping their children with homework at primary school, but fewer when it came to secondary school.

9. Changes in the area

Government and Local Authority regeneration initiatives are targeting both areas. Some community-based groups in The Valley are working to tackle specific area problems and needs. Many families recognise the potential of the areas and pointed out where things are improving in particular streets, rows of houses or blocks of flats. However, as many families felt that there was little change or that things were actually getting worse. Adult education, Lifelong Learning and Sure Start were popular in Kirkside East; in The Valley a local community forum was actively working to improve the image of the area and the

local environment. New Deal for Communities and Sure Start are also very active in The Valley. But fear of crime and drugs swamped positive feelings for some. People who had lived in the areas for a long time and those who were involved in community activities tended to be the most positive.

10. What would help

At the time of interview, over half the families in each area felt that a little more money would have helped them most. In The Valley nearly half the families wanted more and better services and activities for children. Just under a fifth of the parents in each area thought that moving would help their families. Work was also important, both getting jobs and keeping them. Other things that would help were home improvements, better health, better transport, help with a particular child's needs. Sometimes people just wanted less tangible things like improving the family's well-being, gaining confidence, spending more time together and resolving family problems. Seven people said that they were 'content' as they were.

11. Conclusion

Poorer families, the large majority in both areas, struggled with neighbourhood problems and felt insecure about the future. All families shared worries about their children. But most families valued, relied on and wanted to protect their immediate neighbourhood and the local community. This feedback gave us the sense that there was something to be built on in these neighbourhoods and that life within them could be made far better.

About the research

The author interviewed 50 families in each of the two neighbourhoods (100 families in total). They were contacted through baby clinics, local groups, community centres and schools, and through families already interviewed. The Neighbourhood Study in Leeds and Sheffield is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and is the second part of the neighbourhood study, which started in two areas of London in 1999 (CASEreport 9). The two areas of Leeds and Sheffield are also part of CASE's 12 Areas Study (CASEreport 14).