

Neighbourhood Renewal

Newcastle City Council

May 2009



Summary

1 This inspection asks ‘how good is the neighbourhood regeneration service/and will it improve? We have focused on three neighbourhoods, selected by the Council, as case studies of Newcastle’s approach to neighbourhood regeneration.

2 The Council, with its partners, has identified five areas as priorities for regeneration, being the most deprived communities in Newcastle. The Council has suggested three of them as the areas which the inspection should focus on: Walker, Scotswood Benwell and Elswick. Further details of findings in these neighbourhoods are attached as Appendix 1.

3 Our judgement is that Newcastle City Council is delivering a ‘fair’ neighbourhood regeneration service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. The Council has been involved for many years in regeneration schemes across the City with varying degrees of success. The City has a deep-seated legacy of worklessness, deprivation and depopulation in some areas. In Elswick, progress has been made against all indicators of regeneration – the only New Deal area where this is so. This progress is recognised by the community. In Walker the Planning Framework has been put in place for regeneration, the community has been effectively involved, but only limited numbers of new houses have been built. In Scotswood, a great deal of demolition and land assembly has been achieved and local people have been re-housed effectively but no new houses have been built, although a new school, Excelsior Academy, opened in September 2008.

4 The Council has had a reputation for slow and cumbersome processes, particularly amongst businesses and the voluntary and community sectors. Decisions have been slow. In the past, there has been limited strategic direction and some staff, residents and partners are still not clear about future plans. However, there is now much better strategic alignment across the Council and there is a sense of greater engagement and pace since the restructuring of the Council in 2008. Stronger delivery channels and governance arrangements are being put in place, based on proven successful models elsewhere in the Council such as Building Schools for the Future.

5 The Council has had mixed success in improving outcomes for users and the community. Overall, Newcastle is relatively less deprived compared to other areas in 2007 than it was in 2004. Crime has reduced, educational attainment has improved but the gap has not narrowed on health and economic indicators. The Council is working with partners to deliver pathways to work with some success, for example Newcastle Futures have placed over 1,200 people into work in under two years. Resident satisfaction is generally high and increasing in Elswick and Walker but below average in Scotswood Benwell. In all three neighbourhoods resident satisfaction is higher than the city average for changes made to the area, ability to influence decisions, and opportunity to participate, but lower than average with the local area as a place to live, satisfaction with choice of housing, and feeling safe after dark.

6 Community capacity has increased, particularly in Elswick, as a result of regeneration. The Council has good arrangements for consulting and engaging with residents on its regeneration plans, and there have been imaginative consultation events held in Walker. Services have increased their presence in communities through the use of neighbourhood response managers and neighbourhood wardens. There is an improving relationship with the business community across the city. However, there are also weaknesses in communication and engagement: communication with local businesses is not always effective and engagement with the voluntary sector is inconsistent. Communication is not always sufficiently timely, and the council is not good at communicating changes to plans, or completing the consultation process by explaining outcomes resulting from consulting to those who took part.

7 The Council is mindful for the need to begin to make rapid process in regenerating its five priority areas, and transplanting the lessons from these areas to the wider communities of Newcastle. It has, over the last 18 months, begun to deliver a series of notable changes including the following.

- Supporting the creation of the City Development Company, with Gateshead.
- Defining, with partners, a clear vision for the City within the Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS); with shorter-term targets being expressed within the Local Area Agreement (LAA).
- An increased focus on the five strategic commission areas (including the three areas looked at in this inspection), being the most deprived communities in Newcastle, where outcomes must be delivered.
- Revised its regeneration strategy, and made it link more clearly to the SCS and LAA.
- Established clear plans for the development of neighbourhoods.
- Established a Regeneration Delivery Board to oversee the delivery of regeneration in the City. However, it is new and had met only once prior to the inspection.
- Implemented a new corporate, and LSP, performance management system, which will link to a suite of actions plans which are intended to drive the delivery of change.

8 In making our assessment of neighbourhood regeneration, and in comparing Newcastle to other local areas where we have undertaken similar work, we have not been able to point to any major areas where proposals for change or development have been omitted. However, these proposals for change and development have only recently been instituted. Whilst strategies and plans are now generally clear, they are not yet sufficiently well integrated, or translated fully into action plans with a clear outcome focus at local level.