Research Report 19 Summary

Seeking the Lessons: an evaluation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Skills and Knowledge Programme

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Introduction

The Skills and Knowledge Programme was introduced by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) to bring about a step-change in the level of skills and knowledge for all those involved in neighbourhood renewal, and to ensure that everyone involved in neighbourhood renewal has the support they need to improve neighbourhoods. A vision for this change is set out in the learning and development strategy document: **The Learning Curve[1]**. Key elements of the Programme have included:

- the Renewal.net website (www.renewal.net) designed to capture and spread knowledge of 'what works' in neighbourhood renewal

- Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers, a body of experienced practitioners available to provide technical assistance to partnerships

- Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills, a programme of short training courses tackling skills gaps at the heart of implementing neighbourhood renewal strategies

- regional networks. intended to provide networking and learning opportunities across subject, programme and local boundaries

- flexible budgets available to Government Offices to promote skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal in each region

EDuce ltd were commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the Programme, in conjunction with the University of Cambridge (Department of Land Economy), GFA Consulting, Makesfive ltd and Sharp End Infoseek[2]. The research was based upon a mixture of surveys, area case studies, and analysis of management information. This summary document sets out the key findings from the evaluation. More detailed reports are available on the NRU website (www.neighbourhood.gov.uk).

Skills and knowledge: critical to successful delivery

The NRU has made **very substantial progress in implementing the Skills and Knowledge Programme**, putting key building blocks in place to help ensure that there is sufficient capacity to deliver the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The Programme has become geared increasingly to the requirements of delivering performance improvement. There is **evidence of Programme impact, especially in bringing about changes in policies, practices and ways of working**, without which the Strategy will fail.

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1 www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/publications.asp?did=265

2 Evaluation team: Derrick Johnstone, Susan Johnstone (EDuce ltd), Peter Tyler, Angela Brennan and Monica Otero-Garcia (University of Cambridge); Geoff Fordham (GFA Consulting); Solihin Garrard (Makesfive ltd); Claire Campbell-Jones (Sharp End Infoseek).

The Programme has been a **significant source of innovation** in promoting learning and the use of evidence in the neighbourhood renewal field. It also offers lessons and experience for approaches to building capacity for improved delivery across a wider set of policies, including the broader Sustainable Communities agenda promoted by the ODPM.

The **rationale for the Programme has been borne out**, reflecting the analysis set out in The Learning Curve. There is continuing and strong evidence of performance issues, eg, in the design of strategies (insufficiently outcomes-driven and evidence-based) and in implementation (eg, weaknesses in project management and partner accountability, and barriers to mainstreaming). There is now greater understanding of the scale of the task involved in harnessing public, private, voluntary and community sector contributions to 'closing the gap' for the most deprived communities, and the ways in which relevant skills and knowledge contribute. **Where such capabilities are lacking, then there are significant risks to delivery**.

The Learning Curve's vision remains a big challenge, that of *"equipping everyone with the skills and knowledge needed for the successful delivery of neighbourhood renewal"*. Such a vision is highly ambitious and requires a major culture change on the part of all partners in placing higher priority on addressing these needs.

Very few stakeholders interviewed or surveyed in the evaluation were able to *quantify* the benefits or results they had achieved through Skills and Knowledge Programme interventions. It was too early for them to judge; the nature of the Programme has been much about building capacity to deliver in future. With the focus shifting much more to supporting performance improvement, **future evaluation must give priority to identifying evidence of learning gains, changes and improvements made and how these track through to improved partnership performance**. The main vehicle for this should be through annual Performance Management reviews which have been introduced since the start of the evaluation. More systematic monitoring and evaluation are needed of Programme activities, including events, and greater use made of the findings, shared across the NRU and GOs.

Influencing partnership plans and activities

The NRU and GOs have **helped significantly to raise the level of interest amongst LSPs and neighbourhood partnerships in skills and knowledge** for neighbourhood renewal. They have taken a wide range of initiatives to help partnerships translate this interest into action, notably through Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers, GO and Regional Network events. Renewal.net has created a very substantial on-line knowledge resource for learning about 'what works' and the policy context for neighbourhood renewal.

From a low base, there is now much more learning *activity* (eg, workshops and seminars, partner induction) associated with the implementation of national and local neighbourhood renewal strategies. This can be attributed to the emphasis on skills and knowledge in the National Strategy Action Plan, to NRU guidance and GO roles in providing encouragement and support. The availability of Skills and Knowledge budgets at national and regional levels has enabled action that is likely not to have taken place otherwise, either on the same scale or reaching the same range of participants.

Progress by many LSPs and neighbourhood partnerships has been a slow, uphill task. Most have had individuals championing the cause of skills and knowledge, but have had to confront a variety of obstacles including the lack of a learning and performance management culture across the partnership, perceived time pressures, and limits to commitment to the partnership itself by individual partner organisations. Some partnerships have benefited from advice from GOs on where to start, while in other cases NRAs have played an instrumental role. There are **signs that the introduction of Performance Management Frameworks has been making a difference** – though the real test comes in the extent to which partners successfully implement the improvement plans produced as part of these reviews.

Most actions by partnerships have sought primarily to improve how partners work together, with less focus on tackling specific problems and working them through as partners. This has tended to reflect their stage of maturity as partnerships, with concerns over process, direction and priorities being bigger concerns in the earlier stages of partnership development. In the fieldwork areas, we found evidence of organisational changes, process improvements and changes in personal behaviour and confidence as a consequence of partnership learning activities, but putting mainstreaming into practice has not been a prominent theme for learning activities. However, there are indications that partnerships are now devoting more attention to gearing partners up better to deliver floor targets and other outcomes.

Progress on skills, knowledge and behaviours

Overall, the **Skills and Knowledge Programme has primarily contributed to building** *knowledge* **for neighbourhood renewal** (eg, about needs, policies, and appropriate interventions) and **less to developing critical** *skills and behaviours* (eg, in abilities to manage change and work together in ways which bring out the best in what each partner has to offer). On the latter, there are **significant needs amongst partnership managers** in their roles as change agents, eg, skills in building partnership boards and groups, diagnosing performance issues and support techniques for performance improvement.

Typical needs which are now in sharper focus amongst a wide range of players in neighbourhood renewal include:

Building the knowledge base

- using evidence (accessing and interpreting data; using evaluation to improve the evidence base and develop more robust strategies and projects)

- understanding what 'mainstreaming' means and what works in promoting it

- understanding policy developments relevant to neighbourhood renewal

- appreciating the factors which drive and constrain partner organisations

Developing core skills

- engaging and influencing service providers/other partners

- managing complex change (including putting mainstreaming into practice)

- building consensus and commitment amongst partners (and resolving tensions and conflict)

- making performance management work

- developing sustainable organisations in the voluntary and community sector (social enterprise skills)

Changing behaviours

- creating conditions for effective collaboration and the learning needed for performance improvement

- problem solving, including a greater propensity to seek evidence from elsewhere

- strategic and systems thinking – understanding how all the parts fit together and lifting partner sights to concentrate on what matters beyond narrow interests)

Many individuals – including many experienced ones – have taken time to adjust to what has changed (eg, with 'mainstreaming' rather than competitive funding the main vehicle of policy), and we found evidence that there are some who do not yet see 'neighbourhood renewal' as relevant to them despite their having relevant roles. There are also significant and continuing **needs for induction into neighbourhood renewal and partnerships** for a wide range of people, given the breadth of stakeholder organisations – and the typical turnover amongst individuals involved.

Targets of learning activities

NRU and GO sponsored activities and actions within LSPs and neighbourhood partnerships have been aimed mainly at managers and partner representatives. **Less priority has been given to front-line workers and residents and their role in bringing about service improvement.**

There has been **limited attention to the needs of partnership chairs**, despite their key roles within partnerships, and the **needs of councillors have not been addressed systematically** though many have participated to a limited extent in LSP learning activities. Councillors have important roles as community leaders and, increasingly, in neighbourhood governance, and they have great scope to foster collaboration – or frustrate what could be achieved. Training provision been introduced recently within national programmes through IDeA ('Modern Members'), to which the NRU is contributing.

The **pursuit of equality and diversity objectives has not been a strong element of the Skills and Knowledge Programme** (nationally and regionally), though, eg, targets have been set (and largely met) for some activities (eg, recruitment of NRAs from BME groups), and some specific actions have been promoted, eg, race awareness training and NRA support for Community Cohesion action plans. Feedback from our fieldwork areas suggests that equality and diversity considerations have only strongly featured in thinking on learning activities in those areas with significant BME populations.

Influencing the supply of learning opportunities

Research evidence points to **latent demand for accredited learning** and to the need for further action to improve the supply of trained and qualified practitioners. This is warranted as a response to persisting recruitment difficulties and relatively high turnover of staff in the neighbourhood renewal field (a key issue for NDC partnerships for example). It will be a focus for the work of the Academy for Sustainable Communities[3] (the new national centre for sustainable community skills), and a continuing interest for the NRU in seeking to ensure that delivery of the National Strategy is not compromised by skill shortages. At GO level, action is needed to **influence future priorities of the Learning and Skills Council and Regional Skills Partnerships** to ensure that appropriate account is taken of skills and knowledge needs for neighbourhood renewal in their planning and resource allocation.

Skills and knowledge within Government

The experience of implementing the National Strategy has brought out a range of skill needs amongst civil servants, including those required to promote learning in LSPs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships and to ensure more effective joined-up working across government. In GOs, more recent policy developments (eg, on Devolved Decision Making and the introduction of Local Area Agreements) have highlighted skills concerning, eg, relationship management, brokering support packages for performance improvement, and advising on performance management and improvement planning, data sources and analysis. GO interviewees did not consider that as organisations GOs were very effective at capturing and sharing knowledge, especially in building the 'organisational memory'. High turnover of staff and the recruitment of staff new to neighbourhood renewal has tended to compound the problem.

There has not been a strategic approach within the NRU and most GOs to identifying and addressing skills and knowledge needs, nor indeed, more broadly to pursue organisational development geared to their roles in improving delivery of the NSNR. Business plans have not been not converted systematically into team and personal development plans, and critical learning needs, common across key groups of staff, have not typically been addressed. Skills and Knowledge budgets available to GOs from the NRU have been used by several GOs, however, to instigate cross-GO learning activities that would not otherwise have happened.

There is **scope for much more joint learning with others in the delivery chain** (both across tiers of government and vertically). This has potential to build relationships and mutual understanding, promote solutions to common problems which might not otherwise be found, and reduce delivery risks.

Contribution of the Skills and Knowledge Programme tools

The Skills and Knowledge tools have begun to make a significant contribution to plugging gaps which have not been met by alternative provision. As intended, they have addressed distinct learning preferences amongst organisations and users, whereby individuals respond more positively to some forms of learning (face-to-face, on-line, seminars and workshops, etc) than to others.

3 www.ascskills.org

Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers

- NRAs have acted as front-line trouble shooters and capacity builders, playing an important role in support of LSPs and neighbourhood partnerships, not least in interventions with those facing particular difficulties, in breaking new ground in the introduction of performance management, and in strengthening community engagement.

- NRAs are the most likely of the Skills and Knowledge tools to lead to changes in strategies, projects and ways of working. In more than four out of five cases, partnerships we interviewed had introduced or made changes to strategies and/or projects. In three out of five cases, they had introduced or made changes to ways of working, systems or processes.

- Half the partnerships interviewed pointed directly to actual or planned improvements to services, and some to specific neighbourhood renewal outcomes, eg, in better housing and in the extent and quality of community participation. For most other respondents, it was too early for them to comment on improvements and outcomes.

- While NRAs have enabled learning within partnerships, more could be gained, eg, through facilitation techniques and more use of evidence of what works elsewhere.

- Over two thirds of partnerships surveyed considered that they had achieved more, better or faster benefits/results than they would have without the services of an NRA.

Renewal.net

- Renewal.net has developed as the on-line 'place to go' for knowledge about what works in neighbourhood renewal. It has developed very substantial content: case studies, overviews, policy and research documents, and 'how to' materials.

- Use of the site has increased steadily, with over 1,000 user sessions a day, projected rise to 48,000 sessions/ month by March 2006. Users have been concentrated mainly amongst practitioners and researchers with core neighbourhood renewal interests (rather than more widely amongst those with thematic contributions to neighbourhood renewal – in community safety, education, economic development, etc).

- The most prominent benefits have been knowledge of 'what works' (for 62% registered users), awareness of policy and research (54%), and new ideas and opportunities (52%), followed by its use in providing validated evidence to make a case (eg, in reviewing strategies, developing projects or bidding – 25%).

- Just under 30% of these users reckoned that they could point to specific results from their use of Renewal.net, and 37% considered that it was too early to say. Of those who could identify results, two thirds cite better informed debate within their partnership and/or organisation, and just under half have found a solution to a particular problem.

- Nearly three quarters of registered users were confident that their use of Renewal.net will help them produce better neighbourhood renewal outcomes.

Regional networks

- Regional Networks have developed as organisational vehicles to promote cross-sector networking and learning in five regions, while Government Offices in the other regions have supported networking initiatives, mainly specific to particular types of partnership (LSP, Community Empowerment Network, NDC or Neighbourhood Management partnership). In *all* regions, further development of networks is taking place in the context of the Regional Centres of Excellence, which can be expected to provide a better basis for future networking than existed when the Skills and Knowledge Programme was introduced.

- We have found consistent evidence of the value to participants of networking with peers, whether through opportunities provided by Regional Networks or in other ways (eg, through participation on Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills courses).

- There is little evidence to date of the *impact* of Regional Networks and other regional networking initiatives. Most of the Networks were formed recently and longer-established Networks have not undertaken such assessments. Our research has found evidence of gains in social capital, where Networks have brought benefits in terms of 'bridging' (helping participants make the links across sectors, with government bodies, etc) and 'bonding' (strengthening relationships and trust amongst participants).

- The Networks have also demonstrated value as independent bodies that are not the creatures of particular sectors or interest groups, and in providing a resource with dedicated 'skills and knowledge' expertise to identify needs, contributors and organise events.

Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills

- The pilot courses[4] run as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills programme have been dedicated to filling very specific gaps in learning needs for neighbourhood renewal – gaps confirmed by our fieldwork analysis.

- The courses have been appreciated by participants – especially for the opportunities they have provided for peer exchange and the time away from the job for reflection. Ratings for course content, facilitation, enjoyment and skills development have been high (averaging 4 on a 1-5 scale), though a minority of participants (one in six) have had concerns about course content and pitch.

- Three quarters of participants felt that they applied something useful they had learnt from their course. Most, however, felt that their course had helped them only at the margins in relation to the specific learning outcomes set out for the course they attended. 'Cascade' effects have not been strong, in that only 16% had passed on some of their course learning to others.

- When asked about evidence of improvements in partnership or organisational performance, or outcomes for local people, one third felt that it was too early to say, and a quarter could not identify any. Those that said they could, tended to refer back to progress in partnership working rather than (as yet) improved performance.

- Promotion of the programme has been difficult, partly because of resistance to the three day duration of each module. There are many other calls on the time of potential participants, and also other learning opportunities they may wish to pursue. We also found evidence of barriers to participating in residential training for women from some BME communities and others with care responsibilities.

- The programme is now seen by the NRU as part of the performance support package that can offered to individual partnerships tailored to their specific needs.

Key Messages and Recommendations

Key messages

Key messages for further progress in implementing the Skills and Knowledge Programme include:

- Continue to **harness Skills and Knowledge Programme resources more closely to practical concerns in the delivery of the National Strategy**, notably around making mainstream services work better in deprived neighbourhoods and planning to achieve floor targets.

- **Build more *learning* into the Skills and Knowledge Programme itself**:

  - Give more attention to evaluation, feedback and 'what works' in delivering the Programme (eg, in use of facilitation techniques to foster joint working, use of evidence and faster adoption of innovation) – up, down and across the delivery chain.

  - Focus on how learning activities can most effectively promote the capture and sharing of knowledge, support culture change and contribute to improving performance.

- **Develop the strategic and influencing roles of the NRU and GOs**, working with government departments, RDAs, the Learning and Skills Council and other partners to promote and find sustainable solutions to meeting skills and knowledge needs.

  - Make the most of the connections across related policy areas, (eg, learning and skills, local government modernisation, and the voluntary and community sector role in delivery of public services)

  - Ensure that there is critical mass across the regional infrastructure for capacity building (skills development, analytical capabilities, etc) – Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery project, RCEs, Regional Observatories, etc

- **Invest in capacity within NRU and GOs to lead, influence and support performance improvement**, supporting the drive towards devolved decision-making and building on actions taken to date in mainstreaming organisational learning practices.

4 Topics: 'Partnership Working and Leadership'; 'Programme Design and Delivery'; 'Learning from What Works'. These are provided by Renewal*Academy*, www.renewacademy.org.uk

Recommendations

Specific recommendations include:

Anticipating and addressing needs

- Promote practical examples of how partnerships are managing change and developing skills, and the benefits and results they have realised.

- Review performance improvement and learning needs identified in annual performance management reviews (across all Performance Management Frameworks) to inform planning of improvement support.

- Research implementation of partnership improvement plans to learn from 'what works' and strengthen future delivery.

- Target Skills and Knowledge resources on partnerships where performance improvement support can make the biggest difference, involving a shift of resources towards regions with higher concentrations of LSPs and neighbourhood renewal partnerships with furthest to travel in improving performance.

- Strengthen support for key change agents – partnership managers, chairs, NRAs – eg, through action learning, policy and practice alerts and facilitation tools.

- Pilot innovative approaches to involving front line workers and residents in service improvement.

- Further develop learning provision for councillors.

Maximising the learning from Skills and Knowledge activities

- Build evaluation more systematically into Skills and Knowledge activities, including making better use of management information and undertaking follow up research to find out what impact the activities have had (in terms of learning applied, organisational changes and performance outcomes).

Strategic influence

- Promote ways in which Learning and Skills Council resources can be used in support of skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal (targeting funding streams for qualifications and for learning for community development).

- Ensure that learning needs for neighbourhood renewal are addressed in plans of Regional Skills Partnerships and local LSC plans.

- Work with the Academy for Sustainable Communities and RCEs to develop an overall strategy for workforce development in the sustainable communities/neighbourhood renewal skills sector – including plans to address gaps in provision and qualifications.

- Ensure that the Academy for Sustainable Communities builds fully on the highly relevant experience gained by the Skills and Knowledge Programme in its future development.

Developing capacity within government

- Develop a more strategic approach to meeting the competency requirements for effective delivery of NRU and GO roles in neighbourhood renewal, linked to business plan priorities.

- Review the 'state of the art' in performance improvement, drawing on experience across government, inspection bodies and the private sector.

- Provide more opportunities for joint learning and development across the delivery chain, including workshops, exchanges, placements and job shadowing.

NRA service

- Make operational improvements to the NRA service (in, eg, earlier identification of NRA assignments; matching NRAs, partnerships and assignments; devising briefs; networking GOs, NRAs and partnerships; sharing knowledge and outputs from assignments).

- Support continuing professional development by NRAs through more briefings and workshops on policy and performance improvement, including techniques for use on assignments.

Renewal.net

- Refresh the strategy for the development and marketing of Renewal.net – including topic and updating priorities, regional contributions and pages, and involvement of other departments.

Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme

- Explore further options for development under the Delivery Skills programme: masterclasses, action learning, and non-residential provision (while ensuring complementary approaches with regional GO plans).

- Review how to maximise the extent to which participants are likely to apply what they learn after their courses.

- Make operational improvements to programme provision (eg, in course design, use of participant experience, learning materials and administration) and marketing.

Regional Networks and Regional Centres of Excellence

- Ensure the development of strong Regional Centres of Excellence as an integral part of a coherent infrastructure for skills, knowledge and capacity development at regional level, linked with related initiatives to improve quality of and access to data.

- Ensure that the experience of Regional Networks is recognised and used to the full in RCE development, building on current arrangements and ensuring productive opportunities for cross-sector networking and the development of 'communities of practice' which bring stakeholders together, focused on opportunities for sharing knowledge and finding ways forward on common challenges.

Seeking the Lessons: Skills and Knowledge Programme Evaluation

Draws together the main findings from different strands of the evaluation: national and regional delivery of the Skills and Knowledge Programme; area fieldwork; and evaluation of the Skills and Knowledge Programme tools (Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers, Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme, Renewal.net and regional networks.

NRU and GO Strategies and Delivery (Background Report 1)

Introduces the Skills and Knowledge Programme and provides the wider policy context for the Programme, describes how the NRU and Government Offices have approached implementation, reviews capacity issues and assesses success in promoting learning for neighbourhood renewal amongst stakeholders.

Findings from the Field (Background Report 2)

Analyses fieldwork in nine LSP areas, setting out the main factors driving and constraining partnership effectiveness and illustrating how partnerships and partner organisations have tackled their learning and development needs, to what effect. It considers the influence of the NRU and GOs in this, and draws out implications for future support.

Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers (Background Report 3)

Describes the Neighbourhood Renewal Adviser service and its take-up, and presents results from surveys of (a) partnerships on their use of NRAs, and (b) NRAs themselves. Key findings relate to changes and improvements brought about through NRA assignments and ways of improving the effectiveness of the service.

Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills (Background Report 4)

Reports on the Neighbourhood Renewal Delivery Skills Programme and its take-up, presenting results from a survey of participants from the six courses run as a pilot. Key findings relate to ways of improving the delivery of the programme and maximising the learning for participants and their colleagues.

Regional Networks (Background Report 5)

Describes the development of regional networks set up to promote networking for regeneration and neighbourhood renewal, highlighting lessons from their experience, and drawing implications for future policy and practice. Comments on the value of networking as a learning process in addressing skills and knowledge needs in neighbourhood renewal.

Renewal.net (Background Report 6)

Outlines the development and take-up of the Renewal.net website, and presents results from surveys of users, practitioners in the fieldwork areas, and analyses web statistics. Key findings relate to trends and patterns in use, and the extent of changes and improvements the site has encouraged. Recommendations relate to site marketing, development and linkages within and beyond the Skills and Knowledge programme.