

***“The Houses all Look Posh Now”* - Evaluating the Impact of a Housing Improvement Programme: the Case of Portobello and Belle Vue**

Key Findings and Policy Messages



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Introduction

Interest in housing improvement schemes has grown in recent years with the implementation of the most ambitious and comprehensive modernisation programme ever undertaken in this country, the Decent Homes programme. However, relatively little is known about their impact and there has been little comprehensive research into this important area. New research conducted by a team (Paul Hickman, Aimée Walshaw, Tony Gore, Ian Wilson and Ed Ferrari) based at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, which has been funded by the housing association, Wakefield and District Housing (WDH), seeks to address this 'gap' in knowledge. Drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative data collected over a four year period, it assesses the impact of the improvement programme undertaken in the Portobello and Belle Vue areas of Wakefield.



Source: ©Crown Copyright Ordnance Survey

The study, which placed particular emphasis on exploring the 'lived' experiences of residents, and used a range of seldom used (in policy evaluations) research techniques, such as photography and diary keeping, to do so, found that:

- **The improvement programme has had a major positive impact in the study area.** It has done so in a number of interlinked and overlapping ways:
 - first, it has led to a large increase in housing satisfaction amongst WDH tenants: satisfaction rose by 11 percentage points over the course of the study;
 - second, it has enhanced tenants' emotional well being with 79% observing that they now feel more comfortable in their homes; and
 - third, it has encouraged tenants to invest more of their own time and resources in the maintenance and further improvement of their homes, which is evidenced by 62% reporting that they have spent more money on their homes as a result of the improvement programme. Furthermore, it has encouraged tenants to view their properties more as a 'home' rather than simply a 'house or somewhere to live', and to use them in different ways.
- **The overall impact of the improvement programme is being diluted by two inextricably linked and overlapping issues that are not directly connected to the programme:** the severity of the area's socio-economic problems; and more recently, the effects of the recession. In Portobello, another factor appears to have diluted the programme's impact: the poor quality of the estate's green spaces, property boundaries and (some of its) gardens.
- **In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, such as Portobello and Belle Vue, housing interventions undertaken in isolation are likely to have relatively little lasting impact on their overall 'health'.**

About the Research

Two of the first areas in Wakefield to see their housing improved by WDH (between 2007 and 2008) were the neighbourhoods of Portobello, a social housing estate where WDH owns most of the housing stock, and Belle Vue, a mixed tenure neighbourhood. The physical environment of these areas has also been improved by WDH, although in Portobello this programme is still ongoing and will not be completed until early 2012. In 2006, WDH appointed CRESR to undertake an evaluation of the improvement programmes in both areas, which ran from January 2007 until December 2010.

The study team employed a range of quantitative and qualitative research techniques including: household surveys (more than 500 residents were surveyed before and after the housing improvement programme); in-depth interviews with nearly a hundred residents; a solicited resident diary keeping exercise; resident photography (photo novella); resident focus groups; film making (a community film making company, Littlestar, was employed to make films about the study area before and after the improvement programme); in-depth interviews with more than 80 local 'stakeholders'; and secondary data collection and analysis.

Findings

Key 'Headline' Impacts

The key 'headline' impacts of the improvement programme are:

1. Tenant satisfaction with their homes has increased markedly

WDH tenants' satisfaction with their accommodation has increased by a (statistically significant) level – 11 percentage points – well beyond what might have been expected for this type of programme. The view of one of the participants in the photo novella exercise, Jeanette, was typical of many tenants we spoke to: she felt that the installation of new windows and doors made properties look 'posh.'



(Jeanette, resident photographer, Portobello, year 3)

The houses all look posh. Now they have new windows and doors.

In terms of the mechanics of how the improvement programme has enhanced housing satisfaction, both directly and indirectly, it appears the following factors lie behind the phenomenon: enhanced satisfaction with kitchens and bathrooms; a greater sense of security within the home; enhanced satisfaction with the state of repair of properties; and greater satisfaction with the internal decoration of homes.

"I like the kitchen best, particularly the sink because it is nicer than any I've had before...the kitchen is definitely easier to use and keep clean."
(Portobello resident, female, year two)

"I love what they (WDH) have done. It's fantastic. It's so much better than it was before." (Portobello resident, female, year three)

"I think it (the respondent's new bathroom) is fantastic. I love it. I've got an immersion heater and only need to put it on for two hours or an hour or press the boost button and I can have a really hot bath. Before I had that, I'd run it halfway and the water would go cold." (Belle Vue resident, male, year three)

I took this photo because I like the kitchen as it's very modern and I was able to choose everything down to the last detail. I also have more workspace and it looks a lot bigger



(Colleen, resident photographer, Belle Vue, year 3)

2. Warmer homes that costs less to heat

Another factor contributing to enhanced levels of housing satisfaction amongst WDH tenants is the improved warmth of properties since modernisation, which are also perceived to be less expensive to heat:

"Before these windows I had wooden windows. You can feel the difference. These are double glazed. When you have the heat on it does feel warmer." (Belle Vue resident, male, year two)

"It (the respondent's home) never used to be as warm as this. It was always a very cold house. And I used to have the (gas) fire on low all day to keep it warm. And upstairs was very cold. It's 100% warmer, sometimes too warm.... I think the double glazing has made the difference." (Portobello resident, female, year three)

"(Before my home was modernised) I got out of bed and thought: 'Oh God, it's bloody freezing in here'. I'd get down and clean it (the coal fire) all out. But by time you'd done that, I'd got me little electric fire, which I used to put on, top it up. And then I'd get fire going. But it took an hour or hour and half to get properly going right." (Portobello resident, male, year four)

As the quotes above illustrate, tenants attributed the enhanced warmth of their homes to the installation of central heating/ new external doors and double glazed windows: 80% and 77% respectively reported that their new heating systems/ doors and windows were better than their 'predecessors.'

I took this photo because I like the windows. The house is a lot warmer and the rents let air through. Also it's less noisy.



(Colleen, resident photographer, Belle Vue, year 3)

3. Enhanced emotional well-being of tenants

One of the most important impacts of the improvement programme is that the emotional well-being of WDH tenants has improved. While it is a highly complex concept, and therefore is not easily measured, both quantitative and qualitative data collected by the study team supports this assertion. With regard to the first data source, 79% of WDH tenants reported that the improvements undertaken to their homes had made them feel more relaxed within them, with 83% observing that they now felt more comfortable in their homes.

In terms of the qualitative fieldwork undertaken by the study team, enhanced emotional well-being was a recurring theme to emerge from the in-depth tenant interviews:

“I feel so much more relaxed here now because it's just a nicer place to be, you know?” (Belle Vue resident, female, year three)

“Before it (the respondent's home) was just somewhere where you come and go to bed. It wasn't somewhere you could relax... it's smashing, really nice and cosy. We love spending time in it.” (Belle Vue resident, female, year three)

As the above quotes illustrate, the adjectives ‘relaxed’ and ‘comfortable’ were frequently used by residents when describing how they felt in their newly modernised homes, alongside other terms, such as ‘comfy’ and ‘cosy’, which also had connotations to emotional well-being.

Reflecting (in part) residents’ enhanced emotional well-being, between years two and three of the study there was a notable change in their emotional attachment to where they lived. More specifically, they increasingly began to refer to their residence less as a ‘house’ and more as a ‘home.’

“(Before my house was modernised) well, you just got by. You made the best of things. But the bathroom was a bit drab. It was years and years old. Everything was tired but you made the best of it by keeping it nicely and keeping it clean. That's all you could do...Well it's more like a proper home now. It feels like home.” (Portobello resident, female, year three)

4. Greater investment in their homes by residents

Nearly two thirds (62%) of tenants reported that they have spent more money on their home as a result of the improvement programme and 57% stated that they would like to do so. Investment took a number of forms including: employing window cleaners (for the first time); the installation of new flooring or carpets; decorating; and improvements to the garden. Not all investment was financial in nature – a number of residents reported that they were now spending more time on housework.

5. Expansion of the role and uses of the home

WDH tenants are now spending more time in their homes with nearly three quarters reporting that the improvement programme had made them more inclined to do so.

Overall Impact of the Programme

As noted earlier, the impact of the improvement programme is being diluted by: the severity of the area’s socio-economic problems; recession; and, in Portobello, the paucity of the estate’s green spaces, property boundaries and (some of its) gardens.

The Government’s Index of Multiple Deprivation reveals that the study area remains a ‘deprived’ area. This is further evidenced by reference to data collected by the study team in relation to the following ‘deprivation’ domains: income; employment; health; educational attainment and skills; crime; 'barriers to housing and services'; 'the living environment'; and anti-social behaviour.

In terms of the study area’s socio-economic problems, in Portobello the anti-social behaviour of some of its younger residents is perceived to be a particular problem. Although the material presented below was garnered from a teenage resident from the estate in the first year of the study, the problems he highlighted were still very much evidence in its last year.

Monday 30th July

1. Activities

- What did you do today? (Please remember to include your feelings about what you did)

For example, places you went to, people you met, things you did.

My mum and I took my dog Sandy for a walk. We went first to the Phillip Bennett's memorial garden (this was done by the kids of Portobello in memory of Phillip who died age 12 from meningitis). I like it here as you can see for miles, even as far as the Embsay Moor mark. We then went to the field to let Sandy have a run. One thing I don't like about Portobello is the vandalism, I've taken a photo of the phone box near us covered in paint and the door ripped off. Also Jacques came round.

2. Your thoughts on today as a whole

Thinking about your day was it a good, bad or okay day?

Why do you think this?



I took this photo because I don't like the vandalism which takes place around Portobello, the doors here have been ripped off and paint had been thrown over it.

(Resident photographer and diarist, Portobello, year 1)

However, it is important to note that although the study area does have a number of deep rooted socio-economic problems, in one part of it - Belle Vue - neighbourhood quality of life has improved over the last three years, a trend which can be attributed principally to the work of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder based there, through the improvements it has made to parks and open spaces in the area.

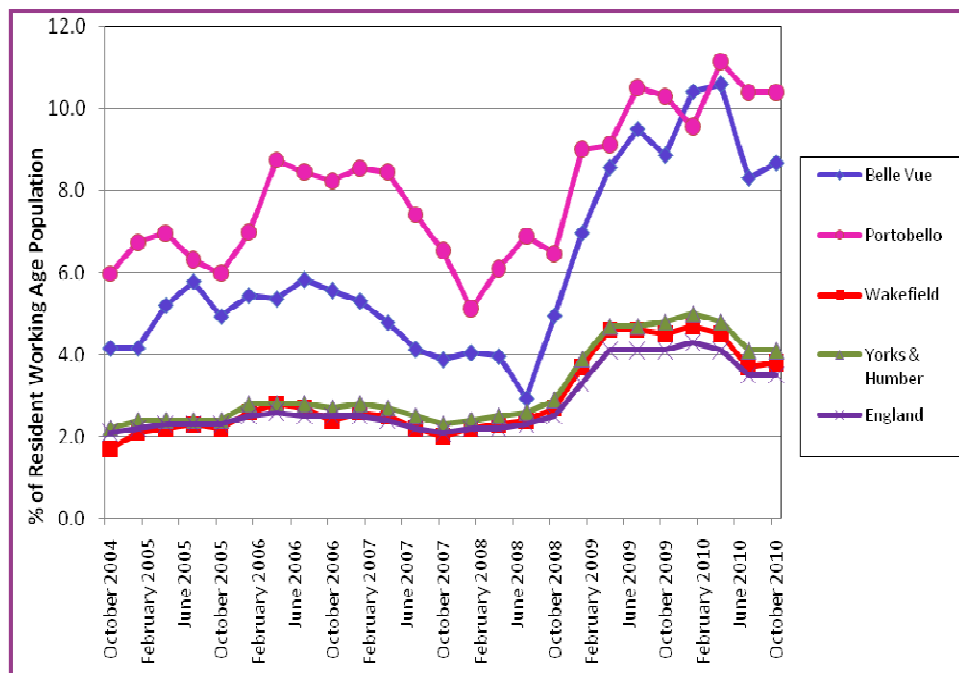


(Lorraine, resident photographer, Belle Vue, year 3)

This sign makes the area look better thanks to the neighbourhood management team working on our behalf.

In line with the findings of other studies, it appears that the impact of recession has been greater in the study area than in other more affluent parts of Wakefield. Evidence of this is provided by figure below, which highlights the proportions of Jobseekers Allowance claimants in: the study area; Wakefield; Yorkshire and the Humber; and England. As the chart clearly reveals, the growth in claimants in the study area has been much more marked since the recession began to bite in February 2008 than in the district, region, and England as a whole.

People Claiming Jobseekers Allowance



Sources: Claimant Count with Rates and Proportions (DWP) 2004 to 2010 (downloaded from NOMIS); Resident Population Estimates for Local Authorities (National Statistics), 2001 to 2009; Resident Population Estimates by Broad Age Band for Middle and Lower Layer Super Output Areas (Experimental Statistics), 2001 to 2009 (downloaded from Neighbourhood Statistics). Crown Copyright

As noted earlier, public spaces in Belle Vue have been improved. However, in Portobello environmental improvement works only began (in April 2010) shortly before the data collection element of the study was completed, and they will not be completed until April 2012. Therefore, perhaps not unexpectedly, many residents (and stakeholders) in the estate expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of its public spaces.

"The trouble is, is that it's not that obvious that the estate has been modernised. Yes, I accept that the outside of the properties look much nicer but the boundaries are a mess as are a lot of the green spaces in the area. When I go to other areas it is much more obvious that they have been improved. For example, Aysgarth has had a lot of work done on it and it looks really good. The area has had environmental improvements

and the houses have been modernised. It looks smashing." (Stakeholder, Portobello)

Policy Lessons

A number of broad policy lessons emerge from the research, which have resonance for **all** agencies with a stake in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Portobello and Belle Vue. These include national, regional and sub-regional policy makers, local authorities, the police, housing associations, health agencies, education agencies, voluntary and community sector organisations, and community groups.

1. Partnership working and a holistic approach to 'neighbourhood management'

It is imperative that all agencies operating in disadvantaged neighbourhoods work together in partnership with local residents. The problems of disadvantaged areas cannot be 'solved' by housing agencies alone because they extend well beyond the housing domain. They can only be addressed by the adoption of a holistic approach to regeneration and 'neighbourhood management' (in the broadest sense) which, in addition to housing, should also be concerned with education, health, worklessness, crime, and anti-social behaviour. Therefore, it is imperative, particularly at a time of financial austerity when resources are scarce, that the agencies responsible for these areas work together in partnership, along with local residents. By doing so they are likely to see greater returns on their investments.

2. A continuous and visible presence

It is important that agencies maintain a continuous, visible and meaningful presence in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Portobello and Belle Vue. Residents in the study area expressed their dissatisfaction with the perceived failure of key local agencies to make a long term and sustained commitment to it. It was reported that periods of investment in the area were often followed

by 'fallow' periods where agencies appeared to lose interest and, in the eyes of residents, became 'invisible.'

As a result, this made residents mistrustful of local agencies and reluctant to engage with them. Therefore, it is imperative that stakeholders maintain a continuous, visible and meaningful presence in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Portobello and Belle Vue.

This study found that, in line with the finding of studies undertaken in other parts of the country including Sheffield (Flint *et al*, 2009¹), social housing tenants may not always recognise organisations or programmes in the way that professionals do – a focus on outcomes is more important, and efforts should be made to avoid 'brand confusion' and complex layers of organisations and programmes.

3. 'Big Society', community and economic development

With the emergence of the 'Big Society' agenda and the reduction in public sector expenditure in disadvantaged areas, even greater emphasis should be placed on fostering and developing the capacities and skill-sets of communities within them. In recent years, local communities have (in theory, but not always in practice) been at the heart of numerous initiatives to regenerate disadvantaged neighbourhoods in this country. However, the emphasis placed by the Coalition Government on 'localism' and the 'Big Society', and the dramatic reduction in public spending in disadvantaged areas, will place even greater onus on them to take the lead in tackling the problems of their neighbourhoods. In many areas this may prove to be an impossible task and a (very persuasive) case could be made for arguing that residents have been 'set up to fail'.

Notwithstanding this important point, renewed efforts should be made to foster and develop the capacities and skill-sets of communities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, particularly in those areas, such as Portobello, where the community infrastructure is relatively under-developed and fragile.

1 Flint J, Ambrose A, Eadson W and Green S, (2009), Home Truths: Perceptions of the Sheffield Housing Market, CRESR, Sheffield.

Like other housing associations operating in similar circumstances, WDH has the opportunity to position itself in the vanguard of efforts to create a 'Big Society' in Portobello and Belle Vue and the wider district as a whole. This will require leadership and shared resources. However, it will not happen without the comprehensive support and frameworks that WDH can provide.

As with many other disadvantaged neighbourhoods in this country, Portobello and, to a lesser extent, Belle Vue is isolated economically. The belief that the private sector will fill the void left by public sector cuts appears questionable, and, in isolation, it is unlikely that the sector can provide the added support needed to regenerate or reconnect these areas. It is therefore important that like other associations working in similar circumstances, WDH examines how it and local communities could contribute to the local economy. In doing so, through initiatives such as the community champion programme, it should build on the community development activities undertaken by itself and other agencies including the Portobello Community Forum and Groundwork.

Options worth considering include the creation of dedicated resource streams or Community Budgets and the devolution of aspects of urban governance.

Changes in the regime for social housing can be used sensitively to bring about diversity within the area and to develop closer connections with the local housing market. Portobello and Belle Vue can become attractive neighbourhoods that meet a range of housing needs and demands given the right housing and the right mechanisms – including tenure flexibility.

The Department for Communities and Local Government recently published a consultation document, *Local decisions: a fairer future for social housing*, which outlines proposals that will provide housing associations with an opportunity to offer its new tenants flexible (duration) tenancies. To maintain neighbourhood stability, in areas like Portobello, WDH should continue to offer long term tenancies. Stability is helpful in a number of inter-related ways. First, a stable community is more likely (than an unstable one) to be socially cohesive. Second, a stable community is more likely to be able develop the capacity and skill sets required by the 'Big Society.' And third, stability has a positive affect on tenants' housing satisfaction – in line with the findings of other studies, the research found it to be positively related to their length of residence.

4. The importance of the social and physical environment

The pairing of housing works and wider environmental improvements is important. Beyond this, obtaining maximal return on investment will require a sustained engagement with the neighbourhoods to make sure that they remain 'places where people want to live' and where residents' life chances can flourish.

In line with the findings of other studies (Hickman, 2010²), the research found that residents attach great importance to the quality of the local environment. The right balance between public and private custodianship of space needs to be found. While, to some extent, its scope to do so may be limited, WDH needs to be proactive here and play a role in 'managing' (in the broadest sense) the local environment.

The long-term stewardship of the local environment needs to be co-ordinated by WDH, although mechanisms for its delivery needs to involve local people. Ideas worthy of consideration include: establishing 'garden champions'; 'community janitors'; or an environmental improvement district scheme based on the Business Improvement District (BID) model³. The successes of the Neighbourhood Management Pilot (NMP) in (Agbrigg and) Belle Vue need to be recognised and built upon.

² Hickman, P (2010) Neighbourhood Infrastructure, 'Third Places' and Patterns of Social Interaction, Research Paper No. 4, Living Through Change in Challenging Places: A Research Project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at:

<http://research.shu.ac.uk/cresr/living-through-change/documents/FP4ThirdPlaces.pdf>

³ The BID model, which is a mechanism for promoting partnership working between local authorities and local business communities, was developed in North America. Further information about the model can be found at: <http://www.ukbids.org/>

For Further information

The full report:

"The Houses all Look Posh Now"- Evaluating the Impact of a Housing Improvement Programme: the Case of Portobello and Belle Vue

By Paul Hickman, Aimée Walshaw, Ed Ferrari, Tony Gore and Ian Wilson.

Can be downloaded (free of charge) from:
<http://research.shu.ac.uk/cresr/wakefield-housing-improvement-evaluation/Reports/FinalReport.pdf>