



# Research Development Initiative

## Research Briefing Note

### Children's Voices in Housing Estate Regeneration

#### 1. What is the study's background?

This study was commissioned under the Irish Research Council's Research Development Initiative, in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The study was undertaken by Dr. Cathal O'Connell (Primary Investigator), Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan and Dr. Lorcan Byrne of University College Cork.\* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2015.

#### 2. What is the study's purpose?

Estate regeneration is the term used to broadly describe the range of physical, socio-economic and environmental interventions in (normally social) housing areas which may be run down, disadvantaged or difficult to let. The overall aim of estate regeneration is to improve the quality of life for residents, both children and adults, and the overall liveability of estates. Estate regeneration can affect children's lives in terms of their living conditions and environmental surroundings, and their sense of safety, belonging, place, identity and community.

However, children's voices are seldom heard in regeneration programmes. The purpose of this study was therefore to elicit and document the views and opinions of children and young people between the ages of 6 and 19 on the regeneration of their homes and community in Knocknaheeny, one of the largest and most disadvantaged social housing estates in Cork City. Since much of the housing stock in Knocknaheeny was constructed in the early 1970s, its fabric, and that of the estate environment more generally, has deteriorated over time and many residents are living in conditions that are now substandard in terms of dwelling insulation, heating and ventilation. In addition to poor dwelling quality, the socio-economic profile of the estate is now marked by high levels of unemployment, lone parenthood, poverty and deprivation, and, in comparison with the rest of Cork City, low levels of educational attainment. The risk of poverty is particularly damaging to children. This combination of physical, environmental and socio-economic factors led to the formulation of a major regeneration initiative for the estate in 2011.

In the context of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (more generally referred to as the Participation Article), the research began from the principle that children and young people have a right to voice their opinions and to participate in decision-making that affects them. The research recognised children and young people to be rights-holders in the 'here and now' rather than as 'adults in the making'.

The specific objectives of the research were:

- » to review the literature on housing estate regeneration from a children's rights perspective;
- » to document children and young people's perspectives of an ongoing large-scale regeneration scheme in Cork City;
- » to identify the barriers to achieving meaningful participation by children and young people in housing estate regeneration;
- » to ensure the effective dissemination of the key research findings to children and young people, parents and guardians, and statutory and non-statutory parties with a view to informing policy.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)

#### 3. How was the study undertaken?

Ten focus groups involving 78 children and young people, aged 6-19, were held over the Spring and Summer of 2013, after an initial pilot focus group was undertaken to refine the research questions. The focus groups were complemented by a focus group with youth and community workers in the area under the auspices of the Northside Youth Forum. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the children and young people through contacts with local primary and secondary schools, family support centres, youth organisations, youth justice projects and youth training workshops. There were challenges when seeking access to young people and some groups, such as Traveller children living in the area, did not take part, despite repeated efforts on the part of the researchers to facilitate their participation.

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs or the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

The research methodology adopted a rights-based approach, which entailed using a range of qualitative and creative methodologies including focus group activities and discussions, Rap workshops and recordings, photography and art. The researchers devised a data gathering tool called 'the Wheel' to capture the views of the participants in a creative and interactive way. In using these methodologies, the research ascertained children's views and experiences on what they liked and did not like about their area, what they thought was good and bad, and what should be changed by the regeneration programme.

### 4. What are the key findings?

The study found that current consultation mechanisms, although well intentioned, are inadequate to involve children and young people directly in regeneration schemes. The research also found that there was an inadequate information flow between the Local Authority and young people on what the regeneration programme entailed and that the information they had was mainly sourced from family members and friends rather than from the Local Authority.

All of the children and young people who participated in the research wanted to be involved in the decision-making around regeneration, but the older groups were more sceptical about having an influence and were critical of the omission of children and young people's voices in regeneration masterplanning to date. Children and young people stated that they would like to be consulted directly in relation to the aims, objectives and implementation of regeneration schemes so that they achieved a lasting renewal of their area, a safer neighbourhood, a cleaner environment, a better reputation for their estates, and improved life chances and opportunities for themselves and their peers.

More specifically, the children and young people felt that **enhancing community and personal safety** could be achieved through more effective housing management to address problems such as:

- » anti-social behaviour and disruptive tenants;
- » public drinking;
- » drug dealing;
- » violence and intimidation.

They proposed that the **physical environment** could be improved by:

- » providing new and better quality houses;
- » providing effective refuse collection and litter removal;
- » maintaining green areas and open spaces;
- » improving recreation, sports and leisure amenities;
- » giving specific consideration to the impact on young people when lanes are closed in response to residents' petitions;
- » more effective traffic management and road safety measures;
- » providing new amenities to better reflect the interests of young people;
- » improving bus services to the area and connectivity with the wider city.

The older groups in particular viewed regeneration as a means to improve their life chances through **employment and training opportunities**. They proposed these could be improved through:

- » training, apprenticeships and employment in the regeneration programme itself;
- » promoting commercial and retail investment in the local economy.

The children and young people also pointed out some of the **disruptive impacts of regeneration** on themselves, their families and their community in terms of:

- » losing their homes due to demolition;
- » the impact on their social networks, friendships, and family connections due to relocation of families and friends to new accommodation away from their estate.

### 5. What are the conclusions?

This research, echoing the findings of international research, has concluded that opportunities for participation by children and young people living in disadvantaged areas are inextricably linked to social justice and are an essential means by which they can access other rights to meet their needs.

The research highlights the importance of actively listening to the voices of children and young people, and enabling their capacity as agents to influence change. This desire for agency and social change was borne out in the opinions of all the children and young people involved in the research, and was particularly striking in the vivid Rap lyrics and among the older participants of the focus groups. Two original Rap numbers were recorded with the help of a professional music producer over a 3-day period and are available to hear on <http://soundcloud.com/gmcworkshops/sets/knocknaheeny-regeneration-ucc/>

The use of Rap workshops proved to be a particularly effective way of getting young people to articulate their concerns and observations about the regeneration programme. The lyrics clearly show how young people draw their own conclusions on the daily realities they must endure in their neighbourhoods, such as empty houses, drug users and dealers, and anti-social behaviour. Quoting just two of the verses from the Rap number called 'No More' graphically illustrates this:

Look over the wall, needles on the floor,  
Outside the boarded up house next door.  
Glossy plans from the corporation man,  
Cans on the grounds, no I'm not a big fan  
Of all the trash outside on the grass.  
The council just needs a kick up their ass.  
All I wanna do is stop the fighting.  
At night people shouting, it's frightening.

He lives in a skip with a needle in his hip,  
A junkie living with the rats in his gaff.  
Always on drugs, always off his head,  
Spending everyday just lying in his bed.  
I don't wanna live next door to that!  
You'd never see junkies living by fat cats.  
Stop all the gangs fighting every day.  
Stop ignoring me, listen to what I gotta say.

Other conclusions drawn from the research include:

- » Children and young people have their own opinions on the regeneration of their estates and communities.
- » They are not apathetic, disengaged or disinterested in matters that affect themselves, their families and their community.
- » Different age groups have different views, perspectives and priorities on the regeneration of their area.
- » Their opinions are different to those of adults and they are willing to participate, as insightful, knowledgeable, critical and reflective members of the community.
- » Children and young people's voices reveal that they have views and perspectives on what they like and do not like about their areas, what they think is good and bad, and about what should be changed.
- » Their views on the regeneration of their area range from the positive to the negative, and from the practical to the aspirational.

This research shows that children and young people have highly developed and original opinions and will speak openly when:

- » suitable spaces are created for them to articulate their views;
- » appropriate methodologies for consultation and participation are adopted;
- » the correct questions are asked in a supportive manner, with people who they are comfortable with and who understand where they are coming from;
- » they are given an assurance that the research findings will be forwarded to the relevant central Government departments and the Local Authority, and taken account of in the implementation of the regeneration programme.

The research concludes that young people should be included from the earliest stage of regeneration masterplanning so that their ideas can be incorporated into draft plans before they are finalised and adopted at official level. They should also be involved at the implementation stage.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

The key recommendations emerging from this study are as follows:

### 1. Recommendations for policy-makers

#### Regeneration guidelines

It is recommended that the existing best practice guidelines in relation to estate regeneration, issued by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in 2012, be amended to include the following: In advance of making applications for regeneration funding to central government, Local Authorities as part of their community consultation responsibilities should be obliged to establish young person consultative panels to ensure the opinions of children and young people are reflected in regeneration plans.

#### Capacity-building and developing a toolkit

It is recommended that a practical toolkit be developed, by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, based on the methods used in this research to guide Local Authority staff and other relevant parties on how to engage, consult and incorporate the views of children and young people in regeneration programmes. The toolkit could form an element of a wider education and training programme regarding children and young people's rights and their involvement in public administration, and be promoted as part of continuing professional development (CPD) workshops and career development across a range of professions.

### 2. Recommendations for Local Authorities

#### Recommendations for Local Authority

##### Regeneration Teams

**Inclusive implementation of regeneration:** It is recommended that children and young people be included in the implementation stage of regeneration programmes so that their views on progress are incorporated on an ongoing basis and plans can be altered accordingly. Information should be developed in an age-appropriate form for dissemination to children and young people in consultation with schools, youth groups, youth workers and others who work with young people.

##### Recommendations for Local Authority and Social Housing Landlords

**Including children and young people in estate management:** Successful regeneration is ultimately dependent on managing the regenerated estates effectively. Therefore, it is important that estate management practices by Local Authorities and voluntary social landlords include the concerns of children and young people through consultation mechanisms.

## Note No. 5 Research Briefing: Children's voices in housing estate regeneration

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Check out [www.dcy.gov.ie](http://www.dcy.gov.ie) for full report of study

### 7. What are the benefits of the study?

This study has demonstrated that children and young people can offer distinctive, original and sincere views and opinions on issues that affect their everyday lives and living space. Their practical insights are of particular value in relation to the issues and challenges presented in complex planning environments such as regeneration programmes. The study has shown that children and young people can respond constructively to social research where creative and age-appropriate methodologies are devised and adopted by researchers. The study also shows how much Local Authorities, regeneration agencies and social landlords can learn from children and young people by giving them space to articulate their voices and opinions. Finally, the study can act as a template from which further research into the lived experiences of children and young people can be generated.

One group of young people who are members of the Traveller community living in the regeneration area were not included in the study despite the best efforts of the researchers to establish contact with them through local support groups and youth workers. After a number of unsuccessful attempts at establishing contact, the researchers had to accept that for a variety of reasons, the voices of these young people would not be included in the research.

### 8. What are the challenges and limitations of the study?

The key challenges involved in undertaking the study were related to making contact with children and young people who would be willing to participate in the research. Accessing children and young people to participate in the focus groups was a challenging and time-consuming stage of the process. Over a period of four months, relationships were established and trust was built up between the researchers and people in the area. From this relationship-building, key actors such as youth workers, training centre managers, school teachers and principals facilitated access to the children and young people. This sensitive networking enabled the researchers to access not only the general population of children and young people through the primary and secondary schools, but also more 'difficult-to-reach' young people in early school-leaving programmes, training workshops and youth projects. These children and young people are acknowledged by youth workers in Knocknaheeny as being among the most marginalised in the area and the wider city. Hence it was vital to garner their views and their participation added to the richness and depth of the data.