

# Skills for Community-based Action in the Process of Delivering Housing Market Renewal

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – to discuss the extent to which the present skills practice fits within the context of Housing Market Renewal initiative in supporting the benefits of the existing and future community within the Pathfinder areas. Housing Market Renewal (HMR) initiative is one of many strategies in the Sustainable Communities Plan (2003), introduced by the UK Government to deal with the housing market failure via tackling low demand and housing abandonment across England.

**Design/methodology/approach** – this paper is centred on three key themes: the HMR and the Sustainable Communities Plan, an exploratory case study at the Elevate East Lancashire Pathfinder and the skills that are to be acquired by the key participants involved in the process of delivering HMR.

**Findings** – the problem of housing market failure is not only an issue of the physical condition of housing but also other non-physical intervention factors such as social deprivation, economic and environmental issues that cause housing to become unpopular and deteriorate. The recent protests by the local residents within the Pathfinder schemes in the North West of England, suggesting a gap between the government's intentions and community expectations. The conflict between the aspirations of the local community and the objectives of the HMR suggests that the participants involved in the process of delivering HMR need to focus on skills necessary for community-based action.

**Originality/value** – the paper builds on established literature and generates debate on the additional skills that need to be acquired by the relevant participants involved in the process of delivering HMR.

**Keywords:** Community-based Action Skills, Housing Market Renewal, Sustainable Communities

**Paper type:** Conceptual Paper

## 1 Background to Research

The UK government's HMR programme is a new opportunity to tackle the substantial problems of housing demand decline in some parts of North and Midland of England. The government introduced the programme shortly after the publication of the report on *Empty Homes* by the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Select Committee in March 2002. The committee suggested three main recommendations and one of them that called for urgent actions to tackle the increasing problems of low housing demand and abandoned homes is as below:

Radical intervention is needed in some inner urban areas where the housing market has collapsed to make them attractive to a broad range of existing and potential residents. The housing market renewal approach needed to achieve this must be on a large, conurbation-wide scale. It will take a long time and so must be started as soon as possible and will require significant additional funding, of the order of hundreds of millions of pounds per annum.

After the report's publication, the government announced the creation of nine HMR Pathfinders (Pathfinder) in the North and Midlands of England. These Pathfinder areas are: Birmingham/Sandwell, East Lancashire, Hull/East Riding, Manchester/Salford, Merseyside, Newcastle/Gateshead, North Staffordshire, Oldham/Rochdale and South Yorkshire. These areas would receive funding of £500 million over three years. No specific targets were announced for the policy at that stage but the overall aim was: *To provide lasting solutions for communities blighted by derelict homes through investment and innovation* (ODPM, 2002).

Details of the HMR initiative were first announced as part of the ODPM's Sustainable Communities Plan in February 2003. The broad objective for the programme was for Pathfinder strategic plans to *entail radical and sustained action to replace obsolete housing with modern sustainable accommodation, through demolition and new building or refurbishment. This will mean a better mix of homes and sometimes fewer homes* (ODPM, 2003). The programme has now been operating for two years. A study by CPRE (2004) has revealed that housing market failure is not only central to the physical condition of housing

but also about non-physical interventions factors such as social deprivation, economic and environmental issues that cause housing to be unpopular. It follows by a recent study by Nevin (2004) that summarised the causes of low demand in Pathfinder areas as:

- *Housing stock obsolescence* – the housing in low demand areas is no longer attractive to existing or potential residents because tastes, aspirations and income levels have changed;
- *Surplus housing stock* – many areas in the north (and to a lesser extent the midlands) have more houses than households, partly because of the depopulation of urban areas as the more affluent residents opted to move out to the suburbs or further field to rural areas; and
- *Unpopular neighbourhoods* – a range of factors, including high levels of crime, poor environment and a concentration of deprivation lead to an area being seen as unattractive both to its existing population and to prospective residents

Nevin (2004) further concluded that these three main factors have contributed to the neighbourhood abandonment and housing market failure. Any HMR programme should be designed in a way to address these factors through specific interventions. Meanwhile, the aspirations of local community also need to be investigated as the latest protest by the local residents on the scale of clearances within the Pathfinder scheme in the North of England (Clover, 2004; Ungood-Thomas, 2005) suggesting a gap between Pathfinder intentions and community expectations. Proposals for the compulsory purchase and demolition of thousands of unfit houses within the Pathfinder areas have been claimed by the local residents as creating forced migration and preventing the creation of sustainable communities. The protestors want actions that encourage people to continue to live and work in the Pathfinder areas and not to be forced to move elsewhere. The conflict between the aspirations of the local community and the objectives of the Pathfinder suggests that local residents are unclear about some of the terminology, options and possible outcomes that are being put forward by the Pathfinder in their areas. It highlighted the need for generic guidance or skills on how local community should be consulted and engaged in each stage of HMR delivery process.

The shortcomings of necessary skills to manage regeneration schemes were first noted in the *Urban Task Force* report in 1999. The report proposed the setting up of regional resource centre for addressing skills shortages and good practice in urban professionals. Five years later, the government responded to the issue and appointed Sir John Egan to head a task force into skills for sustainable communities. As a result of Egan's report, the government announced at the Sustainable Communities Summit 2005, the Academy for Sustainable Communities that to be established in Leeds. This Academic will give priority to training in the broad range of skills and expertise that are required for delivering sustainable communities.

This paper aims to look at what are the additional skills that need to be acquired by the relevant participants involved in the process of delivering HMR. The research to date has included a review of the considerable body of literature relating to the knowledge and skills necessary for delivering HMR and creating Sustainable Communities. The exploratory pilot case study at the Elevate East Lancashire, one of the HMR Pathfinders in the North West of England has been conducted. It seeks insights of relevant participants involved in the 'real life' situations of delivery process and draws attention to the issues and complexities of shortcomings skills for community engagement in the HMR. Findings from both literatures and exploratory pilot case study are necessary to form a conceptual framework for identifying additional skills need to be acquired by those key participants involved in the process of delivering HMR. The main research focus that emerges from this work is centred on the question: *what are the additional skills and competences that need to be acquired by the relevant participants involve in the process of delivering HMR?*

## **2 Nature and Extent of Skills Needs in the Process of Delivering HMR**

### **2.1 Overview of the Existing Professional Practice**

A review of the existing professional skills and competences is perceived by the researcher to be essential to understanding current professional practices and how the professional bodies cooperate with the present and future demand of the regeneration skills. The researcher also needs to explore the extent to which professional practitioners recognise the need for soft and people-based skills development in addition to technical competencies.

A review of the existing models of professional competences indicated that the professionals have recognised the importance of the generic skills such as *working with others*, *communication*, *problem solving* incorporated into their professional practices. These models of professional development works and approaches can be found in: *The UK occupational standards models* (cited by Cheetham and Chivers, 1996); *The job competence model* (Mansfield and Mathews, 1985); *The reflective practitioner approach* (Schon, 1983); *Meta-competencies* (Reynolds and Snell, 1988 and Nordhaug, 1990); *Core skills* (Cheetham and Chivers, 1996) and *Ethics and values* (Eraut et al, 1994).

The most recent model of professional competences developed by Cheetham and Chivers, (1996 and 1998) is mainly influenced by the models as described above. The model has four core components of professional competences, which each are made up of a number of sub-groups or constituents. These are: *Knowledge/Cognitive competence*; *Functional competence*; *Personal or behaviour competence* and *Values/ethical competence*. Kennie and Green (2001) have also developed the model of professional competence framework for the RICS based on four components descriptors of professional competence which combine: *Technical Competence*; *Cognitive/Problem Solving Competence*; *Business Competence* and *Ethical/Personal Behavioural* (which is core to the previous three areas) *Competence*.

Study the existing models as described above suggests that each of the models and approaches has its own strength and weakness within the context of their own professions. However, the purpose of this paper is to study the ability of the existing models to deal with the demand of skills in the process of delivering HMR. Understanding the existing models of professional competences also leads to the identification of shortcomings skills that need to be acquired in order to deliver HMR and create Sustainable Communities. This can be realised by reviewing the extensive literature on skills needs for delivering Sustainable Communities and in particular HMR.

## **2.2 Skills Needs in the Process of Delivering HMR**

Skills are important in achieving the objectives of HMR as well as creating sustainable community. An active engagement from all participants involved in the delivery process and plays an essential role in making local communities attractive, safe places to live and work. This approach requires additional skills and new ways of working to those participants involved. But *why do relevant participants need a new approach in delivering HMR?* Local residents are very clear about what they want from their communities but, in many places the current approach fails to deliver what people want. For example protest by the local residents on the scale of the clearance and compulsory purchase of thousands of unfit houses within the East Lancashire Pathfinder area have been claimed as creating forced migration and preventing the creation of Sustainable Communities (Clover, 2004; Ungood-Thomas, 2005). The local residents want actions that encourage people to continue to live and work in the pathfinder areas and not to be forced to move elsewhere. The conflict between the aspirations of the local community and the HMR Pathfinder suggests that the relevant professionals involved need a new approach in addition to their technical expertise that enable them to understand exactly what people want from their own communities. Meanwhile, a study by CPRE (2004) in East Lancashire and Merseyside Pathfinder areas reveals that housing market failure is not just about the physical aspects of housing but is also about non-physical factors such as social deprivation and bad image that cause residential environment to decline. These non-physical aspects of housing within the social, economic and environmental context are very important in tackling low occupancy and empty houses. Thus in the process of delivering

HMR, the relevant participants need to acquire not only the core, harder and technical skills, but also other skills that are more *generic, softer, people and community-based skills*.

Increasingly, skills and competencies for community engagement and people-based skills development have been recognised as one of the crucial education and training needs for sustainable development. A recent study by Hartley (2002) for the local authorities' officers has proven that a culture shift is needed to move from being a professionally driven, paternalistic organisation towards one which aims to empower individuals, groups and communities and build their capabilities. A number of key skills that were seen as important are: *Putting people at their ease; Learning to think about services from a user's perspective; Listening to interests as well as voices; Recognising the different pace and processes of community groups and individuals; Capacity building; Managing conflict and difference; Managing expectations; Influencing skills; Detailed local knowledge; Professional skills; Maintaining a strategic focus and Working constructively with councillors*.

Egan (2004) highlighted that the successful delivery of sustainable communities depends on the skills/competencies necessary to support the delivery process. The author further concluded that lack of skills and knowledge in regeneration is a perceived barrier to the delivery of sustainable communities. The author further lists out the generic skills, behaviour and knowledge that are considered essential for delivering Sustainable Communities. Studies by the Turner and Townsend Group (2004), suggests that society has not necessarily been well served by the existing professions operating in the built environment. The professions are either unwilling or unable to *engage with communities*; knowledge about '*what works*' is, inconsistent and poorly managed; the skills and knowledge relating to strategic planning, project management, urban design, *community engagement* and partnership working necessary for the development of successful sustainable communities are absent. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and ODPM (2002, p33-34) have also recognised the importance of skills for working with the community as part of professional and practitioners' core skills development. Their regeneration-learning framework for neighbourhood regeneration suggests professionals need to address three key different audiences of residents, professionals and civil servants and policy makers when dealing with regeneration.

The need for the additional skills for sustainability delivery is unquestionable. The weight of evidence suggests that skills for community-based action are increasingly important for the sustainability agenda and Housing Market Renewal.

### **2.3 Community-Based Action Skills in the Process of Delivering HMR**

The Government has promoted the idea of community strongly (e.g. by encouraging community involvement), making it a key requirement of urban regeneration programmes, a driver of local government reform and a key feature of its Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (Brickell, 2000). The author further emphasised that the Government's overall approach to community regeneration is failing because of its inability to engage communities in a dynamic, entrepreneurial and widely inclusively way. But, this raises the question of *what is the community that the relevant participants need to get involve and engage with in the process of delivering HMR?* As defined by Poplin (1979) community is "*the place where people maintain their homes, earn their livings, rear their children and carry on most of their life activities*". Long and Hutchins (2003) define community as "*a grouping of up to several thousand households, whose occupants share common experiences and bonds derived from living in the same locality*". Thus, community consists of the persons or people living within the same geographical area, carrying on their social interactions and activities with one or more common ties and shared values. This is the community that needs to be engaged by the relevant participants involved in the process of delivering HMR.

Secondly, *why do the relevant participants need to engage with the community in the process of delivering HMR?* According to the Sustainable Communities Plan (2003), communities

need to be sustainable over the long term: “people continuing to want to live in the same community, both now and in the future” (Long and Hutchins, 2003). Only local people know what the best is for them and can help creating communities they feel proud of and to become much more involved in how local areas are run.

Lastly, *how do relevant participants engage with the local community in the process of delivering HMR?* This new approach no doubt becomes a challenge to the relevant participants involved in the process of delivering HMR. To be effectively delivering HMR, the local community need to be engaged in significant issues such as participatory planning for public space. Within the Pathfinder areas, communities have different ethnic backgrounds, faiths and cultures. Only the local community know what their common value is. By allowing local people to be involved and participate in the process of delivering HMR can the conflict between the government objectives and local community aspirations and interests be prevented. The key objective is how the relevant participants strengthen community involvement in the process of delivering HMR. These are the skills that need to be addressed by the relevant participants involved during the process of delivering HMR.

### 3. The Exploratory Pilot Case Study at the Elevate East Lancashire

An exploratory pilot case study has been undertaken at East Lancashire Pathfinder area, one of four areas in the North West, England from February 2005 to August 2005. The East Lancashire Pathfinder, is also known as ‘Elevate’ focuses on parts of five separate Local Authority areas: Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Pendle, Hyndburn and Rosendale. The current population of those wards which lie either partly or wholly in the target area is 256,335, approximately 50 per cent of the total population of the constituent Local Authority areas. This accounts for over 100,000 households out of 186, 000 for the sub-region (Audit Commission, 2004). This particular Pathfinder is chosen as a case study for this research project as it has been the focus of community protests who claimed that the project is not for their benefits and interests (Clover, 2004). The aims of this exploratory pilot study are: *to study and understand the process of delivering HMR; to identify main participants that involve during the process and to share their common experiences and issues along the delivery process of HMR.*

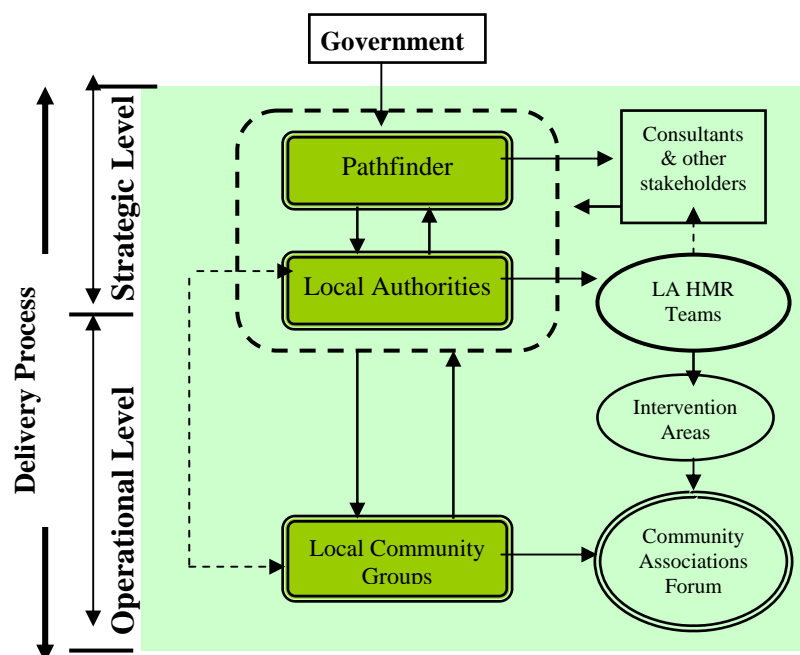


Fig.1. Three key participants of the East Lancashire Pathfinder in the process of delivering HMR

Initial findings showed that there are three main participants that play an important role in the process of delivering HMR. The Diagram in *Figure 1* describes the delivery process of HMR that involves three major participants in three different levels of community-based action skills and competencies. They are: *Elevate East Lancashire Pathfinder* – a funding organisation for East Lancashire Pathfinder area; *Local Authorities* – Pathfinder’s agents to deliver HMR and *Local Community* – groups of local residents comprise of different communities background within the Pathfinder areas. These three groups of participants have been chosen as the key stakeholders in the process of delivering HMR as they have to work together all along the delivery process of HMR. For the purpose of this study, this paper needs to investigate skills that are required for each of the identified participants as shown in *Figure 2* in the process of delivering HMR.

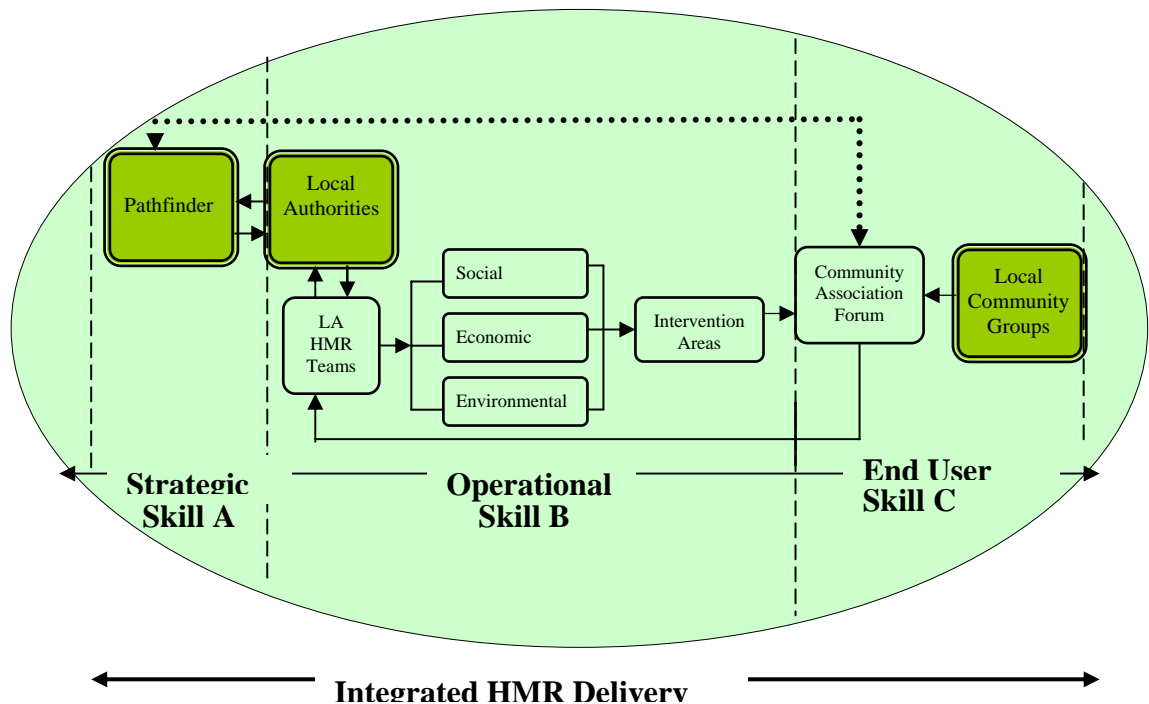


Fig.2. Community-based Action Skills and Competencies from the perspective of three key participants in the process of delivering HMR

There is no doubt that to deliver HMR effectively, relevant participants have to acquire skills and competencies for community-based action as an addition to their existing practices. These multiple responsibilities and diversified skills are across *social, economic and environmental* context of Sustainable Communities. This paper needs to investigate:

- Skill A: Skills and competencies need to be acquired by the employees of Pathfinder organization necessary to deliver HMR
- Skill B: Skills and competencies need to be acquired by the Local Authorities’ HMR teams necessary to deliver HMR
- Skill C: Skill and competencies need to be acquired by the Local Community Groups’ leaders necessary to participate and involve in the process of delivering HMR that are developed for their benefits and interests.

## 2 Further Research

Delivering HMR and Sustainable Communities require not only the technical skills and competences but also a broad range of generic skills, behaviour and knowledge. There is a clear need to focus on skills and competencies for community engagement within the three dimensions of society, environment and economy in the context of Sustainable Communities. These additional skills are required by the relevant professionals in the process of delivering

HMR. Although professional practitioners do recognise these people-based skills it is not clear whether they consider those skills are necessary for their employees interacting among themselves within an organisation or for their employees interacting with the customers/clients.

The next step of this study is to conduct an empirical phase. This is to investigate the validity of the proposed model with the relevant participants involved in the process of delivering HMR. The insights of experienced participants will be sought out on whether they have recognized the need for additional skills and competences and the extent which these skills are required. It is hoped that through this work it may be possible to develop new paradigms for the relevant participants' development which help improve the existing process of delivering HMR.

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