

## **The Leys**

### **A report for the Wates Foundation**

#### **1. Introduction**

The Wates Foundation has a history of supporting community projects on the Blackbird Leys estate in Oxford. To inform future work on Blackbird Leys, the Wates Foundation asked the Young Foundation to undertake a focused piece of research exploring how residents, communities and local agencies feel about previous regeneration initiatives on the estate and to gather different perspectives on local social needs.

Over the last four years the Young Foundation has worked with twenty different local authorities in England, including districts, counties and unitary councils, focusing in particular on innovation in neighbourhood working, supporting good practice in neighbourhood management and exploring the social, organisational and operational obstructions to increasing resident involvement in local decision making. The Young Foundation is currently working to identify solutions to tackle entrenched deprivation on very small housing estates. This involves work with three small estates in very different parts of England, where despite efforts over a period of time, all three areas continue to have a poor reputation and there are very visible factors signifying low aspiration, high levels of worklessness and incidence of long term illness above the national average. The work has set out to identify any factors specific to these estates that inhibit improvement. Although Blackbird Leys is very much larger than these three estates, they share common issues and problems. The small estates project and our history of working with local government and neighbourhoods has informed the work on Blackbird Leys.

#### **2. Research approach**

This study includes the original estate of Blackbird Leys and the Greater Leys, which together are known locally as the Leys. We refer to the estate as the Leys throughout this report.

The research involved speaking to local agencies and residents to gather different perspectives about day-to-day life on the Leys, the impact of previous regeneration projects, local social needs and problems, and opportunities for community projects. The majority of these interviews were in-depth one-to-one conversations. In addition, researchers spent time walking around the estate, visiting community projects and carrying out informal conversations. This observational work is particularly valuable when contextualising the comments from interviewees. The focus on qualitative research was designed to draw out detailed insights and reflections from a small group of individuals who live and work on the estate. These

perspectives were reviewed in relation to the extensive statistical evidence about deprivation on the estate, and various reports about previous regenerations initiatives that are available.

In total, 13 residents were involved in the research. We carried out three in-depth one-to-one interviews and spoke to 10 residents in less formal interviews. Most interviewees were long-term residents and reflect a variety of ages, genders and ethnicities. We interviewed 22 agency staff from public agencies and local voluntary organisations delivering services on the Leys, including lengthy conversations with officers from Oxford City Council and housing providers.

This work was supplemented by a desk-based review of quantitative social and economic indicators to understand how the Leys compares to other estates and neighbourhoods in Oxford and nationally. This review also included analysis of previous regeneration projects on the estate.

The research for this project was carried out from May to July 2009.

### **3. Summary of findings**

This project has identified a range of issues for residents of the Leys that span straightforward concerns with littering and parking, to more complicated, underlying problems such as young people lacking both aspirations and opportunities to get work, which in turn are connected to anti-social behaviour on the estate. These issues are not unique to the Leys and can be found in many deprived estates and communities around the country.

What sets the Leys apart from many other estates however, is both its size (with a population of over 13,000 it is more like a small town than an estate) and the significant amount of attention and regeneration investment it has received since the early 1990s. There are many well-established community projects, groups and support services on the estate. Residents describe a community with a sense of identity and belonging, reasonable levels of neighbourliness and involvement in community events. Arguably, much of this activity can be traced back to community projects set up with regeneration money. However, there has been seemingly little lasting impact on the underlying social problems that keep the most disadvantaged individuals on the estate trapped in poverty.

The following section summarises the perspectives and issues that emerged from our local research, starting with comments about day-to-day problems raised by residents and finishing with a discussion about how people feel about regeneration on the estate.

#### **3.1 Place, identity and reputation**

Blackbird Leys lies four miles south-east of Oxford's city centre. The original estate was built in 1958, taking its name from the nearby Blackbird Leys farm. Its purpose was to provide housing for workers from the nearby William Morris car factory. In the early 1990s the development of Greater Leys began. The original Blackbird Leys estate and Greater Leys are now simply known as the Leys and its population at the time of the last census stood at 13,586.

Community life centres on Blackbird Leys Road. The community centre sits on one side of the street, between the Leys Community Church and the Blackbird Pub. A bakery, a betting shop, corner store, takeaway, and the local Agnes Smith Advice Centre line the other side of the road. A local library completes the nexus. Less than half a mile south, down Windale Avenue, lies the beginning of Greater Leys. The Farmhouse, the Dovecote, and the Clockhouse mark the start of the new development.

In the 1990s Blackbird Leys had a national reputation for joy-riding displays on the estate, which was fuelled by newspaper and television coverage of races around the streets. While its notoriety may have faded nationally, the Leys still has a poor reputation locally.

This has a negative effect on residents, who are well aware of the estate's reputation. Residents described how this reputation is "out-dated". Several interviewees talked about how the stigma attached to Blackbird Leys is constantly perpetuated by local media and word of mouth.

Several interviewees who work on the Leys describe how they were told by acquaintances never to park their cars on the estate. They were then quick to point out that their cars have never been touched on the estate, but the reputation persists. "[Media] Have this idea that it's like Peckham" one local authority officer told us. Another interviewee described how her daughter was taking a taxi home while on a holiday from university in Lincolnshire. She asked the taxi driver to take her to Blackbird Leys, but the taxi driver didn't believe her when she said that's where her family lived – she said: "They don't think people from Blackbird Leys go to university."

Various studies investigating the link between place, identity and reputation, identify that communities quickly acquire a reputation (good or bad) and once established, it is very difficult to change regardless of how an area may evolve. It could be argued that one of the problems for the Leys is that planners designed the estate with no thoroughfares in a bid to minimise traffic and noise pollution. The unintended consequence of this is that none of Oxford's residents have reason to go to the Leys and see it has changed.

This issue is significant for the Leys because the estate's reputation influences how residents, agencies and the wider public feel about the area. Our work with the

small estates has identified how a negative reputation can feed through to service providers opinions about residents and in turn impact on how resources are allocated to deprived neighbourhoods.

### **3.2 Littering, parking and a lack of ownership**

There are a total of 4,922 households on the Leys. Forty-five per cent are owner occupied, while 47.1 per cent are socially rented and the remaining 4.3 per cent are privately rented. Oxford City Homes manages the bulk of the socially rented properties on the original Leys estate. Housing on Greater Leys is managed by multiple social landlords including Catalyst Communities (formerly the Ealing Family Housing Association), Oxford Citizens Housing Association, A2 Dominion Housing Trust, Keystart Housing Association, and Cherwell Housing Trust.

The Leys appears to be generally well-kept. The overall impression is of generously proportioned gardens and plenty of open space. The majority of private gardens are cared for and public spaces are predominantly free of litter. Houses on the Leys are mainly semi-detached; only the original estate has two tower blocks. However, there were exceptions to this picture, such as occasional small sites that were heavily littered, with broken glass and remains of old furniture.

In the area of Greater Leys, the estate appears to be less spacious, with more recently constructed homes appearing slightly smaller and possibly built closer together. There seem to be more low blocks of flats on Greater Leys, which may add to this impression. The other noticeable feature across the whole of Blackbird Leys, but especially in the original area, is the cars parked on grassed areas in front of houses and in some cases actually on pedestrian footways.

Researchers questioned council officers about the issues with maintenance and car parking. Officers described the difficulty in identifying the individual or organisation responsible for maintaining the small patches of land that are heavily littered, mainly because of the number of agencies involved in providing housing. Over 40 per cent of the area is owner-occupied, with a similar proportion being tenanted social housing, managed by the City Council and several housing associations. The smallest proportion (under 5 per cent at the last measurement) are let by private sector landlords. There will almost certainly be some properties ostensibly owner-occupied that are in fact also rented privately. There appears to be reluctance by institutional landlords to accept responsibility for land where the ownership is doubtful, and so these small sites become heavily littered dumping grounds.

### **3.3 Crime and anti-social behaviour**

While the majority of residents we spoke to found the Leys a pleasant place to live, recent resident surveys carried out by local agencies identify crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) as concerns. This reflects national trends: crime was considered one

of the most important issues facing Britain, second only to the NHS, until it was leapfrogged by overwhelming concern about the economy in 2008.<sup>1</sup>

Criminal behaviour specific to the Leys includes young men being recruited by drug dealers to run drugs on the estate. This involves young men delivering drugs, usually on bicycles using the alley ways to evade police. The boys see it as an easy way to make good money and internally minimise the risks involved. One person who worked on the estate told us: “Some parents are living below the bread line – can’t afford the £150 trainers. [Teenagers are attracted to the] trainers, bling, fast cars and not having to work for it.”

One person described a teenager who had been caught by police with £3,000 in cash, commenting on how difficult it is to persuade young people there are other options, saying: “Until the front door of their mother’s house is kicked-in by armed police at dawn, it is difficult to convince them that a job at the local supermarket would be better. For many teenagers on the Leys running drugs is the best money they can expect to earn.”

Many agency workers cited low aspirations and poor self-esteem as a problem among young people and a reason why some of them chose to run drugs. This mirrors the findings from other Young Foundation projects, such as work on local wellbeing, a large-scale study of unmet social needs in the UK, and our work with small estates. One resident considered that young people on the estate had an inferiority complex, the origins of which lay in society’s tendency to value university education above trades and craftsmanship. He felt the Leys’ proximity to the Oxford’s academic community made the feeling of inferiority even more acute amongst young people on the Leys, saying: “there’s an inherent assumption that they’re superior because they have more money and education.” Some interviewees talked about how young people have to leave the estate if they are going to “make something of themselves.”

There is an emerging body of research and practical work exploring different ways to build the resilience, leadership skills and aspirations of young people. Much of this work is summarised in *GRIT: The skills for success and how they are grown*, a new book published by the Young Foundation in June 2009. Arguably, there is an opportunity to connect some of the many community projects on the Leys to practitioners in this field, or to consider approaching local agencies to put forward a case for funding this type of work.

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<sup>1</sup> Ipsos Mori Issues Index, see, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2393>

### **3.4 Impact of the recession**

A BMW factory now stands on the old William Morris site, producing its new range of Minis. It is still a big employer on the estate, but since Christmas 2007 it has stopped 24-hour production and cut back on staff. The decision to decrease production has had a knock-on effect on the Leys community, which still relies heavily for the car industry on employment.

The percentage of working age people claiming benefits on the Leys stands at 18.1 per cent, compared to 8.9 per cent in Oxford and 14.2 per cent nationally.<sup>2</sup> The percentage of Leys residents working in elementary occupations stands at 22.6 per cent (compared to 12.2 per cent in Oxford) and 12.2 per cent work as process plant and machine operatives (compared to 4.7 per cent in Oxford). Residents we spoke to had worked as cleaners in local schools, in the post office, or for other regional employers such as Nuffield Press.

The recession has made it difficult for residents to find work, in particular people aged over 40. Those laid off from BMW often find themselves unable to transfer the skills they developed during the course of their employment at the plant to a new workplace. Providers of adult education and information technology (IT) courses have seen the demand for their services increase in the past year. The community centre on the original estate and the Clockhouse on Greater Leys both have IT facilities that are in steady use. At the same time Learning Communities, a local project providing adult education, has ceased because its funding has expired. Both residents and agencies talked about how unemployment is impacting on people's self-esteem and putting pressure on their families and finances.

### **3.5 Previous regeneration projects**

The Leys has received substantial regeneration funding over the past two decades. It has had three rounds of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding as well as additional public and private investment.

#### *Social Regeneration*

Investment in the Leys social infrastructure has seen a strong community and voluntary sector become established. There are multiple youth outreach programmes, children's playgroups, activities for older people and advice centres. New projects are constantly emerging and adding to the wealth of community life.

At the same time there is a strong sense of consultation fatigue among residents and agency staff, who have seen many projects and proposals come and go. While many community organisations are now well established they still struggle to be sustainable. Much of their funding is short-term. This combined with many funders

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<sup>2</sup> See, <http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/2038431818/report.aspx#tabwab>

seeking to support new programmes instead of established ones, and an unwillingness to cover core costs, makes securing funding increasingly difficult. It also limits the amount of time organisations can devote to outreach work.

### 3.6 Future regeneration

#### *Physical regeneration*

There is a proposal for 4,000 new homes to be built south of Grenoble Road, Greater Leys. This is controversial as it would mean building on Oxford's green belt. The plans are supported by Oxford City Council and the government, but opposed by South Oxfordshire District Council, Oxford County Council and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England.

Oxford City Council sees the plans as a way to help meet Oxford's housing demands. The strength and political nature of the opposition means that the plans are likely to be reconsidered if there is a change in government.

#### *Social regeneration*

Oxford City Council has been working with local partners to develop a strategic regeneration plan for the city. Blackbird Leys is identified as a priority neighbourhood in these plans. Key documents helping to shape the strategy include:

- A Regeneration Framework for Oxford to 2026, Oxford City Council, April 2009
- Targeting Areas of Deprivation in Oxford City and Banbury, Paper for Oxfordshire Partnership, June 2009
- Oxford City Council - Regeneration inspection report, Audit Commission, June 2009

Within these documents there are a number of proposals being considered that could have significant implications for improving engagement and partnership working at Blackbird Leys. These include:

- *"Establishing a Blackbird Leys Steering Group with key partners (local agencies, VCS, residents, council departments)"* – the intention is to set up this group in autumn 2009 to begin engaging residents in conversations about the Area Regeneration Plan. It is not yet clear which agency will lead on this, although Oxford City Council already has Neighbourhood Forums established in some areas, so it would seem likely that it will fall under their remit
- *"Widening the scope and participation of public involvement"* – this is stated as a general commitment within the Regeneration Framework and could indicate a variety of new or expanded engagement activities within the community
- *"Considering neighbourhood management approaches to coordinating multi-agency work in specific localities"* – as before, this is stated as a general commitment but does not identify which areas would benefit. Although as a priority neighbourhood, it would appear likely that Blackbird Leys would be

considered as a neighbourhood management area. This represents an opportunity to tackle the widespread lack of co-ordination and joined up working on the estate, which would help to tackle many of the day-to-day issues identified by residents, and potentially some of the more complex social issues that need strategic focus and extensive collaboration between local agencies.

While proposals for regeneration are emerging, action plans and timetables for taking them forward are limited or absent. There was a willingness among the agencies involved in this project to take a more coordinated approach to service delivery at Blackbird Leys, no one agency is yet willing to lead the process. This presents an opportunity for The Wates Foundation to engage with the local authorities and other public agencies about work on the estate.

#### **4 Conclusions**

It is clear that considerable resources are deployed on the Leys and the numerous community projects have dedicated staff. However, the absence of an overarching strategy for coordinating delivery plans means that resources do not necessarily maximise their impact.

The over-riding impression gained from this work however, was the lack of co-ordination between service providers. The ideas about joined-up working and lateral management have now been current in management thinking for a number of years and yet these lessons do not seem to have been taken onboard in Oxford. We are sure that there will be examples where it does happen but these will be the exceptions that confirm our impression.

We were commissioned by the Wates Foundation essentially to look at the situation on Blackbird Leys and to advise on how best to target future funding. What we found, based on experience in many other areas, is that the area has been stigmatised, in ways and at times that have been disproportionate. Because of this, considerable additional resources have been allocated to the area, but apparently with little strategic thinking involved and even less inter-service co-ordination. Given that a number of the social problems that exist on Blackbird Leys and elsewhere cannot be solved by throwing money at them, the problems and the stigmatisation remain.

The City Council as part of its latest forward planning for Blackbird Leys has proposed establishing a neighbourhood forum and has made reference to neighbourhood management. However there is little detail available that spells out exactly what these ideas might mean. Experience elsewhere has shown how the neighbourhood approach can work, and how it can go wrong from the outset.



Residents of Blackbird Leys are already sceptical about regeneration plans and unless the purpose and powers of a neighbourhood forum are very clearly thought through and transparent, it could become a talking shop with minimal credibility and limited power. Any neighbourhood management structure that might be put in place also needs some serious thinking beforehand to define the role and to ensure that the other bodies delivering services in the area are signed-up to the new approach. It is essential that a neighbourhood manager is seen as that, a manager, with sufficient authority to be able to talk on equal terms with all the agencies and to expect co-operation to solve problems. What is not needed is another community worker, although good neighbourhood managers need community work skills amongst other attributes.

Given these considerations we feel at this stage it would be advisable for The Wates Foundation not to undertake substantial investment on the Leys. We advise the Foundation to maintain a watching brief on the estate over the next six to nine months, while plans for neighbourhood engagement mechanisms and the regeneration framework are refined. It is essential for the sustainability of any future projects funded by The Wates Foundation that they have a clear position in the overall strategy and vision for the Leys.

However, there are some practical activities that The Wates Foundation could undertake in the short-term to lay the foundations for future work. These are:

- Starting a dialogue with the local authorities and public agencies that are involved in proposals for neighbourhood working and regeneration, with a view to supporting co-ordination between agencies and the VCS on the estate
- Conducting a rapid mapping exercise to identify and review all existing community/voluntary projects (identifying their purpose, client base, workload, funding and usage) as an aid to identifying gaps/unmet needs
- Reviewing the current situation regarding provision of training/re-skilling for residents of the estate, in particular the 40 + age group who are struggling to retrain and find work. Depending on the outcome of this review, to consider term-limited financial support for local projects delivering adult reskilling and retraining.

## **Appendix**

Subsequent to this report being prepared for The Wates Foundation in July 2009, the Foundation has commissioned the recommended follow-on work at the Leys, specifically the mapping exercise and the review of training/re-skilling provision for adults. This work will be carried out in late summer/early autumn 2009.

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**The Young Foundation**  
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The Young Foundation undertakes research to understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them. Visit [www.youngfoundation.org/](http://www.youngfoundation.org/) for further information.