

## **Community Engagement in the M74 Study – summary**

### **What did we do?**

As part of our research on the health impacts of the M74 motorway urban extension, we conducted a complementary programme of community engagement with the help of the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC).

Before the study took place, we invited 18 local community organisations to comment on whether they were concerned about any aspect of the motorway. This early engagement gave us a sense of what was important to communities, helped us build relationships, and raised awareness of the study among local stakeholders. It also helped us design the study, particularly the qualitative research, which explored local residents' lived experience of the motorway in the context of wider changes in the urban environment and social connections.

In the second phase, we organised a series of community events to share emerging study findings. We set up four informal 'pop-up' events in local spaces – a sheltered housing complex, a shopping centre, a local street and a community hall. We invited people to discuss the study with us and give us their views. We also organised an event using interactive methods which encouraged participation and feedback. Attendees included representatives from government, community groups and local residents. During our events, researchers and attendees reflected on study findings, worked together on a shared understanding of findings, and discussed wider opportunities and challenges facing local communities.

### **What did we find?**

In our early engagement the motorway was not a hot topic with local community organisations although some respondents felt it had helped to regenerate the wider neighbourhood.

Many people we talked to felt that the motorway had been helpful for car users, allowing faster and easier journeys. This feedback agreed with our survey findings suggesting that those people living near the new motorway had increased their car use. However, some people questioned the "fairness" of this finding, in light of the fact that many people in the area do not own a car.

Local people had mixed opinions on whether the attractiveness or 'liveability' of local neighbourhoods had improved or deteriorated, though many felt that local cycle infrastructure was poor. There was also a lack of consensus on whether any changes in neighbourhoods were directly attributable to the motorway. For walking and cycling in particular, this agreed with our findings from the postal survey which detected no overall effect on walking for transport and our interviews with residents which found mixed effects on walking and cycling, mainly relating to the quality rather than quantity of active travel. The community engagement also highlighted tensions between how road users (cars, buses, bicycles and pedestrians) shared the space, particularly on busy roads.

Different areas, different audiences and different individuals had vastly different opinions about the motorway, illustrating an entire spectrum ranging from positive to neutral to negative. Attendees at the community engagement events also described a mixture of positives and negatives that they had personally experienced, as well as acknowledging that benefits for some were achieved at the cost of burdens to others.

### **What does this mean?**

Our public engagement activities helped us to make sure that our research questions were relevant, both to local communities and to policy-makers and practitioners. We were also able to explore whether and how our study findings resonated with local residents and stakeholders, which contributed to the overall study interpretation.

Our public engagement helped us to learn more about how to meaningfully incorporate community perspectives into research. In particular, it helped us explore the different motivations, timelines and language used by different stakeholders, including scientists, residents and policy-makers. Finally, the public engagement was useful in generating ideas for future road-related research such as assessment of noise or air pollution, or disturbed sleep (suggested by residents), or a formal economic evaluation (suggested by policy-makers).

Our programme of public engagement also stimulated wider discussion about community opportunities and challenges, and consideration of how study findings might promote action and change in the interests of residents and communities. The immediate impacts include giving a voice to local residents, including some living next to the motorway; and communicating study findings to stakeholders directly involved in decision-making about the new motorway and future major road building in the area.

Overall, community engagement should ensure that any research is of direct interest to the community; that community members can take part in a variety of ways; that the findings will be used to stimulate activity and change in the interests of the community; and that both the community and relevant public bodies are involved. Community engagement research should empower – it should provide insights and information that can underpin the efforts of communities and those that work with them to take action on the needs and issues that the community experiences.

