

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK

**TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990
AND ACQUISITION OF LAND ACT 1981**

Revised Inquiry into

**THE LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK
(AYLESBURY ESTATE SITES 1B-1C)**

COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER 2014

PINS REFERENCE: NPCU/CPO/A5840/74092

**Summary of Evidence of
Richard Baxter
For the Aylesbury Leaseholders Group**

12 December 2017

Introduction

1. My name is Richard Baxter. I have been a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at QMUL and a Lecturer at Birkbeck. I have specialised in the modernist residential high-rise. This statement is mainly based on the Leverhulme research, from 2012-2015, that is providing a biography of the Aylesbury Estate as home. The project used qualitative methods, specifically archival research, oral history interviews and home tours with 25 residents, semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight people who had worked on the estate, and my photography. It also draws on my PhD research, which explored the lived experience of 44 high-rises in inner London.
2. The statement contributes to the argument that the Aylesbury Estate's regeneration (in its current form) and the compulsory purchase of leaseholders' homes are not in the public interest. It takes the view that Southwark Council's assessment of the public interest has been informed by stereotypes about the Aylesbury Estate and modernist high-rise estates more generally. It then discusses the negative affect that the regeneration has had on some residents. This negative affect needs to be seriously considered in the assessment of the regeneration and the compulsory purchase orders.

Challenging stereotypes of estate life

3. The social life of modernist high-rise estates tends to be demonised in popular culture. These stereotypes matter because they affect residents and policy decisions. However, they are partial because they ignore ordinary and positive lived experiences. My PhD research found that high-rise living in inner London is diverse and that the majority of high-rise estates are liveable environments with residents mainly satisfied (Baxter and Lees, 2008). As is well

documented, the Aylesbury Estate is a deprived neighbourhood and was awarded New Deal for Communities funding in the early 2000s. This deprivation is associated with some social problems. However, everyday life at the Aylesbury Estate tends to be ordinary and mundane. For example, the residents I interviewed discussed going to bingo, talking to neighbours, having family over to visit, cleaning the communal corridors outside their front doors and cooking in their kitchens.

4. Out of the residents I interviewed, the vast majority were happy living on the estate and especially liked their flats. Most residents liked the space, the layout and the natural light. It was their home. As one resident stated '... they're beautiful places, I love it up here. It's a lovely flat.' This argument about most residents feeling at home on the estate supports the 2001 vote when 73 per cent of residents stated they were against stock transfer and the regeneration.
5. Some of this attachment can be explained by the verticality of the Aylesbury Estate. For Le Corbusier, who influenced the design, vertical living was important in realising the utopian city. Positive vertical experiences and practices are therefore a feature of everyday life on the estate (Baxter, 2017: 9-13). Some residents stated in interviews that they enjoyed walking on the vertical walkways since they offer efficient and safe movement away from cars at ground level. Others discussed how their children liked riding their BMX bikes on the walkways. Some residents in first floor maisonettes also enjoyed talking to their neighbours on walkways below from their dining room windows. These positive experiences contrast with popular accounts of anti-social behaviour and crime on the walkways.

6. The high flats in the high-rises are associated with positive experiences and practices surrounding the view. The significance of these experiences should not be underestimated. 'Viewing' involves positive sensations associated with sight, sound and touch. These sensations can result in positive feelings, such as enjoyment and warmth. The view can also involve verticalised behaviours involving furniture, with some residents positioning armchairs to face the view and placing their dining tables next to flat windows. In turn this material arrangement can encourage family and community ties. For example, some residents stated that family and friends liked coming round to dinner partially because they were surrounded by the view. Far from the images of social decay that have influenced the policy decision to demolish, living on the Aylesbury Estate does involve unique vertical experiences. As one resident stated:

'I immediately fell in love. The space, the big windows, the view and I couldn't believe my luck ... I felt like, you know, that I am home immediately. It felt the kind of positiveness in this place, every single time when I open the door. The view and light just strikes me and makes me smile' (oral history interview, 2014).

The affect of regeneration on residents

7. The regeneration has had a substantial influence on tenants and leaseholders' lives. This impact needs to be taken seriously in the assessment of the regeneration and the compulsory purchase orders. Arguments about the negative affect of regeneration projects of the type seen at the Aylesbury Estate tend to focus on resident displacement. However, I would like to add to these arguments by emphasising two further points.
8. First, examining regeneration projects globally, academic authors Porteous and Smith (2001) argue that there is a tendency to foreground 'rational' considerations, exemplified by financial

models, and devalue residents' lived experiences. Drawing on this work, it is emphasised that the estate and flats are *home* to many residents. Home is a special place that can be intensely meaningful. Thick with memories and emotions, it involves feelings of belonging. All the residents I interviewed viewed the estate and/or their flats as home. Tenants and leaseholders are not just experiencing a loss of personal property, but also a loss of home. A painful experience, this loss needs to be fully recognised in any decision over the compulsory purchase of residents' homes. As a resident stated:

'I love this flat, I love this flat ... but to move out of here is going to be murder, believe you me ... It's my home' (oral history interview, 2014).

9. Second, this loss of home is not just a single event that occurs when residents move. At the Aylesbury Estate it has been a prolonged and multidimensional process that began around twenty years ago when the idea of regeneration was first raised (Baxter, resubmitted). Since this time residents have encountered a series of negative experiences that have resulted in feelings of loss and influenced well-being. My research shows that the regeneration has decreased the extent of community ties. For example, as buildings get closer to demolition longer term residents leave and tend to be replaced by new tenants on short-term contracts. This demographic change decreases the sense of community in the buildings. Residents have also been affected by changes to the material fabric of the estate. Witnessing demolished sites can be a difficult experience for long term residents since it can signify the loss of a familiar environment or friendships. It also means that residents are constantly reminded of their future move, which increases feelings of anxiety. As one resident stated:

'It is very sad to see the demolition of Wolverton ... slowly this estate is coming down and then I'm thinking about myself and what's going to happen in the next five or ten years when Taplow is coming' (oral history interview, 2014).

10. The interior decor of flats and personal possessions can be important to residents and associated with memories of domestic life. The regeneration has meant that some residents fear leaving some of these items behind, such as kitchen units. Other residents have also been forced to dispose of some of their possessions in preparation for the future move because they will have to downsize. This removal of possessions is further associated with feelings of separation and loss.
11. The regeneration has also been associated with high levels of anxiety. Even the thought of the future move can result in anxiety. As one resident stated 'For the first time in my life I felt at home. But the thought of having to move. It makes me feel so empty.' Anxiety have also resulted from regular changes to the regeneration plans and ambiguity over whether residents have the 'right to return.' As flats are vacated in blocks approaching demolition, the doors and windows are boarded up with sheets of steel. This steel has made some residents in still occupied blocks worry about what might happen if they are the last to leave.

Conclusion

12. This statement has argued that the regeneration and compulsory purchase orders have been influenced by stereotypes about the Aylesbury Estate and modernist high-rise estates. However, these stereotypes only provide a partial understanding of estate life. Many residents in my research enjoyed living in their flats and the high-rise residents, especially, benefit from a range of vertical experiences, such as the view. This more balanced appreciation of

estate life needs to inform the assessment of the compulsory purchase orders. The statement has also argued that the affect of the regeneration on residents has been severe. It has resulted in a series of negative experiences that have influenced resident well-being and generated feelings of loss. This process also needs to be factored into the assessment of the regeneration and the compulsory purchase of leaseholders' homes.

References

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