

Written Testimony - Helen O'Brien, Heygate Resident 1974 - 2009



We moved to the Heygate in 1974, when it was first built. I lived there for thirty-five years. We lived in one of these old places in Danson Road before that. It was awful: we had no hot water, no heating, you had to go to the public washhouse to wash things, and to have a bath; had to boil water on the gas cooker. The walls were crumbling. We couldn't get over it when we moved to the Heygate. It was lovely: hot water, bath, you could plumb in a washing machine, there was a patio where you could put your washing out. We all had a bath the first night – not together!

We had a three bedroom maisonette, on the top floor. It was right opposite that big block, Ashenden. That kept a lot of the noise out. When we first moved there, everything seemed so hemmed in. When you think about it, there were hundreds and hundreds of

people living there, we weren't used to it.

We were very annoyed with how the council dealt with the regeneration. We didn't want to leave, a lot of us didn't want to leave. I miss the people from the Heygate, the friendly nature of the people.

It was on 24th October 2008 that we received our 'notice to quit' a notice seeking possession of our home by Southwark Council. We had dreaded getting this letter, even though we had been expecting it. Having lived on the estate for so many years, we couldn't believe that Southwark Council were forcing us to give up our homes even though we were secure tenants, to make way for private developers.

I started to worry about where the council would put us, who our neighbours would be and how we would get through the actual day of moving. When should we start to pack all of our treasured belongings, books, paintings etc.? What about our furniture? What should we leave behind?

I kept telling myself not to worry and to be positive, but I knew that wherever we ended up we wouldn't be as happy as we were on the Heygate. I keep remembering what Fred Manson [Head of Regeneration] said some years ago - *"Get rid of the working class from the Elephant & Castle and bring in middle class people."* Well it seems as though his wish is coming true.

We have spent many happy days on the Heygate and a few unhappy ones. My fondest memory is of the party we organised in 1977 for the Queen's Jubilee. Everything took place in the Statue Garden. We put bunting up early in the morning and organised tables and chairs for the children's sit-down tea party - 300 children attended. Local shops gave food, drinks and prizes. Gilford's bakery made an enormous cake. There was a true sense of community spirit that day, with everyone mucking in. And what of that spirit now? What was once a thriving community has now been scattered all over Southwark.



And what of the new housing that should have been built 2-3 years ago for us? We still can't get a straight answer from the council why it was never built!

Then, to add insult to injury, we were sent letters inviting us to attend classes organised by Southwark Council on how to cope with stress!!

I lived on the estate with my family for 34 years, half of my lifetime. I have never been in arrears all that time. I worked as a teacher and have devoted 30 years of my life to the community and was honoured for this work with a civic award in 2004.

I am very angry and insulted. Southwark's Elephant regeneration plans are a miserable failure. Everyone who has worked on the regeneration at the Elephant should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.