**The Ocean Estate: An Overview of its Regeneration**

Since its conception at the end of the 1940’s, the Ocean Estate in Stepney, Tower Hamlets, has been one of London’s largest council estates, home to 7,459 people in 2,574 households.[[1]](#endnote-1) Over the last 20 years the estate has received several rounds of regeneration funding, starting in 1999 with the demolition of some of the original buildings. Several phases of regeneration followed, with residents decanted, sometimes into temporary homes, sometimes more permanently off the estate, with some of the estate’s original buildings demolished, new buildings replacing them and residents moving back. The most recent new-builds were completed in May 2019 finishing up any current regeneration plans on the estate.

For these reasons, the Ocean Estate is an interesting example of what happens to residents, households, and local businesses when a council estate is regenerated and was an important estate to be included in the project *‘Gentrification, Displacement, and the Impact of Council Estate Renewal in C21st London’*. Twenty-one interviews were carried out on the estate. This included eight residents that had been decanted and had moved back, four residents who had been decanted and moved away permanently, and nine residents whose homes were not included in demolition and were able to remain on the estate throughout regeneration.

Interviewees shared their experiences of the decanting process, which was often very difficult on households, particularly those with children. The households that were moved off the estate into temporary accommodation didn’t know for certain if or when they would be able to return to the estate once the new homes were complete. Interviewees spoke about the precariousness of the decant process, with residents having to juggle children still in school, having to put their furniture and belongings into storage whilst living in temporary housing, and being unable to feel ‘settled’ into their temporary homes. One interviewee recounted their experience of this process as feeling *‘like I’m a gypsy traveller you know, I’ve been moving from place to place now’*.

*‘…they [the Council] told us that, you know, they’re going to demolish the building and they’re gonna to move us in various places. And we all were so upset, we didn’t wanna move anywhere else, we just wanted to stay together, and then we had no other choice’.*

The common shared experience by those decanted was that process was emotionally stressful and poorly managed. Decanted residents felt they had little choice in the process and described a sense of loss and grief at having to move from homes that they had raised their families in, sometimes having lived there for decades.

*‘…we was moving our stuff out, it was sad in a way, it was sad you know like we lived there … But I knew that place I would never be able to go back, you know like some properties you leave you can actually go back and look into it, but I knew it was going to be demolished and I think that was the saddest thing’.*

Of our interviewees, eight are now living in the new-builds on the estate and they spoke about the quality of these homes, with one describing the move back as ‘bittersweet. Several lamented that noise carries between the flats, there are issues with plumbing, flat sizes are much smaller and furniture from their previous home didn’t fit in the smaller room sizes. Residents have expressed that the new homes are far inferior to the estate’s original brick built housing blocks that they had lived in, which only adds to the difficulty of losing a good quality home that they loved. One interviewee detailed having 42 defects in their new flat, proclaiming that the new home *‘looks good but it doesn’t taste good!’*

Compounding the challenges for decanted and returned residents, the change of tenure from a council home to a housing association came with an increase in rent. Of our interviewees that now live in the new-build homes with a housing association landlord, 80% felt their rent was expensive, with one household’s rent having gone from £425 a month in a council home to £800 in the social home. Further still, utility bills are no longer included in the rent as was common place in the council homes, so households are having to adapt to more monthly outgoings and managing their money in a way that they hadn’t had to before. One interviewee shared that they were relying on family members for support to pay their bills. This raises questions around the long-term affordability of the new-build social homes for estate residents and whether these are putting households in a difficult financial situation.

*‘It’s okay, its new properties [in the housing associations] but financially a lot of people actually they’re not happy with that, they’re saying it’s way too much rent than what the council properties were so they’re really squeezing tighter [financially]. Some of the people they complained and to be honest this is in a way putting them people into a benefit-trap’.*

The move from a council home to a housing association also meant that residents potentially had a change in their tenure type, losing their ‘secure’ tenancy and instead becoming ‘assured’ tenure. Long-term residents were aware of these changes and were vocal about losing their ‘rights’ and fought hard to retain their secure tenancies in the transfer to a housing association. Key concerns with the tenure change were about succession and the ability for their children to have the option of living in the home, the choice to sublet, and the Right to Buy. Notably, the residents who were most informed on this topic were White British and had lived on the estate for a long time. For these interviewees the ‘rights’ associated with their council home were an important thing to preserve and represented an element of retaining the security that a council home offered.

However, for three of our interviewees now living in the new-builds on the estate, it wasn’t clear if they fully understood that there had been a tenure change and with it a change in certain housing rights. One of our interviewees was even unaware that they were no longer a council tenant referring to their housing association landlord as being part of ‘the Council’. Notably the residents who appeared less informed of these tenure changes were Bangladeshi, mostly older, and often English was not their first language.[[2]](#endnote-2) The possible disparity with who got preserved rights in the new homes raises issues around whether there was enough clear information to all residents decanted from council homes about their change of tenure and the change of housing rights in the move to a housing association.

*‘… some of the tenants, like [name] who rang me, now she hasn’t got preserved rights as I have okay, in other words she can’t, she hasn’t got the Right to Buy like I have’.*

Not all buildings on the estate were decanted and demolished, the northern part of the estate had no demolition at all. Our interviewees who were not decanted shared their experiences of seeing their estate change around them and the impacts of living with the building works. There was a common sense of loss at seeing neighbours and friends moving away, not knowing who and when people would be able to return. The residents remaining on the estate also experienced a sense of apprehension about what the impacts of the regeneration might be in the long-term. A common reference point is the changing community and the new residents moving onto the estate, with 14 out of the 21 interviewees having stated that the estate was seeing a changing social character. The new housing blocks include market rate homes for sale, as well as shared-ownership options, with the blocks renamed and marketed towards a young professional demographic. A new-build block occupied by a private firm running short term lettings aimed at young professionals and students adds to the ‘new faces’, as does the block of flats sold privately to foreign investors.

*‘I was thinking like, you know, because it was beyond my thinking, what they gonna do there, who’s gonna come there, you know, things like that, who are they gonna move into these houses and, you know, all the new people, that’s what I thought because I didn’t know … so the whole Ocean Estate is going to be new faces, a new generation and stuff’*

The new homes not only look very different from the estate’s original buildings but also feature added luxuries; CCTV and on site security, enclosed gardens, and the newest block includes a gym and underground parking. These new-build blocks have been labelled by some as ‘the posh part’ of the estate and their desirability has not only meant the estate has seen a changing social character, but also adds to a common concern about the high cost of the new homes and the general affordability of the area. The challenge of affordability was particularly difficult for the three decanted leaseholders who were interviewed, with the compensation payments from the Council not being enough to buy a home on the estate.

*‘Well it definitely is changing, since I’ve been here in the 70s. One of the disadvantages with the newer builds is that you get, that the price is too high and if you - so local people couldn’t really afford it, I mean no local person around here can afford these flats now. I mean my one bedroom flat is probably worth about £375,000 – I don’t own it all, but who can afford to pay that money for one bedroom flat, it’s not much use you if you’ve got a family anyway so you’re talking about nearly £500,000 and that’s just not possible’*

Adding further layers of exclusionary pressure, the estate has also seen changes to the local businesses and the parade of shops along the southern edge of the estate were included in the regeneration. These shops were demolished and replaced with a block of new homes and commercial space. This required the displacement of a row of small local businesses on the ground floor that were primarily Bangladeshi stores; two Asian grocers, a tailors and sari maker, a Halal butchers. One of our interviewees included a resident from the estate who was firstly displaced from their home on the estate due to demolition, then a few years later was displaced from their shop on the Ben Johnson Road. Rent in the new commercial spaces were more than double what they paid previously and as a small family business they were unable to afford to return their business to the new shops. This interviewee felt that the removal of these shops was an intentional ‘ripping up’ of the Bangladeshi community. Others have expressed a wider concern that the changing shops on the estate echo the needs of a new wealthier resident population.

*Interviewee: ‘… I don’t think they [the Council] want Bangladeshi little shops with saris. I don’t think it might be appropriate for these inhabitants, new residents, they might not want that, they might not like the smell of dahl or whatever, you know.’*

*Interviewer: What kind of shops do you think they want?*

*Interviewee: Oh yeah, insurance, estate agents, there is a new swish newsagents, yeah, to cater for the needs of new gentrified population which lives down there more and more’.*

The displacement of the local small business owners runs parallel to the displacement of council homes on the estate. Of our interviewees, 48% discussed race in relation to the estate’s regeneration, with 20% stating that they felt that the regeneration was intentionally targeting the Bangladeshi community, often describing social and ethnic cleansing. The change in the type of shops on the Ocean Estate is a response to its changing social character and perhaps the strongest indicator of the estate’s gentrification.

Many of these experiences recounted by our interviewees on the Ocean Estate were echoed by interviewees on the other estates in the project, but it is useful to remember that the Ocean Estate is much further along in its timeline of council estate renewal when compared with some of the other estates in the project. What was observed on the Ocean is similarly happening on other estates in the project and across London as a whole; from the displacement of neighbours, a changing social character, more expensive rents and cost of living, and the loss of local services and shops. And so the Ocean Estate serves as a useful case study and a reminder of the difficult experiences residents have within the regeneration process even long after building work finishes.

1. Figures were taken from: <https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s101268/6.3a%20-%20Appendix%201%20Ocean%20Regeneration%20Trust%20Business%20Plan%202017.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Data from the 2011 Census showed that over a quarter (27 per cent) of Bangladeshi adults in Tower Hamlets could not speak English well or at all: <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Diversity/Language_proficiency_in_Tower_Hamlets.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)