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BLUE CHULA

Big Local experiences of regeneration and development

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Local Trust

About this version

This collection of case studies from Big Local areas, form part of a set of three resources commissioned to provide support for communities experiencing regeneration and development initiatives. These resources aim to bring together case studies and practical guidance to help ensure that communities are more effectively involved in regeneration process, to the benefit of both residents and those designing and delivering schemes. We want to thank everyone who participated in this research, in particular the community groups and residents, councils and developers of the Big Local areas.

All three resources can be found at localtrust.org.uk/developing-potential

Big Local experiences of regeneration and development was researched by Helen Nicol and Paul Raven between June and December 2018 and was published by Local trust in November 2019.

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SO18 Big Local; Southampton, Hampshire
Photo credit: Benjamin Nwaneampeh

COMMUNITY FUND

Contents

About these experiences

Understanding how residents can gain from regeneration and development, rather than lose out to it, is a challenge shared by many Big Local areas. In trying to address this challenge, it became clear to Big Local areas that accessible and clear information on how best to engage, influence and negotiate for the benefit of communities was very hard to find.

To address this resource gap, Local Trust offered a number of Big Local areas the opportunity to become involved in action research. This approach aimed to build the areas capacity to engage more productively in regeneration programmes, whilst simultaneously informing the development of resources that could be used by communities and others involved in the design and delivery of regeneration schemes.

Between June 2018 and May 2019, five Big Local partnerships volunteered to take part in research conducted by Blue Chula.[1] What set out to be a guide to regeneration for community groups has become a collection of resources based on the findings from this research:

1. **Developing potential: lessons from community experiences of regeneration.** Lessons learned from our research, and recommendations for central government, local authorities, housing associations and other lead developers.
2. **Developing potential: a guide for communities.** Advice for making the most of regeneration and development based on the experiences of the Big Local groups and lessons learned from successful examples of community-led regeneration.
3. **This document, Big Local experiences of regeneration and development.** A collection of five case studies, offering a fuller description of the context, challenges and future possibilities for each of the five areas.

   These five case studies were developed through workshops, conversations and email iterations with Big Local areas and local regeneration contacts, between June and December of 2018, and represent the experiences and facts related to regeneration and development, in the areas, at that time.

[1] http://bluechula.co.uk

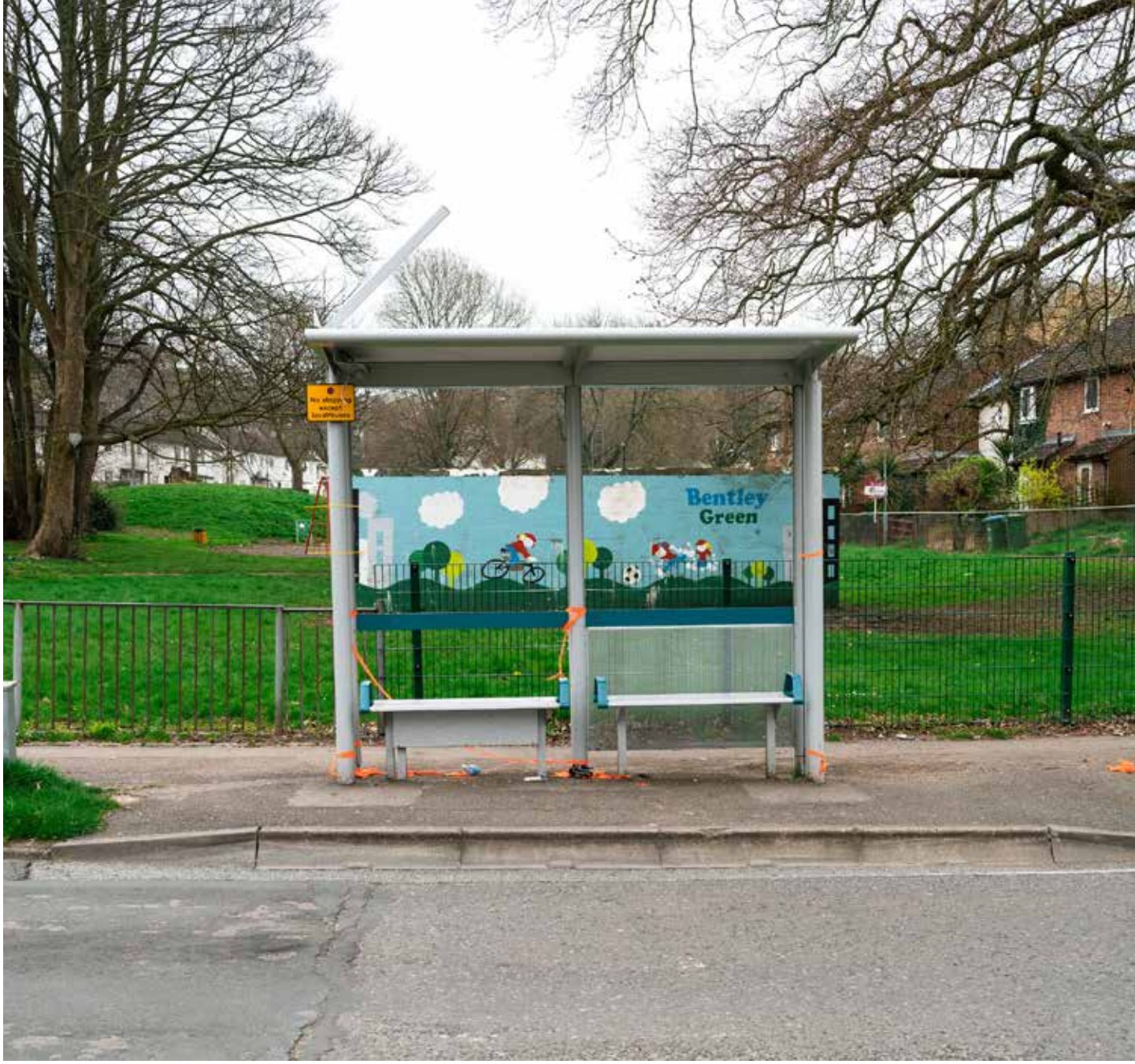


Photo by Benjamin Nwaneampe

Our thanks to the community groups, residents, councils and developers, who were involved in bringing together these experiences: Birmingham Council, Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, Firs & Bromford Neighbours together, Newham Council, Northfleet Big Local, The Peoples Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH), SO18 Big Local, Southampton Council and Welsh House Farm Big Local.

All three resources can be found at localtrust.org.uk/developing-potential

Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together

History and context

The Firs and Bromford housing estates are located to the east of Birmingham city centre, directly to the south of the M6. On the north side of the motorway, which roughly shadows the route of the river Tame through the area, industrial and retail parks now dominate what was predominantly farmland until the mid-1800s. There had been a mill at Bromford since the time of the Domesday book. Originally a corn mill, it converted to iron milling around 1600, then shifted through paper production and wire extrusion before settling into steel rolling around 1850, at which point the steel industry came to dominate the local area until the late 20th century.

It wasn't until the rapid expansion of social housing in the aftermath of the second world war that the Firs estate (completed around 1959) sprang up on the farmland between the racecourse and Buckland End, featuring semi-detached and terraced housing in addition to five tower blocks. The Upper Firs estate followed soon after. The Bromford Bridge estate was constructed to a mid-1960s new-town design on the site of the old racecourse. At around the same time the rather more infamous Castle Vale estate was going up to the north of the motorway, which, as a result, seemed to pass through a veritable forest of over fifty tower blocks either side.

A combination of unfortunate siting and substandard construction proved problematic almost from the outset. The Firs estate was constructed from reinforced concrete by contractors using the Truscon system building technique, which had proved popular and successful for the building of factories and industrial complexes. The result was that the tower blocks situated closest to the river were plagued with subsidence, flooding and rising damp. Luckily, the smaller housing units were built on sloping ground, and thus avoided these problems. Following the late 1990s' precedent of Castle Vale across the road, which also suffered from architectural (and social) problems, the Firs estate towers were finally demolished in 2001, and those of the Upper Firs plot in 2005. The Firs towers were replaced with newer low-rise housing, but the sites of the Upper Firs towers, closer to the motorway and undeveloped since the demolitions, have become overgrown with young forest. One of the larger towers on the Bromford Bridge estate came down at the same time as the towers of the Upper Firs, and another two followed in 2011.

Firs and Bromford Neighbours Together street connectors hosting a street event.

Regeneration challenges

Bromford, situated in a valley with a long history as a transport corridor into the city, is surrounded by infrastructure which presents challenges for planning and placemaking—not least because of the Tame's tendency to flooding. While other stretches of the Tame closer to the city centre have been given solid plans for flood defences, plans for the Bromford stretch are still pending, meaning not only that the estates are still at risk from flooding in a one in a 100 years event, but that redevelopment of the riverside sites of the demolished towers cannot proceed until the issues are addressed. Plans to run the Birmingham city-centre spur of Phase 1 of the HS2 railway along the eastern corridor to the north of Bromford were announced in 2012. There has been some suggestion that the HS2 project might unlock funding for local development on the estates, and it will inevitably have a considerable impact on the area's physical and social infrastructure.

In 2013, the newly Labour-dominated city council rolled back on the long-promised demolition of the Holbrook and Warstone Towers on the Bromford estate, citing a desperate need for housing units and the possibility of refurbishing the towers to an acceptable standard. Redevelopment was mooted again in 2016, with the announcement that Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust would build 225 houses on the estate, with 168 to be retained for council rent—a project which depended on the completion of flood defence work. The Holbrook tower was finally (and slowly) demolished throughout 2018, and the Warstone tower currently stands empty, awaiting the same fate. Meanwhile, the council is consulting with the Environment Agency (EA) on the flood defences, and at the same time running a rather cursory public consultation regarding its intentions to build new homes in the Bromford area.[2]

[2] https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/economy/bromford-regeneration-proposal. Accessed 1st December 2018.

Deprivation and estate reputation

Although improving, the statistics for Firs and Bromford paint a challenging picture. Deprivation, poverty, anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and unemployment are well above the national and regional averages, especially among young adults. But these social ills are seen as at least as much a function of the management by government, both local and central, of the housing stock and resident population, as of the planning principles that informed the creation of such estates.[3] This mass housing, cheaply built on unsuitable sites, has served long past its intended lifespan. Under-maintenance and neglect of the housing stock have made the estates unpopular with residents and leaseholders alike, leading to their use as accommodation of last resort for the statutory homeless.

Residents of Firs and Bromford ascribe some of the anti-sociality in the area as arising from tensions between more stable and settled tenants and leaseholders, and the more transient populations of the towers, whose poor build-quality, lack of insulation and chronic damp problems made them all but unlettable. The council's habit of describing this "eastern corridor" into the city as one of "poverty and deprivation", has done no favours to the area's self-esteem or public image. A focus on the area's problems alone overlooks the positive. The residents of the Firs and Bromford estates describe a vibrant community spirit, and in the last decade the estates have been host to implacable community-led efforts to improve opportunities and social cohesion in the area—all against a backdrop of continuing cuts to social provision.

Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together

The Firs and Bromford Big Local group (Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together) was established in late 2011 and published its ten-year plan in 2012. It aimed to address negative perceptions and fears connected with the estate, as well as with the neglected public domain, and the lack of opportunities and leisure resources for young people. Initially focusing on people rather than place, the Big Local group developed an understanding of the Firs and Bromford communities using community research, conversation events and a Young Voice festival for local teenagers. By concentrating on cohesion and community building rather than place-making activities, the Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together in the main avoided the need to connect with the council. As they have progressed through their plan, the group have moved into the realm of the physical, creating a vision for the area where "…all feel welcome, all feel that they vbelong and all feel that they can flourish, whatever path has brought us to live together."

Creating an urban village

Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together are strongly united behind an urban village concept, where improved facilities and spaces will complement and sustain their current community development efforts, creating "an ecology of activity". Their intention is to develop two linked village centres, one in Firs and one in Bromford, which will become a focal point for the established projects, as well as a physical representation of the cohesive, resilient and flourishing community they are trying to develop.

[3] Boughton, J. (2018). Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing. Verso Books. – Ch. 10, "People Need Homes; These Homes Need People': 2010 to the Present'

Acknowledging the fact that "the bigger you get, the more you can't do it on your own," the group have recognised that future progress towards the realisation of a Firs & Bromford urban village will require them to work much more closely and collaboratively and with a wider group of stakeholders than they have needed to do thus far. Although currently paused, awaiting decisions regarding the specifics of the EA's flood plain work, there already exists an established process for discussing, if not managing, area-wide change. Residents and those driving change in the area have discussed ongoing plans and projects via a partners' group, a sub-group of the Big Local board, with membership from the Big Local, Birmingham Council (the housing and parks departments), the Environment Agency and the HS2 team. The Big Local hopes to use this arena to influence the council toward a more place-based approach to regeneration.

Formalising the group

Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together are now beginning to recognise that the strength of their current position can be boosted (and their place as an organisation of influence cemented) by becoming a constituted organisation. With a strong backing from the residents they represent, they are considering which institutional structures might provide them with the leverage they seek. In debating the possibilities of becoming a parish council, the group noted that the funding for a parish council is generated directly from the residents of the parish in the form of a council tax levy. While parish (or town) councils have many of the rights and responsibilities one would want for a community wishing to take more control over their neighbourhood, depending on levy-based funding is not an appealing option in an area experiencing poverty and deprivation. And they feel that their progress would be greatly slowed by the challenges of persuading their controlling authority, in this case Birmingham Council, to agree to releasing powers to them.

The group are now considering becoming a community land trust, underpinned by a community benefit society. This legal form enables funds to be created via community share offers, which would enable those with the ability to support the group financially to do so, without mandating council tax levies.

Developing partnerships

Firs & Bromford Neighbours Together know that they now need to develop strong relationships with influential individuals who support their endeavours if they are to achieve their future goals. They realise they will need to persuade the council of the value of their plans, so that they respond positively and collaboratively to their vision of the future Firs & Bromford Urban Village. Relations with the council are improving, and it was the council who advised the Big Local that leaning hard on the heritage aspects of the area might help unlock some of their urban village aspirations. And productive discussions with the EA regarding the impacts of the flood defence work on the social infrastructure in the area, in particular the loss of the local park, have shown that the EA is supportive of the Big Local's plans for the area.

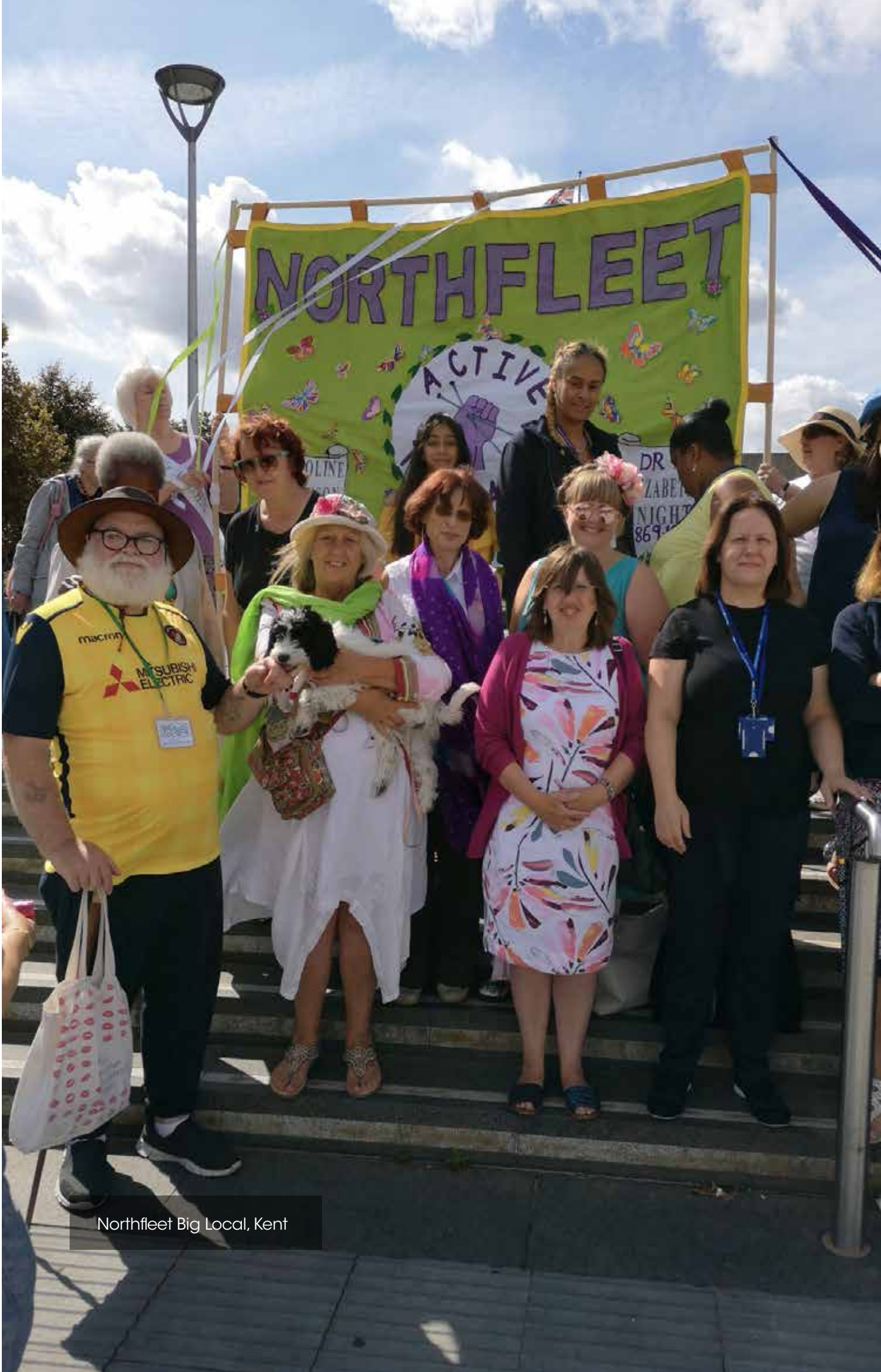
Northfleet Big Local

History and context

Northfleet is a small town located on the south bank of the Thames, close to Gravesend, Kent. Mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, Northfleet was named for the river Fleet, which was renamed the Ebbsfleet some time in the 17th century.

Northfleet has been host to metals refining and to the manufacture of pipes and cables; the presence of Northfleet Docks since the late 1700s both justified and supported these, offering transport links to far-flung destinations long before the existence of railways and heavy road haulage. Industrial production of concrete began at Northfleet around the turn of the 19th century, ending with the closure of the Lafarge plant in 2008. The old industries have gone the same way as the concrete works: closed down, demolished and re-designated as brownfield sites. Nonetheless, local residents retain a pride in the legacy of these industries which might seem at odds with their lack of glamour—the concrete works in particular is much missed, not just as a source of employment, but as a defining element of Northfleet's identity.

Northfleet has experienced the same slow decline that characterised the end of the century for so many industrial towns. The 21st century has seen considerable changes, however, with the opening of the high-speed rail link to the Channel tunnel and the Ebbsfleet International train station in 2007. Since then, the focus of the local economy has shifted toward the nearby Bluewater development, whose retail offer and infrastructural connections have outstripped Northfleet's amenities. Large-scale development continues with the regeneration of the Ebbsfleet valley and a proposed new garden city for 37,500 people.



Northfleet Big Local, Kent

Ebbsfleet Valley development

The Ebbsfleet garden city project is a behemoth—economically important, socially complex and exceptionally ambitious. Outline permission for redevelopment in the area was first granted under New Labour during the early 2000s, reviving the notion of the garden city. In 2015, and with local councils present on the board rather than leading the programme, the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation (EDC) was assigned to oversee the redevelopment process. The EDC's main aim is to raise the ambition of the development and deliver it at speed and with high quality.

The principles of garden cities were defined by Ebenezer Howard in the 1890's, arising from "a socialist movement for collective land reform where every citizen was to be a shareholder and where the provision of social infrastructure was a major consideration in the design of places."[4] These principles are not particular to socialism or, indeed, to garden cities, and have been championed as effective practice by many other proponents of community stewardship. The more recent community land trust model shares many of the garden-city principles of community ownership and management. But attempts to retrofit these precepts into the Ebbsfleet context is an enormous challenge for both the EDC and the communities they are working with.

Northfleet Big Local

Northfleet Big Local was established in 2012 and has nurtured a number of successful projects and initiatives in the area, developing social enterprises, providing skills and opportunities for the unemployed and hosting arts initiatives, youth club projects and community social events. It has reclaimed and repurposed derelict sites for community use, and now manages Northfleet Central, a community hub that hosts many of the local initiatives and community groups.

Despite considerable deprivation and increasing anti-social behaviour in the area, residents of Northfleet describe a warm, friendly, supportive place. But they say they are greatly concerned about the pending Ebbsfleet development and its potential impact on Northfleet. They see the opportunities the Ebbsfleet development can bring to the area, but, without a strong voice to counter the strength of the development company, they fear that the proposed changes will destroy the identity of their area that they have worked so hard to improve.

Loss of identity

The identity of Northfleet and its surrounding areas has been under attack for some time. The renaming of Gravesend and Northfleet football club to Ebbsfleet United in 2007 was seen as an erasure of identity by some Northfleet residents. As one resident stated, "This is Northfleet, not Ebbsfleet—let's not lose our identity."[5] Residents also raised concerns about the plans for the Northfleet north area which focus on the erection of riverside

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2014/mar/17/ebbsfleet-garden-city-george-osborne. (Accessed 7th March 2019).

[5] Comment made by Northfleet resident at workshop

apartments on the embankment. The EDC explained that 30% of the apartments would be available at affordable rent levels (around 80% of the market value) or via a shared-ownership package. Residents felt this could impact on the ability of local people to stay in the area, with the proposed new housing reflecting badly on the look of the existing estate. Residents were also concerned about how new and existing residents might integrate, and about the provision of social infrastructure.

Engagement and co-design

Community engagement and community stewardship of assets are fundamental to the garden city ethos. But Northfleet residents feel that the way the Ebbsfleet development has transpired has so far prevented any authentic co-design between themselves and the developers. In 2016, planning consents had already been granted for 11,200 homes; with fundamental decisions having already been made, residents believe there is little scope for community involvement in design. This has led to a real "…concern things are being done the wrong way round,"[6] echoing the words of architect Sam Jaco, who noted that, "Planning has become completely reactive rather than propositional and doesn't ask what kind of places we want to live in."7

As John Lewis, CEO of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, says: "True success can only be achieved if people feel connected to where they live and enjoy where they are. This is why the focus on social infrastructure is critical in the creation of new places."[8] For the Northfleet residents, the feeling that they are unable to truly influence decisions about where they live is the root problem with the new garden city

Social infrastructure

As with other estates around the country, social infrastructure in Northfleet is limited. When asked to create a vision of the future Northfleet, residents and Big Local representatives emphasised the need for better facilities, for good social infrastructure, and for affordable leisure opportunities. At the top of their wish list was "a community building, purpose-built for needs of the whole community."[9] Promises and commitments from EDC to provide permanent social infrastructure were seen by some residents as tokenistic, with one person noting, "They (EDC) come and see us, but it feels more like box-ticking than anything."[10] This distrust is compounded by what residents feel is a lack of opportunities to input into project decision-making. The EDC has attended Big Local meetings and committed to providing community facilities. But residents are keen to point out that new buildings alone do not comprise true social infrastructures, particularly in the absence of resources and staff.

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/04/ebbsfleet-garden-city-richard-rogers-critics. Accessed 24th January 2019.

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/04/ebbsfleet-garden-city-richard-rogers-critics. Accessed 5th February 2019.

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2012/nov/30/nick-clegg-garden-cities-planning-scheme. Accessed 5th February 2019.

[9] Resident comment at workshop

[10] Resident comment at workshop

Valuing community voice

The EDC has involved Northfleet residents and other local stakeholders in a range of conversations, projects and events, including their Healthy New Town programme and a Community Partners group. It has supported a food growing project at Northfleet and invested in environmental improvements and walking routes to Ebbsfleet International station. But what residents feel the EDC is misunderstanding is the value of community, of partnership working rather than being "done to". When the EDC demonstrated their commitment to residents with an offer of financial investment for a community café, it believed it was doing the right thing, that providing funds for the café aligned with the residents' stated desire to reduce obesity. But residents declined the offer, arguing that such an enterprise would not have a great impact on the local obesity issue and was not something they were interested in pursuing. The residents appreciated the offer but would rather be engaged in the co-production of their area than be in receipt of charity.

There is clearly a growing understanding between the EDC and the Northfleet Big Local of one another's aims and objectives. The Big Local is keen to influence the new developments and the EDC is keen to strengthen its relationship with residents. Both parties hope that their relationship can develop into one of mutual support and trust, and Northfleet Big Local has been invited to sit on the Ebbsfleet Community Partners group. Such a collaboration between the EDC, residents and stakeholders from the wider Ebbsfleet area may provide residents with the ability to better shape their own neighbourhood.

Building trust, working in partnership

What the community at Northfleet is demonstrating is not an outright rejection of change, nor is it fear of change. As one resident said, "Northfleet felt like a village in the past. Change is welcome but we'd like to retain the village feel and identity."[11] Residents have expressed a desire to be respected, to be authentically involved, and to choose to keep their identity in a changing world. The EDC has, in turn, stated its commitment to support rather than threaten the identity of Northfleet, in particular through its intention to retain Northfleet postcodes. With the continued development of the relationship between EDC and the Northfleet Big Local will, hopefully, come a co-produced future vision for Northfleet and a collaborative approach to achieving it.

[11] Resident comment at workshop

Peoples Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH)

History and context

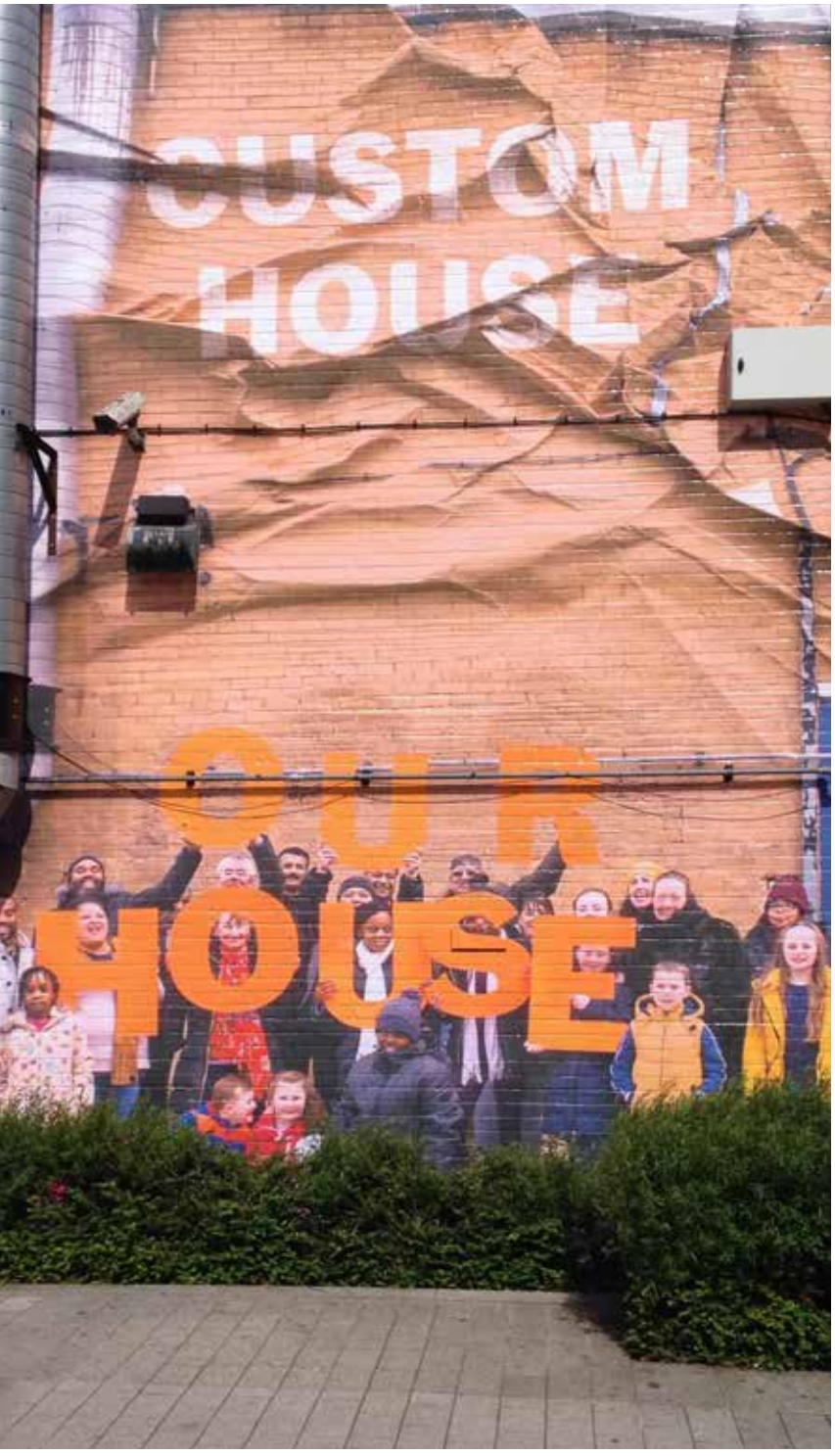
The electoral ward of Custom House is close to the southern edge of the London borough of Newham, an area which for decades was dominated by the Royal (formerly Victoria) Docks along the north bank of the Thames. Newham is still considered to be outer London for the allocation of government funds, resulting in a significant reduction of income by comparison to other boroughs with similar demographics. This sense that the area is just outside of the capital has arguably applied since its first flush of growth in the Victorian boom years.

In the late 1850s, Canning Town, just to the west of Custom House, was a haven not only for noxious industries such as tanning and rendering, but also for noxious practices in speculative slum-building, with many rows of cheaply built brick-and-mortar terraces, and little or no sanitation infrastructure to speak of. Nonetheless, the population of the borough increased by more than a factor of ten by the turn of the century.

The docklands were hammered badly during the blitz, with 85% of building stock eradicated from Canning Town during the bombing. As a result, the outer docklands were among the sites chosen for a post-war, welfare-state settlement of undifferentiated developments, high-rise point-blocks and system building. But with the decline of the docks as a source of employment in the `70s and `80s, and a shift away from manufacturing to a service economy, the very jobs that had brought the area to life in the first place were all but stripped away. The 1990s saw the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) creeping steadily eastwards from the eventual successful Canary Wharf. The ExCel exhibition centre to the south of Custom House opened shortly after the turn of the century.

Regeneration of Custom House

The council's ambition was to redevelop Custom House with no net loss in social housing. But Newham is among the most financially and demographically stressed councils in the country. It is engaged in a struggle to balance its moral obligations with the requirements of a legal, political and financial framework that presents multiple obstacles to doing so. And it is working against the dynamics of the London housing market, as well as the financial system more broadly.



Impact on the community

In 2007, regular newsletters to residents claimed the planned regeneration would bring benefits such as reduced crime, reduced welfare spend, and improvements to health and wellbeing. But when early plans stalled, residents were already being moved out of properties earmarked for redevelopment, and Newham Council made the ill-fated decision to sublet around 300 properties to housing-management company Tando. Residents moving into these properties were mostly unaware that they had entered housing limbo: off the housing list, and into a tenancy agreement with a private company, rather than with the council. Complaints against Tando and its parent company, Omega, include rent-hiking and failure to maintain the homes under their control.[12] In January 2019, Omega (now Mears) tenants are still in technically temporary accommodation, and the so-far successful campaign for the fair treatment of these tenants is still being championed by PEACH.

The People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH)

PEACH Big Local was founded in April 2013, as Newham Council turned its attention from planning Canning Town's regeneration to Custom House. The group is made up of local residents and their efforts have undeniably influenced the council's change of approach in relation to resident rights and community voice. PEACH has established a cooperative cleaning company, agitated for repairs

[12] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/09/families-live-in-victorian-squalor-taxpayers-pay-housing-act-east-end-public-properties. Accessed 23rd March 2019

and maintenance in decaying council properties, and funded initiatives around work, education and health issues in the area. It has founded a community land trust, secured additional sources of funding and support, and made plans to own as well as manage community assets. It has also committed to fully engaging with the regeneration process, to ensure the residents of the area have a recognised role in the new and ambitious co-production process that, it believes, will renew regeneration plans for Custom House.

PEACH's community-organising method explicitly places relationship-building between residents, team building, and community leadership at the heart of the process. This means that residents are in a position to take collective action and conduct negotiations in the interests (and with the trust) of the whole community. As one member of the PEACH group stated, "The community-organising method is the bedrock of all the issues we address and the reason that we have enough power to get a (meaningful) seat at the table."

Alternative regeneration plan

Since its inception, PEACH has built its capacity to engage in regeneration, becoming proficient in procurement and commissioning procedures and in the development of viability studies. It has created a community base of organisational and urban design skills, on its own and in collaboration with architects and planners, and co-drafted the architectural brief for the regeneration plan alongside the council.

Having realised that attempting to gain community control of the regeneration process would be more likely to succeed than trying to fight it, PEACH has adopted the council's figures for demolition and new build as its own. It was keen to drive the change instead of waiting to be asked what it thought of council-led proposals, and so developed a community-led, alternative regeneration plan for the future of the area. Its intention was for residents of Custom House to be involved in regeneration decisions, rather than being the recipients of planned change.

Innovative approach to masterplanning

To embed a community voice in the regeneration process, PEACH developed a two-way, knowledge-sharing approach between community organisers and architects, so that the community organisers gained, amongst other skills, a working knowledge of basic architectural principles, whilst the architects themselves were taught, and required to practise, community-organising skills. Instead of separating community-organiser and architect responsibilities, PEACH embedded knowledge sharing and capability building in both roles. All those involved were paid the same rate. To approach payment in this way is quite radical, particularly when, traditionally, architectural skills are valued in much higher financial terms than those of community organisers, despite both roles being of equal utility in the context of regeneration.

Releasing power

PEACH's history of effective direct action has demonstrated the residents' desire to gain power for the advancement of their hopes and needs. But even the most collaborative councils are reluctant to share, let alone release power. More often, responsibility, rather than decision-making power, is relocated to communities; but responsibility without authority or resource can be oppressive and is often the reason that community groups run out of steam. PEACH recognises this and aims to develop a working arrangement with the council where the community is formally organised, recognised and resourced as an equal partner. They recognise that this moves them away from their current, mainly advocatory, role into that of regeneration partner.

PEACH has displayed a long-standing desire to work operationally with the council, but they are now realising that their struggles to gain traction with council officers is, in some ways, comparable to the challenges those same council officers face in gaining the autonomy to work differently in support of PEACH's objectives. Having a community take the lead or even partner on a project of the scale of the Custom House regeneration, however impressive its financials or proposed impact, is a huge risk for the council. It is understandable (although not entirely justifiable) that council officers struggle to progress on some of the partnership suggestions PEACH has made. This aversion to risk was clear when PEACH was challenged on the level to which it represented the entire community within the red line of the regeneration plan. There is still some considerable work for PEACH, council officers and elected members to do before enough trust and understanding can be developed between them to enable true power-sharing in relation to regeneration planning.

Developing partnerships

It could be said that PEACH's greatest past achievement is that they have persisted, taken every opportunity they were offered to step into the process, learned the ropes, and played their part as community advocates (by which we mean the community advocating for itself) to the fullest extent they were able. Their future achievements may well be founded on their ability to move from a position of advocacy to one of collaboration partner, where the nuances and complexity of power relations and decision making within a council structure may challenge their intention to increase their level of participation. If PEACH can leverage their understanding of the situation, and the council can meet them halfway, they may well be able to take their position as the co-producers of change for the benefit of Custom House residents.

What's happened since?

At the time of writing this case study, Newham Council's ambition was to redevelop Custom House with no net loss in social housing. However, the new Mayor of Newham council has ambitious goals to provide housing for residents, including a stated goal to for 50% of all new housing to be let at social rent and owned by the council[13]. This is a significant difference, as before it was 17.5% of all new housing.

[13] https://www.rokhsana.org/about/pledges/. Accessed 22nd September, 2019.

SO18 Big Local

History and context

To the north-east of Southampton on the south coast of England, Townhill Park sits beneath the flight path of the city's airport. The area was once the private estate of Nathaniel Middleton, who purchased it in 1787 after making his fortune in the British East India Company. The land moved to the ownership of Southampton City Council in 1948, and the Townhill Park suburban estate was officially opened in 1959 by no less a luminary than the comedian and actor Benny Hill. Like with many such estates, a combination of socioeconomic changes and neglect over the following years resulted in a sense of decline and decay, with social challenges arguably peaking in a series of street brawls between local gangs in 2009.[14]

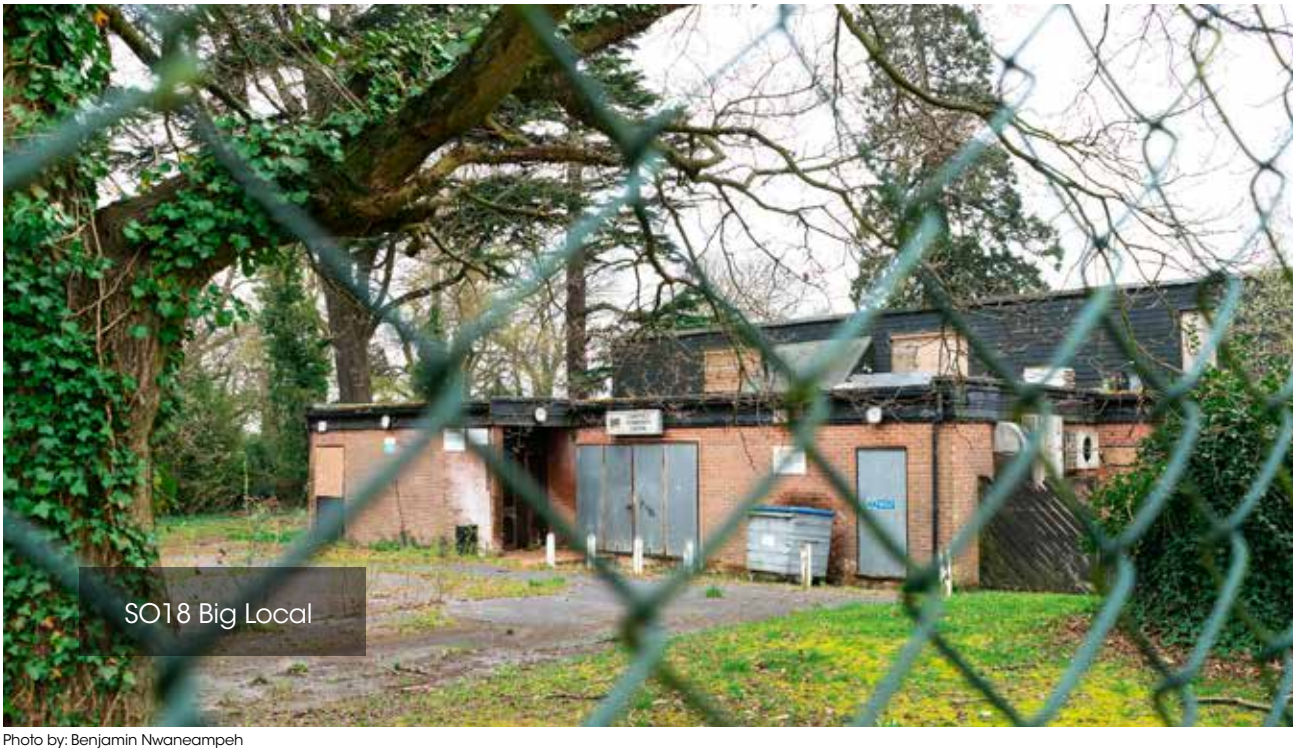


Photo by: Benjamin Nwaneampeh

[14] https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/4440610.Man_left_with_stab_wounds_after_gang_fight_on_estate. Accessed 17th January 2019.

Townhill Park regeneration timeline

2011-2012: Regeneration plans for Townhill Park were already being floated in 2011, and in early 2012 plans to "demolish 428 'ageing' homes" and build 675 new flats and houses, of which more than half would be "affordable",[15] were green-lit by the then Conservative-majority council. In May 2012, the majority shifted to Labour. Despite concerns from the scrutiny committee that rents of more than 450 homes "would almost double" as a result,[16] the new council promised to "follow through" on the redevelopment proposed by its predecessors. The issue of redevelopment had become a party-political point of debate, and the council was under pressure to commit to the regeneration. But national housing and welfare policies made it increasingly difficult to find a viable model that would sustain the availability of social housing in the area.

2013-14: SO18 Big Local was formed in April 2013, against a backdrop of continued controversy regarding the proposed regeneration plans. The 2012 masterplan,[17] developed with residents from all tenures using a Planning for Real methodology, went on show in September 2014. Although some concerns were raised, resident feedback from consultation events was approving of the designs.

2015-16: By October 2015, the first phase of regeneration was halted by the very public refusal of a small number of tenants and leaseholders to move. And, with the impending 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act dictating a one per cent social rent reduction, coupled with the HRA cap and related spending cuts, councillors were arguing that the project was no longer viable, forcing them to reassess their plans. In May 2016, the newly commissioned consultants, Capita, amended the plan and submitted a formal planning application for the Townhill Park regeneration. Further consultation took place over the summer, registering broad support, particularly for a proposed "village green".

2017: In March 2017, more than two years after residents of the first blocks due for demolition had been moved from their homes, plans for the newly labelled Plot 1 were formally approved and a contractor appointed. In June 2017, the council proposed new decommissioning and acquisition policies, and announced a further round of consultation. However, with the inclusion of the two city-wide policies, this consultation was not targeted at residents of Townhill Park but at the whole city. All citizens of Southampton were now deciding the fate of the estate. Only 94 people responded to questions on the Townhill Park regeneration, and with 49 (52%) of them voting to proceed, the council agreed to continue with changes to both the policies and to Townhill Park. Work finally began on Plot 1 in September 2017, with completion slated for March 2019.

[15] https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/11486386.bright-future-for-southampton-estate. Accessed 17th January 2019.

[16] https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/11487668.Parking_a_major_concern_of_housing_estate_plans. Accessed 17th January 2019.

[17] http://www.southampton.gov.uk/modernGov/documents/s13609/Townhill%20Park%20-%20MRD.pdf. Accessed 17th January 2019.

Consultation and communication

Although the council took a participatory approach to engagement in developing the original plans for the estate, the 2017 consultation was not so well received. This latest consultation was open to all of Southampton and focused on proposed housing policy changes. There was no direct contact with Townhill Park residents, and some felt that there had not been sufficient opportunity for the community to engage in the process. The 2017 consultation was also dominated by owner occupiers and leaseholders, with residents noting that the opinions of those who own their properties may have carried greater weight than those of social tenants. As late as June 2018, residents were still registering enquiries with SO18 Big Local on fundamental questions such as compensation, their right to return to the area and the lettings policy, which suggests that the council's communications may have failed to reach all Townhill Park residents, or failed to address their anxieties.

Insufficient housing supply

The intention of the 2017 revamp of the council's decommissioning and acquisition policies had been to provide clarity for all concerned, but instead, the changes produced what appeared to be conflicting or contradictory incentives to tenants for voluntary relocation and downsizing. Members of SO18 reported that this created confusion for residents, and considerable challenges for council officers attempting to manage housing allocations.

At the start of the regeneration process, tenants were expected to make their own arrangements to move from the blocks due for demolition. With a very small team attempting to manage the regeneration project, limited support was available, but there were homes to move into. However, economic and policy changes since the start of the regeneration, such as the extension of the right to buy and reduction in social rent, have so negatively impacted housing supply that, at time of writing, there were virtually no homes available for tenants to relocate to, with no one to two-bedroom homes on the lettings system, and only 22 properties available across the whole city.

In October 2017, a resident liaison officer was appointed to help council tenants relocate, which has been reported as having a positive impact on tenant wellbeing. However, the city-wide lack of available homes to move tenants into, an inability to demolish blocks while tenants remain, and a lack of land on which to build new homes without demolition has created a vicious cycle in which housing supply on the estate cannot be increased. There is no sign that this seemingly insurmountable supply issue, while clearly visible to both residents and council staff, has been considered as a reason to slow or halt the regeneration. As one workshop participant noted, "(The council is) limping along trying to keep going with decant and demolition at the same time as trying to find a financial model which could deliver on the two sites."

Impacts on community cohesion

Residents are acutely aware that such extreme housing-supply challenges are creating additional adverse effects on their lives. With empty properties, Townhill Park is one of very few options for housing families in need, and many have been temporarily moved into the area. Existing long-term residents, whilst concerned for the wellbeing of these families, feel the community is being fundamentally altered from relatively stable to overwhelmingly transient. A recent council agreement to prioritise those being moved from Townhill Park over those in the greatest housing need may help to retain a sense of community, with residents more likely to be able to remain in the area. But the wait for a three-bed home is currently nine years, and, as one resident noted, to all intents and purposes, the social housing tenants of Townhill Park are now jumping that very slow-moving queue.

A number of residents have spoken of the toll this protracted project has taken on them and other residents of Townhill Park. They feel the value of community cohesion has been ignored, with most of the residents from the initial block clearance having moved out of the area entirely. One resident explained that remaining tenants have had their right to buy withheld indefinitely, and their life plans put on hold or changed irrevocably. They feel that the council has done little to acknowledge the distress, frustration and anger that its actions have caused. Residents have also noted that despite the initial masterplan having a place focus, changes in the council's approach to neighbourhoods mean that a place perspective no longer exists, and that interdependencies between housing, public services, schools, leisure, business, transport and infrastructure have been overlooked.

SO18 Big Local's involvement

The loss of council staff experienced in delivering large-scale social housing projects, and the contextual circumstances beyond the council's control, have combined to create significant challenges for residents as a result of the Townhill Park regeneration; and SO18 Big Local has acted to address some of these challenges. It successfully acted as a community- engagement partner in the more recent stages of the Townhill Park regeneration and has organised events to ensure it continues to be in touch with local issues. It has held drop-in sessions and engagement activities on the village green proposal, and provided Planning Aid[18] support for residents to enable them to effectively respond to planning applications. By initiating a multi-stakeholder regeneration forum, SO18 Big Local has created a feedback- and information loop, from consultations back to the local community, as well as providing an essential place-based focus for the regeneration programme. With the considerable challenges associated with the Townhill Park regeneration, the local authority has persisted in developing what it considers to be an intensely valuable relationship with SO18 Big Local, which in turn has successfully positioned itself as a critical friend and on-the-ground signal-booster for the council. It has very effectively worked with, rather than against, the council, successfully channelling residents' wishes to a receptive audience. Despite political changes, policy amendments and funding challenges, the relationship which has developed between the SO18 Big Local and Southampton Council has provided an essential and effective point of contact for an overstretched council, and strong representation for the remaining Townhill Park community.

[18] https://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-aid/ . Accessed 16th January 2019.

SO18 Big Local continues to work with the community to achieve its Big Local objectives, whilst linking the estate residents into the regeneration project. The power of this parallel approach is demonstrated beautifully by its plans to create a Mosaic Way, which will locate a number of small mosaics, created by the community, around the estate. At the same time as contributing to the cohesion of the Townhill Park community, SO18 Big Local continues to act as a vital conduit for residents' concerns and questions as the regeneration work progresses.

Welsh House Farm Big Local

History and context

Since the 2018 redrawing of the political borders, the Welsh House Farm estate has become a part of the Harborne Ward of Birmingham City Council; before 2018, it formed part of the Quinton ward. Up until the end of the 19th century, Quinton was still a village, featuring two small coal mines and some nail-making industry, but was mostly surrounded by agricultural land, which was also known as Ridgacre. Though linked to Birmingham economically, Quinton was not incorporated into the city until 1909. Early developments were largely residential; it's claimed this was due to the influence of well-heeled residents of Edgbaston who, being down-wind of Quinton, didn't want the stink of industry spoiling their air.

Residential development in the area started in earnest in the interwar years with the Ridgacre estate. This was made up of medium-sized, semi-detached houses and built up during the 1930s and 1940s until the second world war intervened. After the war, the 1950s saw the construction of council housing typical of the period, which sprawled steadily westward toward Harborne. The Welsh House Farm estate, predominantly comprising low-rise housing, but also featuring three, ten-storey point blocks, followed in the early 1960s. The M5 (and the expressways that feed into it) were built to the west of Quinton later in the decade, recessed into the landscape so as not to be visible from the village.

The Welsh House Farm estate gained a certain notoriety during the noughties for decline and anti-social behaviour, with police stop-and-search and dispersals orders and a 9pm curfew. There was a sudden upsurge of interest in the area from the Conservative party around 2008, when a representative from the We Love Welsh House Farm community regeneration scheme featured in the party's annual conference agenda. This led to Gisela Stuart, the local MP for the area at the time, accusing the Conservatives of hijacking long-term efforts to regenerate the area for the sake of winning votes.

Community experiences

During our research, residents of Welsh House Farm described the estate as "lawless", blaming a combination of reduced community policing, minimum maintenance of the public realm, and empty and temporarily let accommodation for a recent rise in anti-social behaviour. They told of homes that were ageing and inadequately insulated, with black mould a common problem. The three 'New Zealand' tower blocks

Welsh House Farm Big Local

had recently been redecorated, but this was seen as a case of, quite literally, painting over the problems rather than fixing them. There are four more tower blocks—St Albans, Tintern, Stoneleigh and Netley—which, residents state, are also visibly in a very bad state of repair.

Stories told by residents demonstrated a prevailing sense of powerlessness, with their attempts to improve the estate, such as installing cameras to monitor anti-social behaviour, being met with a `cease-and-desist' level of response from the council. Some residents felt that such responses from the council had led to a reluctance to report housing issues. Digital inclusion was also a challenge for some, because broadband is expensive or entirely unavailable in many homes. This makes accessing council services difficult for many, and even prohibitive, as local government moves to online service-provision as its primary communication channel. A number of residents reported that they were unable to access important information or connect with the council online, exacerbating their reluctance to report issues.

Welsh House Farm Big Local

Welsh House Farm residents are enthusiastic and keen to take charge of local assets. They have reclaimed and reconditioned shared green spaces, and organised small-scale arts and festival events aimed at bringing joy to the area. As with many similar community groups, Welsh House Farm Big Local is almost entirely dependent on its council where developing assets are concerned. Residents explained that the relationship between the Welsh House Farm Big Local group and the council has been positive and productive in some situations and challenging in others. For instance, the converted council house the group uses as a community space is being leased to it at a reduced rate; however, an attempt by the group to claim a small plot adjacent to the nearby golf course for a community garden was stalled by the offer of a prohibitively expensive lease.

Some of the council's officers are supportive of the Welsh House Farm group and have made efforts to help them find an allotment plot, which is now used for the production of fresh fruit and vegetables. But the council is not homogeneous and, with an electorate extending to over a million people, is considerably overstretched. As the Big Local is discovering, different internal departments function differently. Where one may be supportive and engaged, another may come across as more authoritarian and entirely delivery focused.

Varying council approaches

Residents described two different approaches taken by the council, exhibiting contrasting levels of engagement and with very different effects. On the positive side, a set of seven modular housing pods has been planned alongside the Big Local. Residents have been given an opportunity to debate the location and the possibility of land being re-purposed from garden space to integrated public realm. This would enable the council to improve some of the problem areas which are attracting anti-social behaviour.

This ability to enter into a dialogue with the council has empowered residents, enabling them to take some control over their area while integrating council plans with their own vision of the estate. In contrast, however, new homes are being built elsewhere on the estate (Selcroft Avenue) without the involvement of the Big Local, or indeed any engagement with the residents at all, except a letter to inform those living nearby of the pending development. Residents feel that this has intensified the feelings of powerlessness experienced by some. They feel this approach has undone some of the trust-building work undertaken by the officers involved in the housing-pod project on Capern Grove.

Some departments of the council may be demonstrating collaborative ways of working, thus building trust while empowering the Big Local group to achieve its aims of improving its neighbourhood. But some residents feel the lack of consistency in the council's engagement with them may be eroding confidence in the council, as well as their belief in their own ability to influence change.

Autonomy and authority

The Welsh House Farm Big Local has experienced difficulties in engaging council officers with the autonomy and authority to make decisions which support its ideas. In particular, it has struggled to find the right officers to help it better manage local assets. For instance, the Harborne Day Centre on the estate is unused during evenings and weekends. There is also the Keystone nursery, which is said to be massively under-utilised and shut most of the time. The Welsh House Farm Big Local has been pressing the council to allow it access to the building, so that it could make more effective use of the facility out of hours in order to run the activities, events and groups for which it currently has little or no space. The limited progress made has required the intervention of an officer whose remit is not children's social care or facilities management, but who could nonetheless see the inefficiencies and lost opportunities in the situation. Without that officer stepping out of their defined role, the Big Local group would still be no closer to maximising the use of an asset which could be of huge value to its community.

No focus on place

Without a community or place focus, it appears that council officers find working in a place-based way just as difficult as community groups do when they try to engage a council officer of influence with the authority to make decisions on all aspects of their area. The Welsh House Farm group has been forced to take a differentiated view of the council, and to recognise that its influencing needs to extend beyond a single point of contact. And in the absence of any such single actor, officers must step out of their prescribed roles and take it upon themselves to recognise, and where possible, act to maximise the use of community assets and support the communities for whom they work.

Welsh House Farm residents feel that what they perceive to be the council's inefficient asset management—which may be attributed, at least in part, to the way in which the council functions at neighbourhood level—has created an even stronger desire on the community's part to step in and do things themselves. They feel the challenges they have experienced have been associated more with their inability to access and maximise the use of much-needed community assets than with the impact of pending regeneration. But their concerns about plans to build new homes, and their lack of a voice within some elements of the planning process, are the same concerns experienced by those anticipating much larger redevelopment schemes on their doorstep. The scale of the project may be smaller, but the effect on residents is the same.

Learning from experience

These stories provide an insight into the experiences of communities and their involvement with regeneration and development. The examples sit alongside two other resources; a guide to regeneration and development for communities and lessons from communities.

All three documents can be found at localtrust.org.uk/developing-potential

About Blue Chula

Blue Chula is a consultancy specialising in community development & engagement, collaboration & partnership working, research, and change & programme management. Working across all sectors and at all levels they aim to build on what is working, to bring out skills and abilities and to share stories that help people build strong and trusting relationships. They are passionate about empowering communities to make their lives better, whether that means making better places, better organisations or better partnerships.

bluechula.co.uk

About Local Trust

Local Trust was established in 2012 to deliver Big Local, a unique programme that puts residents across the country in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. Funded by a £200m endowment from the Big Lottery Fund - the largest ever single commitment of lottery funds – Big Local provides in excess of £1m of long-term funding over 10-15 years to each of 150 local communities, many of which face major social and economic challenges but have missed out on statutory and lottery funding in the past.

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