

Council estates: why demolition is anything but the solution

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In early 2016, the Prime Minister [announced plans](#) for the demolition of 100 large, run-down and difficult to manage council estates. [Anne Power](#) argues demolition not only doesn't solve housing and social problems, but in fact deepens them. Here, she outlines the hidden costs of the process, and explains why infilling and upgrading is what the government should actually be looking at, not demolition.



Days before David Cameron's announcement of the estate demolition plan, Savills estate agents, in a [report](#) to the Cabinet Office, argued for restoring London's street patterns by "regenerating and intensifying" large housing estates, adding 50 per cent more homes. Demolition is their favoured option. Yet the report explicitly excludes the cost of demolition – around £50,000 per home. It also excludes the cost of rehousing the tenants. The report therefore undermines the case for demolition by failing to count the direct and indirect costs of destroying homes.



Why demolition is not the answer

Demolition of poor housing earned a bad name for itself in the 1960s and '70s when it swept away whole communities. And although Savills state that tenants will not be displaced, it is not clear how they will be protected. The government is offering a pitifully small fund of £145,000,000 – even though the demolition costs alone would be £5 billion. According to the most successful regeneration developers, the numbers simply do not stack up for building replacement social housing, particularly since government funding cuts have significantly reduced the capacity to

build affordable housing.

Together with these costs, there is also the human dimension. Demolition is a hugely destabilising, clumsy, and laborious process, as the existing tenants are “in the way”. Tenants will be frightened by the insecurity, the higher rents, the community upheaval, the vague promise of moving out somewhere, then having the option to return without knowing when or where. Tenants are also affected by the degrading press headlines about riots, drug gangs, criminals and scroungers, which end up presenting entire communities as “hopeless cases”, if not perpetrators of our worst social ills.

Together, hidden and undeclared costs in demolishing occupied estates include:

- Rehousing costs. While displaced tenants wait for somewhere to live, there might be higher reliance on the private rented sector, there might also be higher homelessness rates, and higher housing benefit bills;
- The time-lag in emptying a large estate. This is in the region of 5-10 years, and means that many properties will stand empty for long periods, blighting a much wider area and causing schools, shops and other services to become fragile and sometimes even close;
- The loss of housing capacity in the estate. During the emptying and rebuilding process, there could be a net loss of maybe 500 homes a year during the long redevelopment phase of each estate;
- Displaced families might end up in worse homes since council stocks are shrinking;
- An increase in crime and vandalism while properties remain empty. There is also a risk of arson, theft of piping, wiring and radiators from those empty flats, causing more police action and higher security costs. It is in such conditions that on a Southwark estate, long targeted for demolition, that [Damilola Taylor](#) was murdered;
- The biggest cash cost is that of replacement housing, which at “affordable rents” (i.e. 80 per cent of market value) is *never* affordable for low-income families in London. High service charges for rich buyers inevitably raise service charges for low-income tenants. With housing benefit restrictions and cuts, these replacement homes will not be affordable for social tenants.

What’s the answer?

If Savills’ core proposal of slow, long-term, investment in low-cost renting allows existing tenants to remain in the community, with new neighbours through a process of densification and upgrading, rather than demolition, then it is possible to fit more homes into existing estates, as they argue.

Many large council estates built in the 1960s and ’70s are laid out in ways that do not maximise land use; the layout is sometimes unattractive, though they invariably house far more viable communities than Cameron recognises. So they have great potential for upgrading through retrofit, using Savills’ proposal for street densification. Infill building can create a more traditional street pattern within an estate, as Savills advocate. Converting empty street level spaces into flats, shops and community hubs also creates a lively street atmosphere. The density of existing estates can be increased by at least 50 per cent in this way while retaining the existing homes and community, as work on some large London estates has shown.

Established council estates can offer decent conditions, satisfied tenants, community stability, well-maintained buildings, high density, additional infill buildings and community facilities. Edward Woods estate in Hammersmith and Fulham meets all these conditions, while housing nearly 2000 almost entirely low-income council tenants. This was achieved through three 23-storey concrete blocks and a large number of medium-rise 6-storey blocks with some infill new housing. An energy-saving retrofit and upgrading was carried out on the estate with tenants in situ during 2012-2014. It took three years and cost vastly less than demolition and rebuild, while retaining the existing low-income community. The tenants, the council, the government and Rockwool, who provides the insulation, are all delighted with the result. It is about ‘High Rise Hope’!

Adding homes to plug the unused spaces in estates creates both street frontages and additional homes. This increases the social mix in low-income areas and can pay for itself. Even high-density, high-rise, poor estates offer myriad opportunities for attractive infill. In Tower Hamlets, East London Homes, a local transfer housing association, has built infill flats for sale between blocks, replacing the bridges that previously linked the council flats. The flats make the estate even denser. But they are attractive to young workers able to buy at a modest cost and looking for a truly urban lifestyle. They blend in well with the existing blocks, and the new residents have blended with the existing tenants. This has improved the overall appearance of the estate and raised the morale of the whole community.

Back to Cameron's plans, the main mistake is the attempt to address poverty and social problems through estate demolition. The disruption, instability, uncertainty, blight and area damage it causes mean that thousands of children's life chances will be threatened. Parents will keep their children indoors, for fear of trouble in the blighted, decaying environment. Older people will not want to move and stress within families will intensify. It is hard to see how living through such a nightmare over ten or more years can be justified as "transforming the life chances of the poorest in our society". If politicians listen, the tidal wave of hostility to demolition should turn the tide in favour of renovation and infilling to large estates with a mixture of protecting property and helping people in order to 'restore London's streets'.

About the Author

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