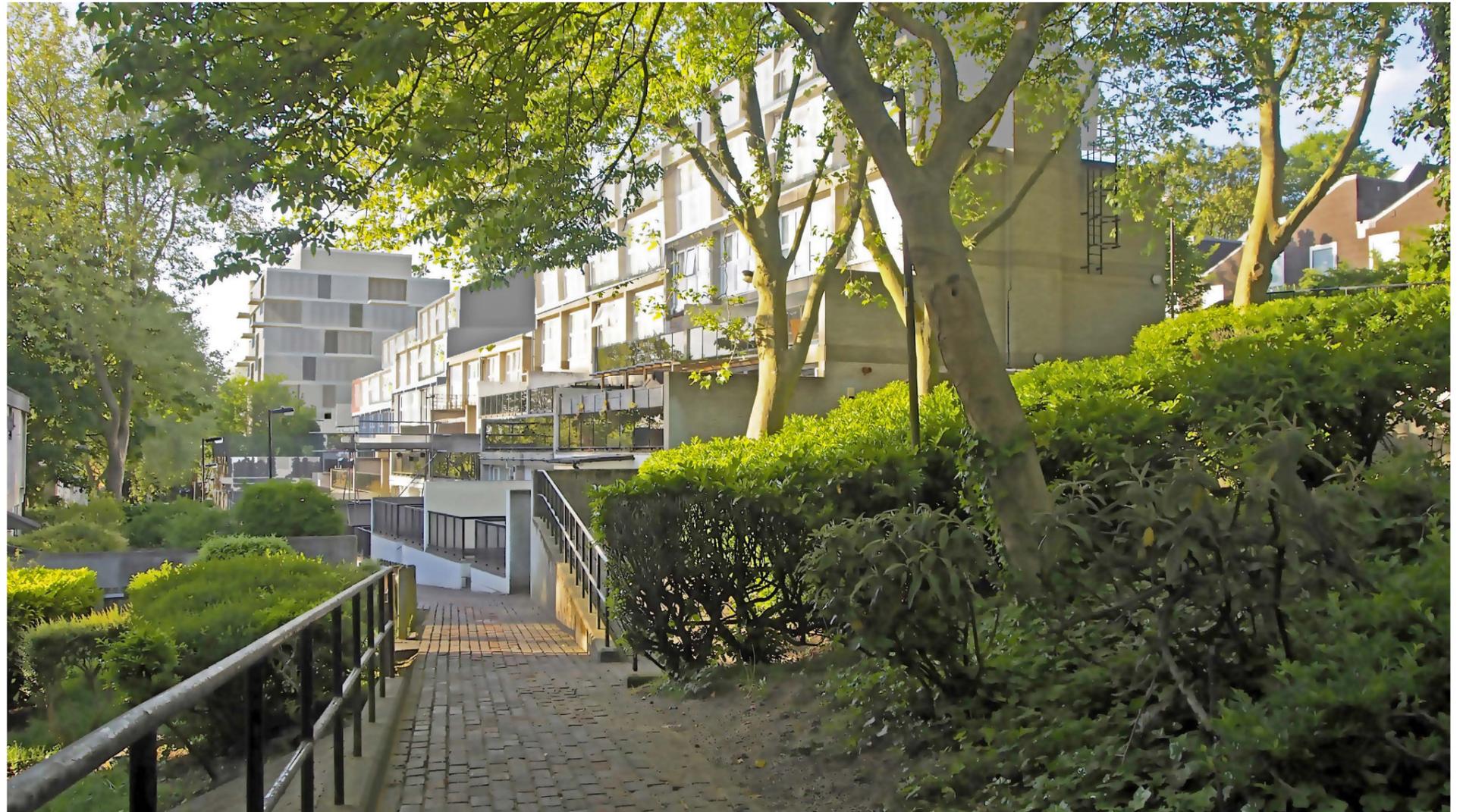


# Central Hill

## 2. Criteria for Estate Demolition



## A Case Study in Estate Regeneration

# Central Hill: Criteria for Estate Demolition

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# ASH response to Lambeth Council

In October 2012, Lambeth Cabinet agreed the development of a Lambeth Estate Regeneration Programme, according to which any council estate meeting one or more of the following criteria would be eligible for demolition:

1. 'Where the costs of delivering the Lambeth Housing Standard would be too expensive and would not be good value for money.'
2. 'Where the Lambeth Housing Standard works would, in themselves, not address the fundamental condition of the homes nor address many of the wider social and economic problems faced by residents.'
3. 'Where the wider benefits from regeneration would justify the investment. This includes where the existing estate is relatively low-density and where there is an opportunity to create additional much needed new homes.'

It is typical of Lambeth council's cavalier approach to estate demolition that the text of these criteria, which will determine the futures of thousands of borough residents, vary in their definitions according to where and when they appear on the council's website. The version shown to residents of Knight's Walk in March 2015, for example, substituted 'prohibitive' for 'not good value for money' in condition no. 1, 'issues' for 'problems' in condition 2, 'affordable homes' (a definition that includes properties for shared ownership and rent at up to 80 per cent of market rate) for 'much needed homes', and omitted 'low density' (which it fails to define) as a criterion, in condition 3.

Nevertheless, in their broad outlines these criteria for demolition are common enough, shared by most, if not all, estate demolition programmes in London and across England, as well as many of the solutions that have been put forward by central government, local authorities, housing associations, think tanks and property developers to address the so-called housing 'crisis'. However, part of the

problem faced by those resisting estate demolition is that the premises of these criteria have never been challenged. To do so, we want to explore the realities behind these three statements in detail, and demonstrate why they are not only untrue, but in many aspects the exact opposite of the truth.

## 1. Value for Money

'Where the costs of delivering the Lambeth Housing Standard would be too expensive and would not be good value for money.'

Despite its original claim, made in March 2012, that the Lambeth Housing Standard was both 'realistic' and 'affordable', Lambeth council, by its own admission, is now unable to apply this higher standard of refurbishment to all its housing stock.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore financially irresponsible of it to establish the higher refurbishment requirements of the Lambeth Housing Standard 'beyond' Central Government's required Decent Homes Standard. If the increased costs of achieving the Lambeth Housing Standard means that the Council is now unable to fund the refurbishment of the estates it was supposedly meant to benefit, but is now being used, instead, to justify their recourse to demolishing them, this Standard is clearly completely out of all proportion with the actual maintenance needs of the homes of the residents that live on those estates. Indeed, as it was undoubtedly meant to do, the Lambeth Housing Standard has effectively turned Lambeth council's 'Regeneration Programme' into a 'Demolition Programme'.

Moreover, Lambeth council's plans to demolish Central Hill estate – to take one example – and rebuild what, according to its own survey, are perfectly structurally sound buildings, represents anything but 'good value for money'. On the contrary, at an estimated total cost of around £295,000 per home, rebuilding the 456 existing homes alone would cost at least £157 million. That's before a single extra flat has been added. Refurbishing the existing homes, by contrast, has been estimated by Lambeth council's own surveyor at around £18.5 million, £6 million of which was already allocated for refurbishing interiors up to the Decent Homes Standard, and

therefore covered by a central government grant. The actual cost of refurbishing Central Hill estate, therefore, is £12.5 million, less than a twelfth the cost of knocking it down and rebuilding it. So our first question to Lambeth council is: how can be this construed as 'good value for money'?

The new flats might have a longer lifespan than the current ones when they are refurbished, but this is not always or necessarily true, as illustrated by the demolition of a block of 48 homes in Solomon's Passage in Peckham, built by Wandle Housing a mere 6 years ago, as well as the complaints from residents about build quality and safety on the newly developed Oval Quarter, Orchard Village and Portobello Square.<sup>3</sup> Such poor build quality is endemic to estate redevelopments in London. What is true, however, is that the structural quality of the existing council homes is extremely high. Far from being the 'broken homes' denigrated by Lambeth council, Central Hill was a celebrated estate at the time it was built, a mere forty years ago, and its design and build quality was published extensively in journals on structural engineering.<sup>4</sup> While Victorian terraces and Georgian squares continue to serve as housing for much of London, there is no justification for pulling down post-war housing estates that have decades of use before them, particularly when there is such a shortage of housing in which Londoners can genuinely afford to live.

It is unclear, moreover, how Lambeth council's demolition plans have taken into account its fiduciary duty to the council tax-payer. Central Hill estate, which recently passed its fortieth birthday, must have paid off its construction and loan debts some time ago. Contrary to the negative propaganda circulated in the press, council housing is not subsidised by the state; and when rent revenues on the estate could actually be making money for Lambeth council, its demolition would put the council in greater debt to the private investors who will build its hugely expensive replacement.

In the current housing climate, the risk to Lambeth council associated with borrowing is extremely high. In their report on regeneration, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has recommended low-risk developments that take account of the economic uncertainty in housing.<sup>5</sup> Even according to the Department of Communities and

Local Government, in the report it produced following the financial crisis of 2008, smaller, short-term projects are far better suited to volatility in the housing market; and the same applies to the similar level of uncertainty attending London's forming housing bubble and the reduced investment in luxury apartments following the referendum vote to leave the European Union.<sup>6</sup>

Lambeth council's mantra of 'More and Better Homes', which it repeats at every opportunity, inevitably provokes the question (which it has repeatedly refused to answer): 'More and better homes for whom?' The issue of housing quality is regularly cited by both architectural practices and the Royal Institute of British Architects; but the housing 'crisis' is not a crisis of design quality, which the unfounded denigration of council estates such as Central Hill seeks to propagate, but of affordability. It doesn't take a housing expert to see this; only someone trying to buy a home. According to a poll of would-be home-buyers published in the *Guardian* newspaper in 2014, it is the lack of low-cost housing, not of high-quality housing, that is the biggest concern for residents.<sup>7</sup> And house prices have hardly dropped since then, with the average sale price of a home in London in January 2018 being £600,926.

In this crisis of 'affordability', it is important to remember that the existing council homes on the six estates threatened by Lambeth council are some of the only genuinely affordable housing left in the borough. Demolishing them and replacing them with higher value, unaffordable housing will do nothing to address the housing needs of Lambeth residents. As we know, so called 'affordable housing', which increasingly means properties for shared ownership, is far beyond the financial means of the majority of the residents of the Central Hill, Cressingham Gardens, Westbury, Fenwick, South Lambeth and Knight's Walk estates, both council tenants and leaseholders; and the emphasis of architects on build quality only reinforces this criterion's so-called 'requirement' to replace anything that doesn't conform to contemporary standards, whatever the cost to the residents whose homes will be demolished as a consequence.

So our second question to Lambeth council is: in what way does the replacement

of low-cost homes with high-value apartments benefit either the existing residents or the wider Lambeth community? It's clearly to the benefit of Lambeth council, as the new, higher-income residents the higher-value properties will lure into the borough will pay higher council taxes and higher service charges while generally making lower demands on council services. But the so-called 'improvements' on the estate will have a negative economic impact on the estate residents, as well as increasing rents and house prices in the surrounding area as the process of gentrification takes hold.

According to Savills, the real estate firm that is advising Lambeth and numerous other councils in Greater London, this is precisely the purpose of estate demolition, which it conceives of as a form of active gentrification, driving out not only council tenants but also poorer households in the neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup> Home-owners might welcome such increases in UK property values, which now constitutes an economy in itself; but private renters and those trying to buy a home will not. This illustrates the clear divide in the way in which estate redevelopment will affect renters and home-owners, and why estate regeneration is such a politically divisive issue.

Since Lambeth council, according to recent audits of its books, is heading for bankruptcy due to a combination of central government cuts and its own financial mismanagement, the demolition of low-cost homes and their replacement with high-value housing – developed, built, sold and purchased by a range of private contractors – also benefits it in another way. Having no access to additional resources outside the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account (HRA), private investment is the only means the council has of getting its hands on the funds it needs to build the '1000 council houses by 2018' it promised as part of Lambeth Labour's 2014 election manifesto.<sup>9</sup> It's worth noting that, according to both the former Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Councillor Matthew Bennett, in his ongoing Twitter posts, and the newly elected ward councillor for Gipsy Hill, Luke Murphy, in his 2016 election promises, Lambeth Council still maintains it is proposing to build council homes. It claims, however, that because of the lack of funds in the HRA, it is unable to build homes for council rent. As a consequence, Lambeth council has set up, with the help of Savills, a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) called Homes

for Lambeth. This is a private company to which, once the existing council homes are demolished, the local authority land will be transferred, and private investors approached to fund the new developments on the six council estates targeted for demolition. However, far from building council homes, all tenancies on the new developments will be changed from 'secure' council tenancies to 'assured' social tenancies, managed as housing associations, with rents increased by between 10 and 25 per cent, and tenants' rights drastically reduced.

In post-Brexit Britain, with the uncertainty of increased debt for private development partners and investors in the SPV, the council must take account of the financial risks being taken with such a large scheme, and compare it with the low risk associated with the ASH proposals for infill and refurbishment on Central Hill estate, which will cost a fraction of the price of demolition and redevelopment. Residents are rightly concerned about the long-term security of their homes under the untested arrangement of Homes for Lambeth, which, with the votes of Lambeth Council, its Cabinet, and the Board of Homes for Lambeth, can be sold into private ownership in a mere five years' time. Since this is the same Labour Cabinet that has consistently voted to demolish the six council estates, since councillors who refuse the Labour whip have been disciplined and suspended, and since the Chair of Homes for Lambeth is set to be the same Cabinet Member for Regeneration that is responsible for signing off the demolition of their estates, council residents understandably have little confidence in who will own their housing association in the future. The fact that no resident ballot or involvement has been permitted in this management scheme, or in any future decisions about the estates, has created huge uncertainty in residents' minds about the security of their homes. And yet all this uncertainty is consequent upon the supposed 'requirement' to bring residents' homes up to the Lambeth Housing Standard.

## 2. Social and Economic Problems

**‘Where the Lambeth Housing Standard works would, in themselves, not address the fundamental condition of the homes nor address many of the wider social and economic problems faced by residents.’**

Nowhere in Lambeth council’s second criterion does it state what the ‘fundamental condition’ of the properties that they claim cannot be addressed by refurbishment must be in order to justify their demolition, and how the council arrived at this undeclared definition that will consign thousands of council homes to the bulldozer. Was this achieved through resident consultation on the condition of their homes? If it was, how many residents took part in the research? How objective were the findings? Was an architect consulted to establish whether their homes could be refurbished? Or does this fulfillment of this criterion rely on, for example, an unidentified photograph on Councillor Bennett’s blog and his assertion that Central Hill estate is ‘broken’?<sup>10</sup> A statement as loosely phrased as the one Lambeth council has put forward here as a criterion for demolishing an entire estate of over 450 homes needs to be first defined, and then verified with expert evidence, if it is to serve as a criterion for demolishing the homes of thousands of people.

The unsubstantiated implication of this criterion is that there is a direct relationship between the architecture of an estate and what it loosely terms the ‘wider social and economic problems of the residents’, as if this too were apparent and requires no evidence. There has been considerable criticism in the media of the rhetoric of ‘sink estates’; and the imputation by politicians of a causal relationship between the modernist architecture of post-war council estates and crime, anti-social behaviour and even rioting has been widely challenged in academic and architectural circles.<sup>11</sup> There is nothing objective about such emotive and unsubstantiated rhetoric, and the ideological motives and potential conflicts of interest in both central government plans to ‘Blitz’ 100 sink estates, and local authority programmes to demolish its own council housing, must be rationally assessed when weighing up the arguments for and against estate demolition.<sup>12</sup>

By the same token, what exactly are the ‘wider social and economic problems’ of the residents? How has Lambeth council arrived at these perceptions? What research has been conducted, how, and by whom? And even if they exist, for which Lambeth council has provided absolutely no evidence beyond reference to entrenched prejudices about working-class communities, how can the demolition and rebuilding of homes address such social and economic problems?

Contrary to the widely accepted opinion – which this statement relies on – that estate regeneration will improve the economic situations of the residents, the increased rents, service charges and council tax rates estate regeneration imposes upon the community only worsen the economic position of the existing residents. Indeed, recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that estate regeneration does not improve the life of existing residents – quite the contrary.<sup>13</sup> On the Myatts Field North regeneration, for example – a Lambeth council estate regeneration that has had disastrous consequences – the increased financial burdens of regeneration are beyond what many previous residents of the estate are able to afford.<sup>14</sup> Here, as elsewhere in the assumptions made about estate communities, the truth about regeneration is the exact opposite of what has become accepted as unquestioned dogma.

As for changes to the social lives of the residents, the proximity of friends, family and neighbours with whom relationships have been built up over generations is something that *does* have clear social and economic benefits to the residents and the wider community, in the form of personal and informal community support networks. Neighbourliness has a positive social and economic effect on the community, and the crime rate on Central Hill, as on nearly all housing estates – and, once again, contrary to the deliberate falsehoods spread about them – is lower than the surrounding areas. This is a clear indicator of a healthy and strong community, not a ‘broken’ one, as Lambeth council claims. Lower income families and the elderly rely on informal economic networks such as neighbourliness for babysitting, help with the shopping, caring for elderly residents and other social ‘services’ they cannot afford to buy. But it is precisely these that will be broken through the demolition of their estate and the breaking up of the community.

Either because they cannot afford the increased rents and service charges on the redeveloped housing association flats or because they cannot afford the increased costs incumbent upon shared ownership of a property on average four times as expensive as the one leaseholders currently own, those residents who will be obliged to move out of the area, or who are unable to transfer their mortgages onto the new properties, will lose all the benefits of being a part of a community. Their children will potentially be forced to change, or make far longer journeys to, their schools, both of which can affect their mental health, education and relationships. The elderly and disabled will be forced to change doctors, and lose the connections with neighbours and family and potentially carers that are crucial to their health and peace of mind. Studies conducted by health professionals show that the stress and effects on the mental health of every resident affected by losing their homes and community can result in depression, the loss of employment and other breakdowns in the social fabric. Indeed, the ongoing threat of losing their homes to demolition has already resulted in just these symptoms in residents of estates threatened by Lambeth council.

But in addition to its impact on the mental and physical well-being of the dispersed community, the disruption of estate demolition will inevitably have financial consequences that will eventually be borne by the state in the form of an increase in benefits and the knock-on costs associated with a decline in health. Both of these will increase demand on welfare and health services. Academic research at the London School of Economics and Political Science has shown that the stresses associated with estate regeneration can result in increased cases of illness and early death; and the sad truth, for which Lambeth council should be held legally accountable, is that many elderly residents – of which there are a disproportionately large number on council estates – are likely to die during a demolition and redevelopment process that could last up to ten years or more.<sup>15</sup>

The adverse mental health effects of austerity have been analysed and recorded in research by Psychologists Against Austerity, and the conditions they identify are remarkably similar to the effects of estate regeneration. ‘Humiliation and shame’, ‘fear and distrust’, ‘instability and insecurity’, ‘isolation and loneliness’, ‘feeling

trapped and powerless’ – all are daily experiences for those living under the threat of estate demolition, as residents will confirm if Lambeth council took the trouble to listen to them.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the indicators of a psychologically healthy society – ‘agency, security, connection, meaning and mutual trust’ – are all being eroded, if not destroyed, by Lambeth council’s estate demolition programme.

In a statement that encapsulates the indifference and arrogance of Lambeth’s Labour Cabinet, at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting for the decision to demolish Cressingham Gardens estate, one of six threatened by Lambeth council’s regeneration programme, Councillor Bennett offered the opinion that the anticipated increases in the rent and other outgoings of tenants on the new developments could be covered by housing benefit. Quite apart from the fact that, under the current conversion to Universal Credit, housing benefit is about to be cut to levels that are expected to drive thousands of private renters into homelessness, this reveals that Lambeth council anticipates that the increased cost of the properties they are proposing to build through Homes for Lambeth will be paid for by the tax-payer in the form of housing benefit taken from the coffers of central government. No doubt this, too, is another motivation for them demolishing the source of their current rent revenues, rather than refurbishing and maintaining them out of their own HRA. The reality, however, is that this insulting suggestion, which was met with outrage and disbelief by residents, is no solution at all. Rather, households unable to meet their new, considerably increased outgoings will be forced into cheaper accommodation elsewhere in Lambeth, or even, as the council is already encouraging them to do, moved out of the borough altogether.

From what we have been told, we understand that animals will not be permitted in the proposed new development for Central Hill, making it very difficult for residents with pets – often an essential source of companionship and comfort to the elderly – to continue to live on the estate, even if by some miracle they can afford to exercise their Right to Return. And the amenities – currently enjoyed by the majority of the residents – of a south-facing front garden and a city-facing balcony will, similarly, no longer be available to them. Indeed, it is difficult to see how any aspect of the demolition and redevelopment of Central Hill estate can be seen as improving

either the social or the economic well-being of the residents, according to Lambeth council's own stated criterion.<sup>17</sup>

As for the so-called 'fundamental conditions' of the homes Lambeth council has neglected to maintain for decades while paying its senior management officers ever increasing salaries, they are nothing of the kind. Internal problems in the homes such as leaking ceilings, mould and condensation, most of which have been caused by poor or inadequate maintenance of windows and roofs by the council, can be easily addressed through refurbishment, and are in no respect a justification for demolition. In the few cases of overcrowding, ASH has shown that, with an accurate survey of housing needs, the provision of some smaller homes for those households that are currently in under-occupied homes will free up some of the larger homes. As demonstrated by the number of households being forced to pay the government's debilitating bedroom tax, there is a shortage of 1-bedroom homes in Lambeth; and combined with the addition of some larger homes for those households currently living in overcrowded homes, the housing needs of all the residents can be satisfied without the need to demolish their estate.

If PRP Architects, the practice employed by Lambeth council in order to explore the options for the regeneration of Central Hill estate, had genuinely looked at addressing these issues, rather than simply accepting the council's brief to find justifications for its demolition, they would have told them the same thing. But they didn't.

### 3. The Wider Benefits of Regeneration

**'Where the wider benefits from regeneration would justify the investment. This includes where the existing estate is relatively low-density and where there is an opportunity to create additional much needed new homes.'**

It is far from apparent what the 'wider benefits' of demolition are that cannot be achieved through infill and refurbishment. On the contrary, through the implementation

of the design proposals in our alternative plan (see Chapter 1) – which shows that it is possible to add over 200 new homes plus communal facilities to the estate – ASH has demonstrated that it is possible to increase housing capacity by nearly 45 per cent and make all the improvements necessary to the estate without demolishing a single existing home.

The proposed demolition of Central Hill estate, like that of the other five estates Lambeth council currently threatens, would in fact have a hugely negative impact on the surrounding neighbourhood of Crystal Palace, both on the environment and on the health of residents of the estates and the local area. Demolition and disposal of the estate's concrete, brick and masonry would result in significant and harmful amounts of embodied carbon being released into the atmosphere (see Appendix 2). At an investigation into the respective benefits of refurbishment versus demolition held at the London Assembly in July 2014, Chris Jofeh, Director of Arups, the original engineers for Central Hill estate, said:

'Demolition and rebuild emits a super amount of carbon dioxide, and even if you build super-efficient new homes it could take 30 years before you redress the balance. If we do take carbon targets seriously then refurbishment is an option which is much more likely to achieve those targets.'<sup>18</sup>

In a time of increasing concern about climate change, demolition of housing estates is not something we should be undertaking lightly or, more importantly, unnecessarily. It goes against Lambeth council's own policy on sustainability, as well as the recommendations of research produced by the London Assembly and University College London.<sup>19</sup> The polluting effects of demolition on the immediate neighbourhood in the form of dust and noise will also be significant, as will the effect of construction traffic on the surrounding roads. It is generally accepted by now that if asbestos is present in the buildings, as is typical in 1970s structures, it is preferable to leave it alone. Safe methods of stripping out and disposing of asbestos are often not observed, and Lambeth council has a poor reputation for following safe practice in such work. There is, as a consequence, little trust in the council among residents on the estates and the surrounding neighbourhoods to

safeguard the environment from the polluting effects of demolishing and rebuilding the estate.

According to its own Local Plan, Lambeth council is supposedly committed to the efficient use and management of resources; yet the demolition of a thriving estate and community such as Central Hill, or any of the other five Lambeth estates the council threatens, completely contradicts this commitment.<sup>20</sup> The current biodiversity on the Central Hill site will not be protected – and certainly won't be enhanced – by their demolition scheme, which threatens the majority of the estate's trees, which like the community have taken decades to grow and flourish. The ASH proposal, by contrast, retains and supports the existing green spaces and wildlife. A longstanding community that takes care of its environment is the key to the successful maintenance of public spaces, and destroying that community will destroy the space they currently look after with great care and affection, as the beautiful and well-tended gardens on the estate demonstrate. This is despite the council's ongoing policy of pulling down wall ivy, digging up roof gardens and cutting down trees as part of the managed decline of the estate. In contrast to this care, the design proposals by PRP Architects, who have been employed by Lambeth council to convince residents of the benefits of demolishing their homes, would completely block the protected view of the line of mature trees along Central Hill road with 7-storey blocks, as well as significantly interfere with the current views from Central Hill across London.

Further long-term negative effects include the added burden of the proposed tripled estate resident population on local public services such as schools, health clinics and the already jammed roads on Central Hill itself. Yet Lambeth council has not bothered to produce plans showing how they propose to mitigate these additional burdens on public facilities in the area. Nor have they come up with arguments to support the benefits of the hugely increased population based on anything other than what it is possible to cram onto the estate site, regardless of the consequences for the Crystal Palace community.

As we observed at the beginning of this report, no definition of what constitutes 'low density' has been given in this criterion. That's hardly surprising, since all the 6 estates threatened by Lambeth council are, in fact, low-rise, high-density housing. On the contrary, this is another example of the web of falsehoods about council housing woven by the council to justify its plans to the general public. As is clear from its collaboration with the real-estate firm Savills, from whom Lambeth council takes its language, its definitions and its direction, 'high density', like 'high value', is a barely disguised euphemism for 'high profits'.

Finally, in terms of the architectural heritage of the estate and its value to future generations, Central Hill is a unique example of a period when Lambeth council had a socially ambitious architectural vision. As stated in the council's own Local Plan, Lambeth's architectural heritage is important to the borough. But as the council's thwarted proposal to demolish the sheltered housing at 269 Leigham Court Road demonstrated – and which only its listing by Historic England saved – Lambeth council has neither an appreciation nor an understanding of the architecture of this period, which it seems bent on destroying for the profit of developers, real estates firms and investors.<sup>21</sup> It would be negligent of us in the extreme to entrust the future of our urban environment to a Labour Cabinet that has repeatedly shown itself to have no aesthetic judgement of the qualities of architecture, no ethical concern for the well-being of residents, and no moral sense of duty to the constituents who voted them into office.

## End Notes

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11. See Victoria Pinoncely, 'Sink estates are not sunk – they're starved of funding', *The Guardian* (11 May, 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2016/may/11/sink-estates-starved-funding-poverty-housing>

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