

## **Regeneration and Social Housing – A Paper by Rev. Lesley Goldsmith**

### **What is regeneration?**

The rebirth, or renewal, of something, and increasingly this term has been used to reflect the renewal of run down areas and communities. In the past the regeneration has tended to be purely physical, often damaging, irreparably, existing communities. The best regeneration takes account of the existing communities and seeks to both improve the built environment and provide opportunities for the local community, with schools, transport infrastructure, health, leisure and employment facilities.

The local authority in an area has an overall responsibility to the community it serves, and this was spelt out in the Local Government Act 2000, which said that the local authority has responsibility for the social, economic and environmental well being of all those in its area. The Church could quite rightly claim that this is our agenda as well for the last 2000 years, and it is on that basis, as much as our responsibilities for all people in our parishes, that means regeneration matters to the Church.

### **Housing**

- The days of the Local Authority (LA) providing large numbers of quality homes have gone. The 1980 Housing Act introduced the Right to Buy (RTB) and thousands of homes, usually the best stock, were sold to sitting tenants at a heavy discount and have not been replaced. This was because the LAs could not afford to replace the housing at the inflated prices and then of course the properties were themselves subject to the RTB. It is fair to say that this Housing Act changed the culture of the country, as the vast majority of housing in this country is now owner occupied and this has been promoted as the preferred form of tenure.
- Housing for rental at less than market prices, and not provided by private landlords, is generally known as 'Social Housing.' It is provided by LAs, and Social Landlords, otherwise known as Housing Associations (HA). Some housing associations are small and specialised, but most are now large, having amalgamated for economy and larger than many LAs. The irony of this is that tenants were supposed to be offered a wider choice of landlord, breaking up the LA monopoly, but all that has happened is that we now have an HA monopoly.
- Owner occupation is higher than many countries, and renting is seen as a poor alternative.
- More private rented housing has become available in the last decade, with small investors, and those who let their homes when unable to sell. The

chances of repossession if the owner/landlord defaults on the mortgage means that, in the current economic climate, many tenants will find themselves, through no fault of their own, without a roof over their head.

- Houses in Multiple Occupation or HMOs are very common in the Barking Episcopal area. These are often found in a terraced house where every room, often itself in multi occupation, is let out. Such properties, whilst meeting a housing need, can often be in poor repair, with the poorest people - particularly new immigrants/students - as the tenants. The LA, through Environmental Health, has a role in inspecting and enforcing the laws governing such tenancies.
- In the 1960s/70s there was wholesale slum clearance of older, particularly terraced housing, only to be replaced with modern 'slums' – poorly built and maintained. Much of the new housing was high rise and high density to ensure the demand for additional housing was met. This type of regeneration destroyed communities and often provided no more housing than before, once parking and green space were provided. Ronan Point in Newham collapsed following a gas explosion and the resulting investigation showed up the poor build quality. Many high rise have since been pulled down and replaced with low rise housing – ironically often back to terraced housing which was there before.
- The 1960s/70s build was system built, often untried & better suited to warmer climes, most were subject to condensation (rarely actually damp) because of poor insulation and the cost of heating the properties. They were built using a 'cost yardstick' i.e tight costs, which usually meant skimping on materials, and the LAs couldn't afford to maintain them. A design feature may look good, but what will it cost to maintain? (e.g slates from Spain)
- Terraced housing is actually very high density. ie number of homes per acre/hectare is high, but gives people what they want - defensible space with their own front door and garden space. They are generally more attractive than other high density designs, think of the Bath and Brighton crescents
- In the 1970s Conservation Areas of properties with architectural merit were brought in, as it was seen better to keep existing buildings and repair them than rebuild. It also had the advantage of retaining existing communities.
- Social housing will be filled to capacity; private housing will not eg a 4 bedroom property in the private sector may house a couple and a child if that, but the same property in the social housing sector will have every room filled, and statutory overcrowding, i.e when a property has too many people occupying it by public health law allows very high occupancy rates.

Filling properties to capacity clearly has impacts on local facilities such as schools and health facilities, and that is why it is important, when designing new housing to take into account the impact on the existing facilities, and whether new provision needs to be made.

- The recent changes to benefits, especially the 'bedroom tax' as is becoming known, means that many on low incomes will be forced to move. Whilst this may free up much needed larger accommodation for families, it can also mean a more transient population affecting the viability and feeling of a community, as well as upheaval for the individuals concerned, especially if they have housing adapted for their specific physical needs.
- Any new housing development above a (small) minimum number, now has to have a certain percentage that has to be social or affordable housing. The Mayor's Office (basically replacing the Greater London Council, the GLC ) sets the percentage for the 32 London Boroughs to ensure a fair allocation of housing across London to meet all types of need, both private and social. But social housing does not have to be in one block, although most developers prefer this, because social housing is usually still built to slightly better space standards than private, because it is filled to capacity. [This used to be known as the Parker Morris standard after the government minister who set the larger space standards for social housing.]
- Affordable housing is rather a misleading phrase, as increasingly, so called 'affordable housing' in London and the south east is not affordable to those on lower and indeed some middle incomes.
- New build often has less parking if the development is near public transport links, as it assumed that the occupants will use this, and as an environmental measure. However, this can still lead to parking difficulties for visitors and with so many people still relying on cars.

### **What should we look for when looking at regeneration plans?**

- When looking at plans for a new development, look at how secure it is. Are there lots of 'rat runs' for people to 'escape', particularly if they are bent on criminal activity? Are areas overlooked for safety and to prevent criminal and anti social activity?
- What are the security aspects? Outward opening doors are less likely to be 'kicked in,' how overlooked are doors/ security lights? If there are security gates to an area, eg parking or a play area, who is opening and closing them, how robust are the locks? Ask to see samples of bricks, roof finishes to gauge quality - flat roofs last around 20 years, then leak; pitched tiled roofs last nearer 60+ initially more expensive but lower maintenance.

Where are gutters and down pipes; are they accessible for cleaning and maintenance? If they run inside a building there is more chance of water damage, because any problems are unseen until it is too late.

- If play facilities are to be provided – how realistic are they? Will they be used as a focus for anti social behaviour? What age group will they serve, who will ensure they are only used by that age group, who will ensure the area is clean and free from broken glass etc which can cause accidents? Has a safety surface been provided for health and safety purposes?
- On social housing developments, is there a local housing office for the tenants to report matters, and a designated estate officer taking an interest?
- High rise housing can work, particularly in the private sector, eg Barbican, but really needs costly security such as CCTV/concierge, zoned locking to make it work. It is not suitable for young children, with the noise transference within the flats and for play space; many older people like the security, but high rise living can be isolating with little or no real community, it is possible never to see one's neighbour.
- If the redevelopment is of an existing community, what guarantees are there that people can stay in the area, or at least return after redevelopment?

Our communities are an important part of our mission, and as part of the Transforming Presence agenda, so it is crucial that as the Church we are involved in the redevelopment and regeneration of areas, and the impacts such changes have on the people living there.

*This Paper was presented at the Barking Episcopal Area Regeneration Group meeting in May 2009 and was revised in May 2013. Rev Lesley Goldsmith is Vicar of St. Edmund's, Chingford. Prior to Ordination she spent more than 31 years in local government in two London Boroughs with a career at senior management level, including a Deputy Director post. She worked in housing, environmental health and policy, ranging from management of 30,000 council premises to performance monitoring and major capital projects. She has a Diploma in Housing Management.*