

Top down vs bottom up

Doreen from Silwood, a social housing estate in South London

Mark Saunders

Mark Saunders of Spectacle, a London-based independent and participatory media project, has been documenting the regeneration process on the Silwood Estate since 2001 for a feature documentary. This text and the contribution closing Part 4 are based on video interviews with two community activists: Doreen Dower and Jessica Leech. They live on neighbouring housing estates (the Silwood and the Pepys, respectively), separated by a rail track. The two estates were pushed into one Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) regeneration scheme. On the Silwood Estate, the SRB was an entirely Lewisham council-led bid, whereas the Pepys residents, to the authorities' surprise, put in their own 'bottom up' bid.

The Government Office for London insisted they come together as one scheme, to be known as the Silwood SRB. Lewisham Council used the social development 'outputs' of the Pepys regeneration to cover their almost total lack on the Silwood.

The rationale for forcing these two bids together was that Lewisham Council would view the Pepys social development projects as a pilot for Silwood. A small part of the Silwood Estate belongs to another council, Southwark, whose residents, including Doreen, voted for refurbishment rather than demolition and rebuild. On the Lewisham side of the estate, the demolition and rebuild have been accompanied by the transfer of all the council social housing to two 'registered social landlords': London and Quadrant and Presentation housing associations.

Doreen Dower (over leaf) is the Secretary of Silwood Tenants Association (TA). A long-time resident of the Silwood Estate and nearing retirement, she works as a part-time administrator and cares for her husband.

'I think it was always going to be like it is, because I remember ... we had tenants coming to us saying: "they're going to pull down Silwood". Now if you've lived on Silwood as long as I have, every five years they're going to pull down Silwood, so you took no notice of it.

But it turns out this was just before a local election. And the Lewisham councillors at the time were telling tenants, "Oh. It's going to be a garden estate, cottage estate, it's going to be really nice. Houses with gardens". So that came back to the Tenants Association from the tenants, and in the end I wrote letters to say, can you tell us what's going on? ... So that was the first we heard about it. Back to front.

As a Tenants Association person I went to the first meeting, and that was in the summer of that year. It wasn't until the November of that year the neighbourhood



Doreen Dower.

Photograph by Mark Saunders

manager came to our TA meeting and he said, “as of now you are in this SRB bid”, and that was the first we heard about it as a full committee.

And that was on the Monday, we had a meeting that week, and then the weekend following that meeting, they were going to do an independent survey. It was basically do you want demolition or do you want refurbishment? – except it wasn’t as straight forward as that. But that’s basically what they wanted to know.

This independent surveyor came round. I had a vague idea of what it was about. But there is no way that an ordinary tenant would have known what the hell he was talking about.

We chose to stay and be refurbished as against demolition.

And the rest of the Southwark side of the estate chose demolition and the whole of the Lewisham side chose demolition. You’ve got four high rises, most of them wanted to move. So that obviously tipped it in that favour.

There were things like: we could demolish the four high rises and refurbish the rest; then, one would be total demolition for the whole estate and one would be total refurbishment for the whole estate.

It wasn’t a vote, as such, this independent survey merely told the council what they wanted to know. Let’s face it. ... We still didn’t approve of the way they’d done it because this independent survey was only a percentage of residents. So it wasn’t everybody ... but they don’t know what they were saying.

So, then Southwark had another separate one for their blocks. ... and they had various pictures of how it could be. So that a bit more information was coming through for the Southwark residents.

And then they were rather upset by the fact that these blocks didn't want to be demolished. So they kept pushing and in the end we went round ourselves and the Tenants Association did another survey, and it still came up with the same, no we want refurbishment. It took about a year but in the end they decided they really had to listen to us, and they said, yeah okay fine, we do the refurbishment.

[Before the regeneration] we had a tenant's hall, a community flat and a community worker at one time. We used to have our meetings in there and we had office space in there. Then there was the youth centre, Five Steps Nursery and a play area.

We used to run the community hall with a premises management committee, all the user groups were on this committee but Lewisham Council were the ones with the purse. They looked after the hall, you know, if it needed repairing.

All the facilities we had on the estate were going to go in one building. I went to meetings and we'd work with the architects to get a building sorted out ... and it would have been built in phase one, but it didn't work like that.

They ended up demolishing the community centre three years ago and we still haven't got anything that we can use at this moment.

Silwood did have some projects out [of] the SRB money apart from the demolition side of things, but it was like you had a year's money and then as soon as that was finished that was it; it was dropped and then it might have been money for another year for something else.

They did a business plan, the original business plan, and we went to visit other places, but nothing came of any of it.

Nothing that happened on Pepys [Estate] touched us. In the beginning there was a certain amount of "why have they got that money, it's ours!" Because it wasn't explained to us that when Pepys put in for their SRB bid and Lewisham put in for the Silwood SRB bid, the government said no you can't have two in one place, you got to join them together.

We just thought we were using part of our money for Pepys as well.

So we didn't really get involved with Pepys at all, looking back we should have at least found out what was happening there, and maybe it could have happened on our estate as well.

The whole thing was [Lewisham] council led. And run by SRB people, which are Lewisham people. The minutes were taken by SRB Lewisham people and if something was missed out, it wasn't always put in as an error the following time.

We'd just get used to one lot of people and then one of them would leave and a little while later someone else would come, and so you'd start to get used to them and so it went on. So, definitely, no continuity with people working on the Silwood SRB.

The problem with housing associations is they just focus on their houses. Although they are meant to be non-profit making, they've got to make a profit to carry on building in other places, so they are a business. It's so different now.

On this estate, they've sort of joined up the two housing associations and one is in charge, for instance, of the cleaning and the other one repairs. They're having to treat Silwood rather differently to their other properties. "Cause we kept saying we are one community, we want to be treated as one community."

We were told that it was going to cost the Tenants Association, for sharing an office with another group called Good Neighbours, for the first year 960 pounds, which is half the rent and it's the smallest room, half the rent!

I just said, "well that's us out. Forget it, because we only get a 1000 pounds a year in funding, and it's not for paying rent like that". The only thing I would really like is some sort of office space, some sort of storage space because everything is in my house and I can't move.

I wasn't involved in developing the new business plan at all. We were told at one of the SRB boardroom meetings that they were doing one, and it took ages. I kept asking about it and we never got anything back. Suddenly, it was "oh but it's ready"

And we said but we haven't seen it, where is it? In the end, my copy, I got from Janice from the youth centre. Someone obviously gave her a copy and she got it out to me, but that's how I got my copy.

There's been a business plan already. That's thousands of pounds of SRB money wasted, it's never been used. We don't really know what happened in between those two business plans.

At the moment, the community centre is going to be run by London and Quadrant Housing Association. They said right along they weren't going to.

They're having to work at ways of enabling us to use our own facilities. They've now started these meetings with the various user groups. But all that came from our meeting was, "we will help you find ways to generate the money to pay the rent". I'm sorry, but that's not what I want to hear.

That was mentioned, yeah community trust, we could do that (laughs). That's like another hat, isn't it? It's another difficult job that tenants and residents are supposed to do. I went to a meeting about community trusts ... I wasn't that enamoured because I thought, "oh God that's a lot of hard work" ... It's okay if there's a lot of other people dying to get on the community trust.

But I suppose in their view it's what we always wanted. A community centre. We kept on about it long enough. But that's what we've got, this really "iconic" (pulls face) building with flats above it. It's ridiculous!

Who in their right mind would choose to live and to part buy, not just to rent, a flat above a community hall? The mind boggles.

We've got various projects around that might want to use the hall, but ... they can't afford, and it would be unfair to ask them to afford, in my view anyway, those sort of rents, because it's community.

They gave us one of the old shops in Reculver Road [for a temporary office] which was in such poor condition it's unbelievable. We can't get in there at the moment as there was a fire at the back of the shop and it was damaged, we've got a computer which is being stored possibly by the youth club. We've got a photocopier, I don't know whether it still works but that's in the flat, and we've got two filing cabinets in the flat. So where do we go from here? I don't know.

They would have helped if they had built the community facilities at the beginning when they said they would. We might just have been in the position then to

have got in there and got stuff moving before everything was pulled down. There was no centre of any description, so the community's lost.

As far as I'm concerned the new Tenant and Residents Association needs help. Even if it's going round knocking on doors, they can't be expected to do it all themselves, because they're starting from scratch, and it's quite a big estate.

I've been to so many meetings, I'm so tired, my brain's ceased, I just don't know anymore.

[Lewisham Council] are still supporting the youth club but they're nothing to do with the community hall. Because it's not theirs, they haven't built it. They've got shot of the whole estate. And I'm sure that's what they wanted from the beginning.

I'd go to a meeting and realize that a goalpost had been shifted, which meant that things on this estate were different to what they were originally going to be. And this kept happening. Various reasons were given for various things being done differently.

So, I feel let down, completely ... so much so that when I read in the newspaper about so and so estate going down the regeneration road, I go, don't go down that road please, because it's terrible. But it probably isn't if it's done properly ...

We are still here, but it's so completely changed.

It's a nicer place in terms of houses with gardens, let's face it most people want to live in a house with a garden, but, because there's nowhere for the kids to play, they're in the streets and we've had a lot of problems, so much so that the people in these blocks have voted to stop off the walk ways [connecting the two parts of the estate].

You need a centre of some description, and that's the only one we've got. Quite how we can manage it, I don't know, but whether we're involved with it or not is neither here nor there. Somehow it's got to be made to work.

You've got to bring the community together, and any sort of regeneration destroys the community. I don't care what anybody says.'