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Sustainable Communities Plan: Blackburn

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Commission

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Contents

1.	INTRODUCTION	2
2.	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	2
3.	METHODOLOGY	3
4.	THE BANK TOP AREA IN BLACKBURN.....	4
	4.1 Moving into the area	4
	4.2 The reputation of the area	4
5.	UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT	5
	5.1 Older homes in the area	5
	5.2 Refurbished homes in the area.....	7
	5.3 New homes in the area.....	9
6.	UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIETY AND ECONOMY.....	12
	6.1 Building communities – a sense of community identity and belonging.....	12
	6.2 Access to good quality public services and general facilities	14
	6.3 Access to public transport, walking, cycling and healthy lifestyles	18
	6.4 Access to good quality green spaces	19
	6.5 Recycling initiatives	20
	6.6 Creating economic opportunity and skill development in the local area	21
	6.7 Phone and internet connectivity.....	21
	6.8 Living costs	22
7.	GOOD GOVERNANCE.....	22
	7.1 Consultation about new homes and refurbishment	22
	7.2 Raising other issues	23
8.	CONCLUSIONS	23
9.	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	24

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2005 UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy charged the Sustainable Development Commission with the role of 'watchdog for sustainable development', in addition to its 'critical friend' role. In accordance with their remit agreed with Government they are, in part, taking this new watchdog function forward by carrying out specific appraisals on a thematic basis, called in-depth reviews.

The first thematic review is on the Sustainable Communities Plan. The Sustainable Communities Plan was drawn up by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003 in order to tackle serious housing shortages, particularly in London and the South East; a crisis of affordability for many ordinary households; and the decline of low-income urban neighbourhoods. It included major proposals to raise housing standards, reform planning, speed up house-building. This would all take place within the imperative to protect the countryside, minimise resource use and reduce the environmental impact of development. Three years on, this SDC review intends to analyse the Plan in the context of overall progress towards sustainable development across the UK, and its social, environmental and economic impacts.

This research looks into how communities were affected in Housing Market Renewal Areas in the North of England, where old and run down areas are being regenerated by the government. It will be fed into the SDC's overall review of the Sustainable Communities Plan.

By spending time with its recipients/ target audience this research explores and tries to understand the 'reality' of the Sustainable Communities Plan (SDC). In short, it looks at whether the execution of the plan so far has met core needs within communities and explores any unmet needs which require attention in light of the plan's overall objective.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research were to:

- Assess the impact of the Sustainable Communities Plan (SCP) on a housing market renewal area developed under the auspices of the Plan

- Understand what influenced residents to move to the community
- Assess public opinion in regards to specific aspects of the community including, transport links, local amenities, public spaces and social infrastructure (considering both availability and demand for these services)
- See if these opinions differ between those living in affordable homes and those in 'non-affordable' homes – and possibly those from different ethnic backgrounds
- Gain insight into how different types of household interact within the community
- Look at aspirations and recommendations for improvements to the community and other similar communities

In this report we have focused on the components of the governments' housing agenda that have been identified as being fundamental in making up a sustainable community. We have identified where, according to the residents themselves, the area is delivering on these and where it is failing to do so.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to match and benchmark the studies in Cambridge and Barking, this project used extended depth interviews as its core approach (6 x 1.5-2.5 hour sessions). Time was spent with residents of both affordable and non-affordable homes (some of which were refurbished and some of which were not). There was also a spread of ethnicity included in the sample (this being a crucial factor in this locality) as well as lifestages. Residents took researchers on a tour of their local area, narrating their experiences of living and in some cases working in the area and also involved neighbours and friends in the research process.

Residents were also asked to complete a pre-task about their experiences of living in the area together with photographs. Video vox pop footage was taken by researchers of local people and the area itself.

4. THE BANK TOP AREA IN BLACKBURN

4.1 Moving into the area

There was some variation in the length of time people had been living in the Bank Top area: this ranged from 7 months to 20 years. Most had lived around the area previously. The majority were renting from North Bridge Housing Association or Twin Valleys Housing Association: only 1 was renting on a private basis. For some the decision to move into the area was influenced by availability of housing, better affordability, sheer number and convenience of facilities, more space/ larger property, proximity to Pakistani community and a desire to uplift the area. For others, as seen in the other communities researched (Cambridge and Barking), there was little choice in the matter as they were allocated here.

This indicates that there are some strong motivating factors at work in Bank Top. More government investment over time could enhance the desirability of the area and, in the future, perhaps residents will come to display a sense of pride in it.

4.2 The reputation of the area

Prior to moving into the area, most had been warned in no uncertain terms about the reputation of Bank Top. It was considered to be 'rough', unsafe, had prostitutes, drug addicts and other undesirable elements: not an attractive area to be in. Rowdy teenagers added to the general sense of discomfort, fear and ethnic tension.

However, most residents own experiences did not, in the main, bear this out. For example, some families left children's out door toys and bikes in the backyard, safe in the knowledge that they would not be stolen. Incidences of burglary and car crime were considered to be low. Perhaps residents had taken steps to avoid more risky situations and hence had not confronted the darker side of Bank Top. A smaller minority had experienced racial abuse and violence or knew of others who had. A police presence was observed but not related to a higher or lower incidence of crime.

"At that moment [when I was moving in] everybody was telling me that this area is rough but they were talking about the top but then everything changed, and everything is getting better." - **Female with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40**

Affordable, refurbished

Given the two polarised views of the area, perhaps there is scope to attain a balance. New entrants need to be made aware of the reputation but also reassured that, on an everyday basis, life is generally quite safe. This will instill a greater sense of confidence in the area and build on the positive view of facilities and amenities.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT

5.1 Older homes in the area

Perceptions of the older homes were mixed. They were over a hundred years old and this age was reflected in their general condition. For example, damp was prevalent. Also it became clear that these houses were built for a different era and different type of living arrangement. They had been designed for a 'one size fits all approach'. Unlike the residents of Cambridge and Barking, who were in the main happy with the size of their houses, in Bank Top 'two-up two-down' was no longer feasible nor desirable for modern day living especially as the rooms were small and people no longer wanted to live in such cramped conditions.

"The bedrooms are OK but it is down here – there is one living room and one kitchen and when you have children that is the problem. Because it is like a box and when you have toys and things" – **Female with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished**

"It's just too little. I don't think the builders thought about them being too little for families I mean." – **Female with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished**

Lack of storage was also an issue. And windows did not seal the heat in. In addition, there was little space between the houses. In short, the area was not felt to be physically attractive.

Amongst some of the Pakistani residents, the older houses were less problematic as they enabled a flow of 'traffic' into/ out of neighbours homes. This resulted in a cementing of the community feel and emotional proximity. They also remarked on

the sturdy build and thick walls which offered good sound proofing. Although they did not explicitly mention thick walls, English residents in older homes did not complain about lack of sound proofing.

More recent builds from the 1960s were also perceived to be less than ideal. For example in the blocks of flats the walls and ceilings/ floors were felt to be rather thin. This meant it was possible to hear conversations and general 'goings-on'!

In this sense, the diversity in the new builds could be the way forward as the mix of 3 and 4 bedroom properties and modern storage solutions will help maximise the space available.



5.2 Refurbished homes in the area

A number of residents had had their homes refurbished. Externally, this involved changing the front brickwork, front door, windows, painting the backyard and placing a new wall around it. Internally, it involved putting in new kitchens and bathrooms. For most, the refurbishment was welcomed and for those with external refurbishment the hassle factor was low.



However, the refurbishment did not address damp which was often mentioned as a source of ill health especially in children.

Private owners who lived in flats where refurbishments were taking place were seen as reluctant to pay for the refurbishment of communal areas. Or at least that was the view of council/ housing association tenants (as no private owners were interviewed). In addition, private owners were unable to afford refurbishment of their own windows. As a result, the overall external appearance of the flats was a little askew. The dynamic between neighbours in flats was also affected as private owners resented tenants getting refurbishments for free and the latter resented private owners for not paying for their own refurbishment.



Although the refurbishment programme is a step forward, other elements could also be incorporated to raise the quality of life e.g. damp proofing. The dynamic between tenants and private owners may also require careful management as part of the consultation process to ensure that any possible tensions are diffused effectively.

5.3 New homes in the area

This research was not able to canvass opinions from those in new homes as most of these had not been populated yet. Hence it was difficult to gauge if owners felt the homes were comfortable. It was also difficult to assess if new homes were being built to minimise energy usage and impact on local wildlife.

However, other members of the community were articulate and had a number of views on this topic. The new homes were felt to be a welcome addition to the community, in principle. Many aspired to living in them. They were certainly a significant improvement on their own homes, even for those in refurbished properties. The safety of new homes was gauged on the local area rather than the home itself. In short, they would be improving the area.

“Everyone likes them because they are beautiful the way they have made them. But I don’t know if they are big inside or not, I have no idea but they say three bedrooms.” – **Female with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished**





However, those living directly opposite these new homes felt the new builds were somewhat out of place in the neighbourhood.



There was also a preference for local residents to be given first choice in new home purchase. However, there was some feeling that this was not the case.

The new homes also became a tangible manifestation of community tensions. White residents perceived them to be built for Asian families.

“It’s all the Asians that are buying them.” – **Female with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished**

This assumption was grounded in the knowledge that the homes were 3/4 bedroom properties which were more likely to cater for the larger Asian families. As it happened, feedback from the sales office showed that all the new homes had been/ were being bought by Asians (anecdotally, as was seen in Cambridge and Barking these were mainly those from outside the area). Indeed, the property developer also had an Asian financial advisor on hand to deal with the details of purchasing. A tour around the new houses also seemed to reinforce this view: décor and accessorising of 4 bedroom homes indicated a more ethnic flavour.

The new builds appear to exacerbate existing tensions between the Asian and White communities which manifest along ethnic dimensions. They are (unintentionally) failing to contribute to creating a sense of tolerance, respect and engagement with people from different cultures, backgrounds and beliefs. In the future, this community dynamic over new builds may need to be addressed.

6. UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

6.1 Building communities – a sense of community identity and belonging

There were two different communities felt to exist in the Blackburn area. A clear divide was identified between the Asian community and the White community both geographically and socially. And despite the efforts of Easter Fayres and Melas (the Asian equivalent of a carnival) to bring people together, little had been achieved at a community level. This ethnic tension was also seen in Cambridge and Barking.

Asian community

The Asian community was comprised of both Pakistanis and Indians. It was mainly based around the Johnston Street area and reflected in the high predominance of Asian shops there. There was felt to be a sense of community here particularly amongst those with children who could tap into other families. This helped those Asians who had recently come into the community.

“Because it is like a family almost – everyone in our street they know each other – and when the children play, they all play together, and there are very nice neighbours.” – Female, with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished

“They’re both Asian this side as well and that side, always giving food here and giving ...bringing presents if there’s like a wedding or something.” - Pre-family female, C1C2, 20-30 Private, non-refurbished

There was a fairly constant degree of contact with neighbours e.g. at least once a day: running errands for them, checking on elderly residents in the street and exchanging food gifts on special occasions such as Eid. The local mosque also

helped cement relations. In short, there was a strong sense of community amongst the Asians.

White community

There was little sense of community amongst the White residents and even the presence of local pubs did not bolster this. What sense of community spirit there was, tended to be focused around faith centers such as churches (although this was the minority). Hence those who had been moved into the area did not feel a true part of the community as there were few community structures to tap into. The inability of private owners to contribute towards refurbishment in council blocks added another source of division. Hence, the sense of community became another point of difference between Whites and Asians.

“I’ve lived here 5 years...its been a bit disappointing because the people around here aren’t so friendly and so helpful really. They just keep themselves to themselves and they’re quite rough and ready” - Male with kids at home, C2D, 25-40 Affordable, not refurbished

“Before I came here, they said, ‘you realise the area you are going into is bad’. I said ‘well in my life I don’t worry about what goes on out there, as long as it does not come in here and interfere with my life, I am quite happy” - Male empty nester (retired), C2DE, 55+ - affordable, not refurbished

Youth from both communities were exacerbating tensions by victimising members of the other community. This perpetuated a cycle of fear.

“They don’t like the Whites these Indians around here, they attacked a friend of mine – six or five young Asian lads at the top and calling him White trash.” – Female, with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished

My grandson had a bashing with eight of them [Asian youths] and got left on the ground for dead and it’s the third, third time of going to court, it will be at the end of October. It’s the first one of its type in Blackburn, its racial, so it has affected him ... he wants to go out with me or a mate has to come for him as well so he has lost his confidence” - Male empty nester (retired), C2DE, 55+ - affordable, not refurbished

In essence, the government appears to have succeeded in building communities rather than just houses for the Asian community, but failed in this respect for the White community. Over a period of time, this could exacerbate tensions if left unmanaged and unchecked.

6.2 Access to good quality public services and general facilities

The area was universally perceived as well served and this was seen as a great strength. In the vicinity were a primary and secondary school, medical centre (able to perform out patient care), gym, local corner shops (e.g. Halaal butcher and grocers) as well as a supermarket (for fresh fruit and vegetables), travel agent, chemist, hospital, play ground and parks, local college and petrol station. In addition, the town center was within easy walking distance and a number of high street brands were represented e.g. Next and Debenhams. A short drive would take residents to a large ASDA and Tesco superstore.

“I want to move but I’ve told them I want to stay in this area, I really like the area. You have everything – towns near and shops like Netto. And school near – everything – that is what is good in this area.” - Female, with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished

“Town is only six minutes walk that is why I like this area, you don’t need no bus – you can walk in six minutes.” - Female, with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished

“Since she was born I don’t have to go to the doctor for an injection I just come here and if I want to weigh her or measure her it just takes five no three minutes I think and they have dentists in there – it is a proper hospital, all specialists, everything [in the medical centre].” - Female, with kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished

Most accepted that local shops were a little more expensive, but were prepared to comprise cost over convenience. Appointments with GPs were hard to come by, however, most coped with this. Families also appreciated the home zoning of certain areas which was designed to warn drivers that there were children in the area.



The local church and community centre



The local butcher



Primary school



The local pub



The play areas

The abundance of facilities and amenities in the area served the purpose of forging an overall positive sense of community for all residents.

6.3 Access to public transport, walking, cycling and healthy lifestyles

The excellent transport facilities in the area meant that public transport was a viable option. Walking was predominant, but cycling less so due to the hilly terrain. Good, regular bus services ran to the local area (although service on Sundays was more patchy).

“The bus services are actually very good: I use the bus 5 days a week, it is good from Monday to Saturday but on a Sunday its absolutely terrible for travelling, before 9 o'clock there's no buses at all” - Male with kids at home, C2D, 25-40

Affordable, not refurbished

Blackburn was well served by train services to Manchester and other surrounding towns. Car usage in the local area was not high, for these reasons, however some (especially in the Asian community) used cars to counteract the hilly terrain, even if they were not strictly necessary.

Local residents also complained about other non-locals parking on their roads and driving without care and attention for children playing in the area. Bus services were also found to be difficult to use with young children and buggies, which caused some mothers to resort to taxis, which were affordable and plentiful.

From a health point of view, being fit and healthy was not a top priority although most were aware of the gym. The heavy preference for walking meant that this was the main form of exercise that people took.

This indicates that sustainable modes of transport are available and being used. The compact nature of the area and close proximity to amenities is paying dividends in terms of helping to reduce the impact of transport usage on the environment.



Parking in the area

6.4 Access to good quality green spaces

The area boasted several green spaces. There was the recently built Corporation Park which had sculpted features and was generally perceived to be for adults.

“They wanted to do some bench and some flowers and stuff [in the park] but I don’t think the neighbours liked that because there are a lot of children and instead of putting a slide or a swing they want to put flowers and we don’t understand why. And they wanted to take the gate off but it is a bad idea because in the summer we go in there, take blankets and we can close the door and we know the children cannot get out and that is a good thing” – **Female with 2+ kids at home, C1C2, 25-40 Affordable, refurbished**

There were few facilities for (very young) children: for a minority, this was not ideal. However, Corporation Park did add a sense of civic pride.

At the other end of the community – near the local primary school – Whitton Park had been purposely designed for children. It hosted all weather play friendly ground surfaces and climbing equipment. Whilst this was a welcome addition to the area, it

was situated near several blocks of flats that had a poor reputation (drugs, anti-social behaviour, young people ‘hanging around’ and prostitution). Hence, some parents were reluctant to send their children to the park to play outside daylight hours.

“The new playground has been taken over by teenagers as well. You can go there one day and your daughter can play for ages and the next day its packed with teenagers so there’s no sense because at the end of the day if you ask for a swing they’ll tell you no” - **Male with kids at home, C2D, 25-40 Affordable, not refurbished**

This indicates that there is scope to design open spaces for very young children who are currently not being catered for. It also suggests a need to provide and encourage use of an alternative space that young people can use, freeing up Whitton Park for children. Reassuring parents about the safety of their children will be an important part of this.

6.5 Recycling initiatives

Some areas of Bank Top had well established recycling policies run by the council with bins and bags allocated for paper waste, plastic, glass etc. In these instances, residents had little choice but to take part in recycling programmes as they would be penalised with a fine if they did not. That said, few were resentful of the extra effort involved in separating rubbish.

In other areas of Bank Top – those with the more anti-social elements – recycling was less prevalent. Residents feared being susceptible to identity theft as it would be relatively easy for a fraudster to rifle through the bag of recycled paper for bank statements and other sensitive documents. The reality of the situation was reinforced by police providing ink to smear around the mouth of the bag to catch the perpetrators.

“We don’t have recycling here, we have a big problem with the bins, at night all the bins get emptied ... people rummaging round to see what’s what, so the police have come in with some sort of spray, now when we put rubbish in the bin we put a spray inside it. They catch people walking about with the spray” - **Male empty nester (retired), C2DE, 55+ - affordable, not refurbished**

Awareness of recycling is strong and represents a solid foundation upon which to build more environmentally friendly behaviours. As part of this, overcoming the fear of fraud will be a key factor.

6.6 Creating economic opportunity and skill development in the local area

It was difficult to gauge whether the local housing developments created economic opportunity or opportunities for skill development in the local area. Residents felt that local job opportunities were being eroded by the arrival of Eastern European immigrants. The immigrants were felt to work harder, longer and for less money, making them an appealing prospect for local factory employers.

There was a general sense that there was high unemployment in the local area and that it was not economically prosperous.

Economic opportunity is a much broader issue which extends outside Bank Top and Blackburn and is unlikely to be resolved easily. It may also indicate that, in the future, community tensions may be further exacerbated by the entry of a third community – East Europeans – into the already tense dynamic between Asians and Whites.

6.7 Phone and internet connectivity

No issues were raised about phone connectivity and NTL offered scope for broadband to residents. This would leave open opportunities for home working in the future.

However with the exception of a minority, few had internet connections. And given the types of careers and job profiles of residents (working as a chef, single mum, student or opportunities to work in the local factory) home working may seem unlikely.

It would appear that if the aim is to create a sense of community then this could be better achieved via more inter-personal dynamics and supported by technology if necessary.

6.8 Living costs

The area was generally regarded as affordable and this proved to be a strong motivator to move into the area (despite initial concerns over personal safety). Residents were paying £55-60 rent per week and £700-800 per annum for council tax. There were some niggles about where and how taxes were being used but this tends to be commonplace amongst many council tax payers. There were certainly no complaints about money being mis-spent and the investment in the area was certainly welcomed.

“It’s affordable to live here compared to other places definitely, you just have to work out your finances out properly and you’re fine” - Male with kids at home, C2D, 25-40 Affordable, not refurbished

7. GOOD GOVERNANCE

7.1 Consultation about new homes and refurbishment

Residents were quietly excited about the investment in their area in terms of housing and facilities which was seen to make a real difference. However, this excitement was measured rather than a wave of enthusiasm. Perhaps, this was to be expected as the work was being carried out on a piece meal basis and so the impact of the change was diluted over a period of time. Also, many connected the housing investment to the housing associations rather than the government (based in London) per se. Housing associations were the organisations they were most familiar with and had day-to-day contact with: not the government. This also reflected their more localised perspective on their community.

Evidence for consultation of local residents regarding new builds and general community development seemed to be quite patchy. Aside from a letter from the council, little consultation appeared to have taken place. For the majority, because the sense of community spirit was quite weak, this did not seem to be particularly problematic. Those in the refurbished homes were visited to discuss colours and levels of refurbishment needed. The element of choice afforded (however limited) was appreciated.

Communicating precise details and timing of refurbishments created some frustrations amongst residents as they were keen for them to happen yet were

sometimes inconvenienced by the short notice they were given despite previous delays. There was also some incomplete communication as some residents were not aware that internal as well as external refurbishments were happening.

For those who merely had external refurbishments, they were not felt to be sufficient as considerable internal refurbishment was required to address damp, which was leading to asthma, for example. The quality of the workmanship was also questioned. There were examples given of live wires being left exposed for days in households with young children.

There is scope to enhance communications around the refurbishment task especially scheduling of work in a way that is sensitive to residents' needs. As part of this communications drive, clarity around why only internal or external refurbishment is taking place is also required.

7.2 Raising other issues

Most were aware that they could raise problems with the council or with their housing association. But, in practice, few did. The main reason for this silence was lack of confidence overall, diminished faith in action being taken and little knowledge of to whom they should speak to. For those that did, the result could be frustration at the length of time it took to obtain a response and remedy.

To encourage greater confidence in addressing these matters, there is a need for key council and housing association personnel to be more visible, make residents aware of the process for raising issues and to convince them that action will be taken.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- There are some key motivating factors that attract people to the area and retain them there. The two most important are the affordability of living and the sheer number and convenience of the facilities close by i.e. shops, transport, health services and increasingly green spaces.

- Residents were often warned of the bad reputation that the area held before they moved into it, but many of their fears proved ungrounded in the low levels of crime that they had experienced
- Many felt the older housing on offer, even if refurbished, did not meet the need for a mix of different sized offerings for the local community. In the main they were felt to be too small for modern living
- External refurbishments were welcomed, partly due to the low hassle factor, but some tensions existed between private and non-private residents in the same block over costs of communal refurbishments that had to be footed by private residents
- New homes in the area were welcomed in principle, although they were the focus of some ethnic tension as perceptions within the White community were that they were solely being built and given to/ bought by Asian people with larger families
- The refurbishment consultation process was felt to be patchy or even non-existent in places
- Ethnic tensions and a lack of integration between the Asian and the White communities existed. There was, however found to be a sense of community within the Asian people in the area, although not within the White community
- There was felt to be good public transport and access to green spaces (although the latter could be tarnished by the presence of intimidating youths later at night). Recycling facilities were in their infancy, but growing

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is scope to encourage a more positive outlook by making new residents aware of the historical reputation of the area, but also reassuring them of its safety on an everyday basis. There may be worth in emphasising the strong local facilities, which are appreciated by local people. This may foster pride in the area and begin the process of building communities.

- There are other elements, apart from those already being implemented that should be considered in the refurbishment process, such as damp proofing.
- The dynamics between private and non-private residents within the same development will need careful management as will the process of allocating the new stock of housing. If it is perceived that these are purely for the Asian community, this will do little to ease the existing racial tension
- The new Whitton Park development is appreciated, but could be improved by allowing free access to those with children on a more regular basis. The strengthening of local and community activities and centres for young people may help to free up these areas for children later in the day
- To improve local recycling initiatives, work will need to be done on reducing the fear of identity theft in certain areas. The continuation of the fine scheme would seem to be a good way of encouraging recycling in those areas not affected by this issue
- Economic opportunity is an issue that does not just affect the local area, but extends beyond Bank Top and Blackburn and is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. It does, however have a significant part to play in many of the issues the residents face and ultimately will need to be addressed before many of the problems can be overcome.
- There is scope to open the dialogue between the White and Asian communities and to build bridges between them.
- Communications about the refurbishment process could be enhanced, particularly in the scheduling of work in a way that is sensitive to residents' needs. The reasons behind why internal or external renovations are being undertaken could also be clarified.