

# Displacement and Disenchantment: A Longitudinal Analysis of Social Housing Provision in Earl's Court<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper finds evidence of a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl's Court over the period 2001-2011, particularly in relation to the rest of London. We deduce that this fall is associated with a decline in social housing provision rather than a lack of demand. Additionally, through qualitative analysis, our study finds considerable evidence of potential future displacement of social housing tenants due to the Earl's Court Regeneration Scheme. These results are indicative of a rise in class-based inequality, with a mismanaged social housing system instigating distrust and social tension between local authorities and community members. Semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholders reveal a hostile community response to council-imposed displacement. Furthermore, our analysis unveils the importance of organised community activism, especially pertaining to a "right to transfer" from a local council landlord to a resident-run housing association. If the downward trend in social housing provision were to continue, housing estate tenants could be forced into the costly private rental market, lowering disposable income and further worsening their welfare.

## Keywords

social housing, neoliberalism, gentrification, regeneration, displacement

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we define 'Earl's Court' as the two electoral wards of Earl's Court and North End affected by the Earl's Court Regeneration Scheme

## Introduction:

Earl's Court is an area split between the contrasting London Boroughs of Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham. Despite the area's economic strength, it continues to face social demise through successive 'regeneration' projects. The Earl's Court Regeneration Scheme currently threatens an increasingly insufficient quantity of social housing. Drawing on Census data from 2001 and 2011, this study first determines that social housing has significantly decreased in the Earl's Court area, both in absolute terms and relative to London as a whole. We deduce that this fall is associated with a decline in social housing provision rather than a lack of demand. Subsequent qualitative analysis, in the form of semi-structured interviews, provides evidence of the 'lived effect' of potential demolition for residents of the West Kensington & Gibbs Green Housing Association (WKGGH). Implicit in the decline of social housing is the inability of the state to ensure affordable housing for all. Such inadequate provision threatens the most vulnerable members of our society, resulting in rising displacement and an entrance into the unstable private rental market. Our main research question concerns how the provision of social housing relates to poverty and inequality in Earl's Court over the period 2001-2016. To understand this overarching query, we started with a quantitative enquiry, examining the change in the proportion of households classed as social housing<sup>2</sup> in Earl's Court over the period 2001-2011. These statistical findings led us to explore the emerging dynamics behind the intersection of social housing and class-based inequality in Earl's Court. The significance of our study lies in explaining the increasingly 'marginalised voice' of housing estate communities, seemingly powerless in the wake of private sector interests.

## Methodology:

Based on initial research we looked to investigate the following hypotheses:

- (1) The proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl's Court decreased in absolute terms over the period 2001-2011
- (2) The proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl's Court decreased relative to the proportion of households

classed as social housing in London as a whole over the period 2001-2011

To examine the first hypothesis, we used the two-tailed One Group Proportion test in the statistical package SPSS, with the following test statistic:

$$Z = \frac{\hat{p} - p_0}{\sqrt{\frac{p_0(1 - p_0)}{n}}}$$

$\hat{p}$  represents the proportion of social housing in 2011 and  $p_0$  represents the proportion of social housing in 2001.  $n$  represents the number of households in Earl's Court in 2011. The test was carried out at a standard 5% significance level. Where the test produced a p-value below 5%, we rejected the following null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) in favour of the alternative ( $H_1$ ):

( $H_0$ ) The proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl's Court did not change over the period 2001-2011

( $H_1$ ) The proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl's Court did change over the period 2001-2011

To investigate (2), the decrease in social housing in Earl's Court was compared to the change across London between 2001 and 2011, using a 95% confidence interval around the London average. The change for the Earl's Court area was compared with this confidence interval to determine significance. Subsequently, we assessed the change in social housing waiting lists over the same time period, to determine whether the underlying cause of the fall was reduced demand rather than lack of supply.

The data obtained from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses has certain limitations and assumptions. It is based around households instead of individuals, which can skew the data. For instance, if a regeneration project redeveloped a home into a group of apartments, this would translate into an increase in the number of households classed as social housing, despite the number of people housed remaining constant. Hence the data is not entirely representative of the change in social housing in any location, including Earl's Court. Also, there are likely to be inaccuracies in the Census data due to errors made by respondents and insufficient completion rates in some areas. Furthermore, we made the assumption that the 2001 Census used the same ward areas and criteria for social housing classification as the 2011 Census.

Both the One Group Proportion test and the confidence interval use the assumption that the

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we define 'households classed as social housing' as the proportion of households with the following tenure types: rented from the Local Authority and rented from a Registered Social Landlord

data follows a normal distribution, implying symmetry. This assumption may not necessarily hold, though testing for it is beyond the scope of our paper. The One Group Proportion test also uses the assumption that the datasets are independent. In fact, they are highly unlikely to be so, as the provision of housing in 2011 was quite likely dependent on the state of provision in 2001. However, as this test is the best fit for the available data, there is little capacity for reducing such dependence.

For the qualitative data, we used semi-structured interviews with experts in their respective field. Our interviewees included: an expert in social policy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), who had professional experience working in the Earl's Court community; a community organiser for WKGGH; and an Official from the Office of Corporate Communications in the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham. All three interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 20 minutes to an hour. We asked a different set of questions to each interviewee based on their expertise on Earl's Court. However, all questions followed a specific theme relating to the planned Earl's Court Regeneration Scheme. The interviews were then coded to decipher key themes. We chose to pursue a semi-structured interview approach due to its effectiveness in providing a direct account of the unique situation in Earl's Court. Additionally, the lack of scholarly literature on the regeneration scheme meant our best option was to liaise directly with stakeholders. Nonetheless, our method of asking pre-written questions limited our ability to investigate more broadly in an open interview format. However, we determined our guiding questions were more beneficial in collecting data due to time constraints.

## Literature Review:

Academic discourse on social housing privatisation has evolved dramatically since the early 1980s, increasingly detaching 'modernising' policy developments from their wider consequences on social welfare and inequality (Hodkinson et al. 2013). Over the same time period, much of the "protective shield against exploitation [of social housing tenants]" has disappeared. Instead of a pre-Thatcher policy which securely housed a third of the UK population, post 1970s public housing policy has led to over five million people on social housing

waiting lists, whilst vast rent increases have priced even median-income families out of London (Hodkinson et al. 2013, p. 4) (Hamnett 2003, p. 2417). Such policy is indicative of the neoliberal framework central to Thatcherism, which promoted the idea of housing as a private market, rather than a sector in which the state should intervene to provide "adequate homes for all". The result is a housing policy which serves as an "engine of growing inequality," rewarding private contractors at the expense of poorer tenants (Edwards 2016, p. 23).

Existing literature has explored the effects of government housing legislation on housing estate tenants. The conservative-introduced Right to Buy scheme, offers tenants a "statutory right to buy their council home" at a large discount. While seemingly financially empowering, the scheme has turned tenants themselves into "agents of privatisation," contributing to the current social housing shortage and causing displacement of those on low incomes (Hodkinson et al. 2013, p. 7). Additionally, it is argued that a significant consequence of New Labour's Housing Market Renewal programme was the gentrification<sup>3</sup> of working-class neighbourhoods in inner London (Smith 2002) (Lees 2008). Such private rental-led gentrification has led to both a "steady concentration" of lower income households in the "remaining inner London housing estates" and for many, a complete displacement from inner London into the surrounding suburbs (Hamnett 2003, p. 2417) (Paccoud 2015). The demolition of the Heygate Estate in the London Borough of Elephant & Castle, in spite of spirited community activism, provides clarity on the difficulty in resisting such urban regeneration in practice. If such "social cleansing" continues, the result may likely be a London that is "illustrating the principle of survival of the [financially] fittest" (Lees & Ferreri 2016) (Glass 1964, pp. 140-141).

The 'lived effect' for those affected by socio-spatial displacement in London has been described as one of social exclusion, deprivation and insecurity (Watt 2006). In media and policy dialogues, housing estates communities are marginalised as an "underclass," displaying "deviant or illegal behaviour" whilst being "economically and politically isolated" (Van Kempen & Özüekren 1998, p. 1635). However,

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we define gentrification as the "social and spatial manifestation of the transition to a post-industrial economy...with associated changes in the structure of the housing market [towards private rental tenureship]" (Hamnett 2003)

such discourse negates the importance of community (Power et al. 2011). Indeed, housing estates are far more than “isolation territories” (Van Kempen & Özüekren 1998, p. 1634). They represent a complex social network that fosters a sense of belonging. For instance, in a qualitative study of the London Borough of Camden, the social capital attributed to “knowing people in the neighbourhood” was associated with a “positive sense of place” (Watts 2006, p. 793). Consequently, such evidence supports the critique of urban regeneration schemes as socially destructive, with residents taking an “antagonistic stance” towards the ‘remaking’ of their community (Hodkinson et al. 2013, p. 8).

The existing social policy literature offers a compelling narrative of the experiences of social housing tenants. It reveals the effect of London’s neoliberal housing policy in promoting private rental-led gentrification in Earl’s Court, as well as the resulting displacement and social exclusion of low income residents. In our study, the decline in social housing provision and the continual threat of housing estate demolition are indicative of a wider theme of ‘marginalised voices,’ seemingly powerless to the threat of privatisation.

## Data & Results:

### Quantitative Analysis:

Our two-tailed One Group Proportion test revealed the following results:

2001 social housing proportion ( $p_0$ )	30.12%
2011 social housing proportion ( $\hat{p}$ )	25.82%
Total no. of households in 2011 ( $n$ )	10,482
z-statistic ( $Z$ )	-9.598
p-value	$P < 0.0001$
95% Confidence Interval for 2011 proportion	24.98% - 26.65%

The p-value is below the standard significance level of 5%, and remains significant even at the 0.1% significance level. Moreover, the proportion of households classed as social housing in 2001, 30.12%, lies far outside our 95% confidence interval for 2011. Hence we can offer sufficient evidence to support our first hypothesis (1), concluding that the proportion of households classed as social housing in Earl’s Court significantly decreased between 2001 and 2011.

We now show that decrease in social housing in Earl’s Court was significantly greater than the London-wide change, demonstrating the

disproportionate experience of local residents. Figure 1 shows the average London change in the proportion of social housing alongside the change for each London Borough. A confidence interval has been constructed at the 95% significance level around the London average. Data for the Electoral Ward of Earl’s Court, shown in green, lies significantly outside this interval. Thus we are also able to find sufficient evidence for our second hypothesis (2), noting a statistically significant decrease in social housing in Earl’s Court relative to London as a whole.

In proportional terms, microeconomic theory suggests social housing supply and demand as the two relevant determinants of the quantity of households classed as social housing. Using the variable “number of households on social housing waiting lists” as a proxy for excess social housing demand, we determine that the excess demand for social housing in the London Boroughs for which the Earl’s Court Regeneration Scheme is planned, increased over the period 2001-2011 (Figure 2). Thus, in proportional terms, we deduce that the reduction in the quantity of households classed as social housing was associated with a decline in social housing supply rather than a lack of demand.

These statistical results led us to consider the fall in social housing as an ongoing process. In order to better understand the emerging dynamics, we decided to conduct expert interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Earl’s Court Regeneration Scheme.

### Qualitative Analysis:

Coding of the semi-structured interviews revealed key themes, including: increasing trends of class-based marginalisation, as well as the importance and limitations of organised community activism, especially pertaining to “Right to Transfer” legislation<sup>4</sup>. The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identity.

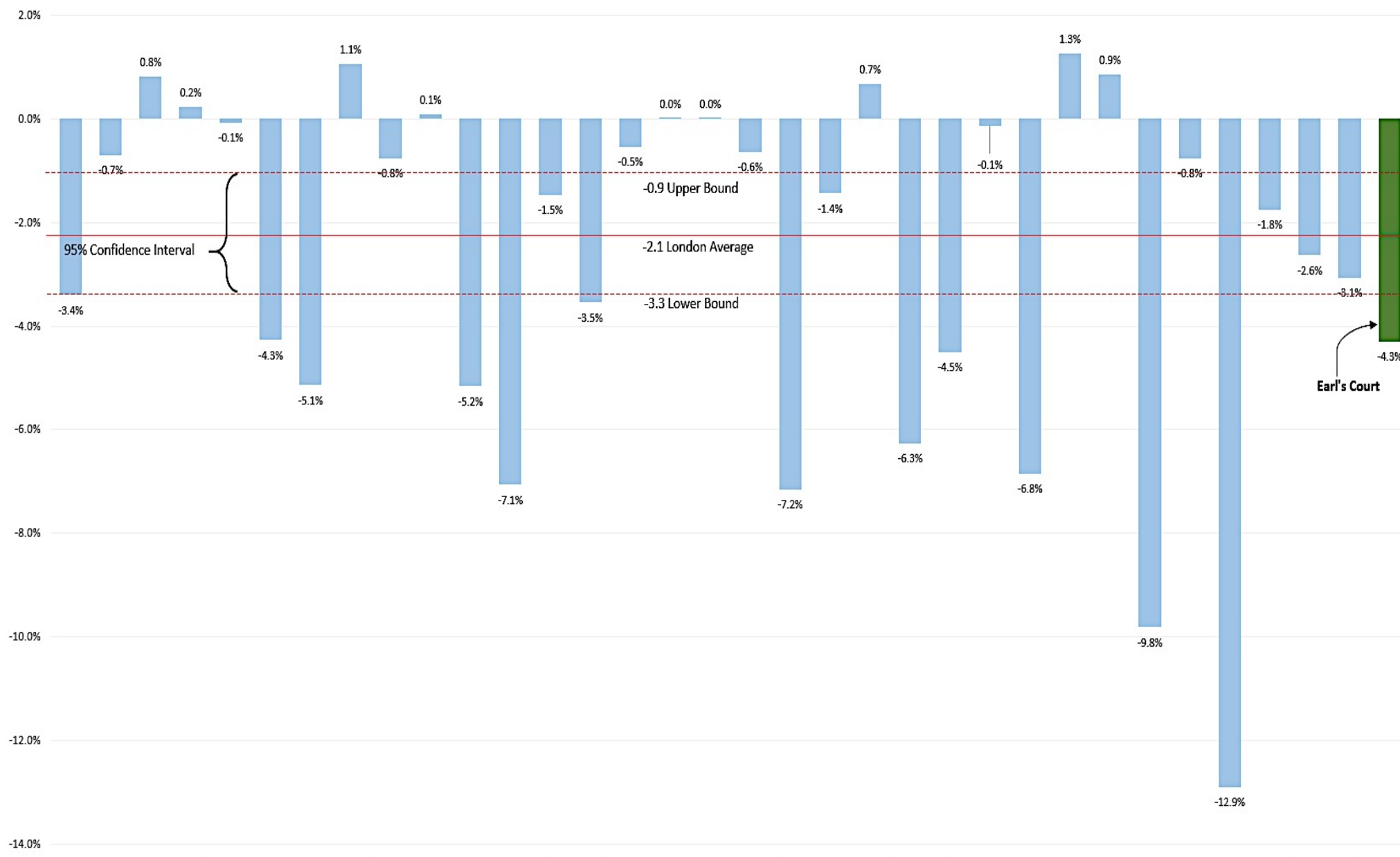
Regarding the increasing marginalisation of housing estate tenants, all three experts expressed the residents’ contempt with the planned regeneration project. Daniel Cohen, a community organiser for WKGGH, spoke on behalf of the locals fighting for the “Right to Transfer” policy and against the planned demolition of their estate. Cohen expressed the residents’ outrage with the

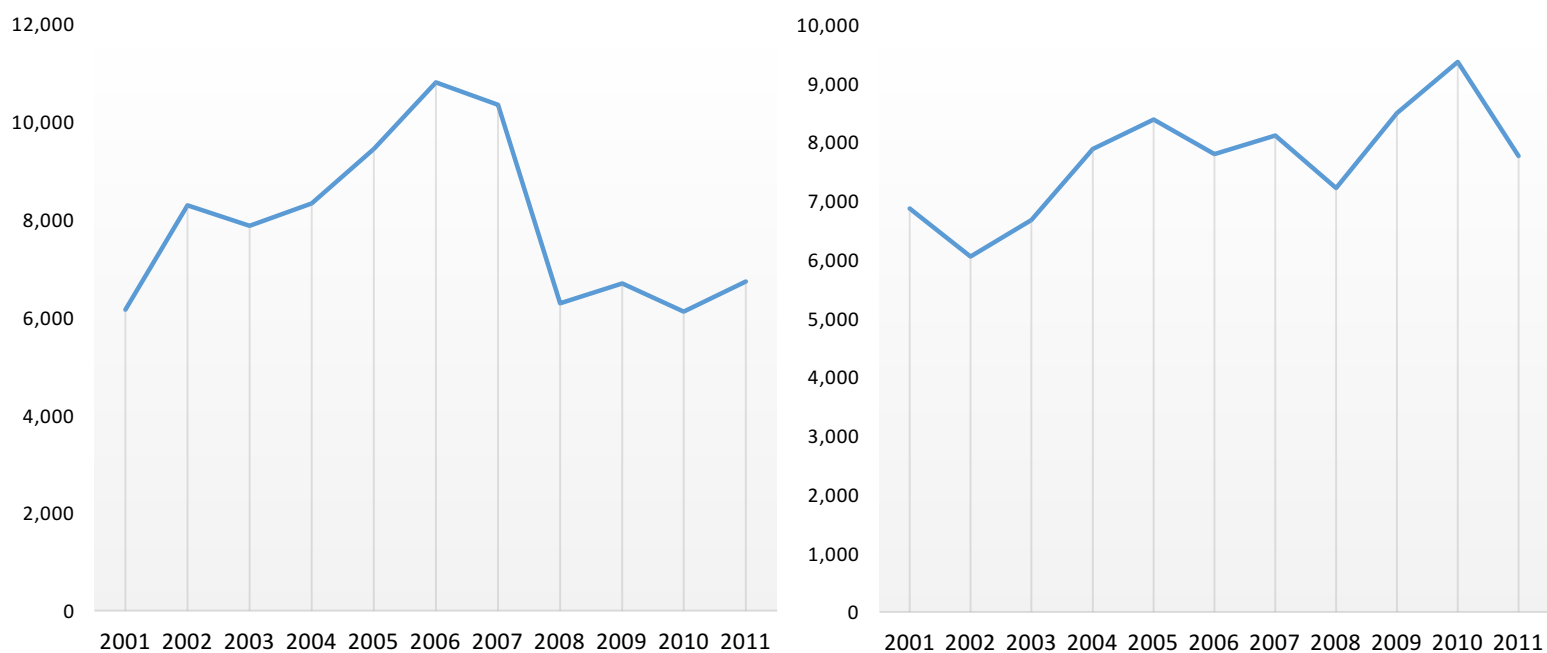
<sup>4</sup> “Right to Transfer” legislation allows social housing tenants to vote to switch landlords from the local council to their own resident-run housing association. The policy aims to prevent local councils from selling land used for social housing to private developers.

**Figure 1. Change in proportion of social housing per Borough 2001-11**

Percentage change in proportion of households classed as social housing in each London Borough shown in blue. Data for Electoral Ward of Earl's Court highlighted in green.

Source: UK ONS Census 2001 & 2011 (Office for National Statistics)





**Figure 2. Rising excess demand for social housing 2001-11**

Number of households on local authority social housing waiting lists in the London Borough of Kensington & Chelsea (left) and the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (right)

Source: UK ONS (Office for National Statistics)

regeneration scheme, with surveys saying 70-80% of residents are deeply unhappy with the project. He noted, *“Local residents dislike the project because there is no reason for people to move, except for monetary gain for private developer.”* Cohen said the reason for regeneration seemed to be the bettering of a “not decent community”. However, he further explained how nothing is wrong with the community, only that “poor people live there”. According to Cohen, the planned demolition effectively creates a precedent for poor people having their homes knocked down, indicating a process of “marginalisation” and “social cleansing” (Lees & Ferreri 2016) (Van Kempen & Özüekren 1998).

Matt Jones, an Official from the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, had little opinion on the “Right to Transfer” policy as an effective plan. According to Jones, the council has created a resident-led task force and is consulting with the residents about their plans. Jones emphasised, *“the council has a commitment to do things with the residents, not to the residents”*. However, he never specified which residents were consulted. Jones did continually stress that the council is working toward helping the residents, though negotiations with the private developer and local council continued to be solely bilateral.

Dr. Mike Smith is a social policy expert from the LSE with experience working with housing associations in Earl’s Court. From professional experience, Smith has seen that most residents

respond in one of two ways to being displaced from their homes. Some view the displacement as a positive experience, which enables them to move either to a different neighbourhood or to be closer to family. However, a majority of people are hostile to relocation due to the forced displacement from their homes and routines.

Smith believes that resident-run housing associations, included the recently created WKGGH, are a good idea in theory but difficult to implement. The difficulty of such community activism lies in the fact that non-specialists are responsible for running a large organisation instead of experts. Similarly, Smith pointed out that there is likely a higher probability of corruption when neighbours effectively become in charge of one another. He notes, *“The council would be more likely to maintain order since they do not have a close personal connection to the people living in the estate.”* Furthermore, Smith explained the additional obstacle of securing sufficient funds to manage the estate.

Contrastingly, Cohen strongly believed that resident-run housing associations were the solution to combat private sector demolition, especially for the WKGGH estate. Cohen argues such a policy would prevent issues such as the Earl’s Court Regeneration Scheme from threatening tenants in the future, since locals *“who know best about their neighbourhood”* would be in charge of their fate instead of the government. He answered to doubts on the

feasibility of the policy by highlighting that new housing associations would have a board consisting of both residents and specialists, with sufficient funding coming from rental payments. However, in the case of Earl's Court, the "Right to Transfer" policy was unable to prevent the conditional land-sale agreement between the local council and the private developer, raising questions on whether such community activism can effectively fight against the demolition of social housing estates.

### **Conclusion:**

Our study has found that the proportion of households classed as social housing significantly decreased (from 30.12% to 25.82%) in Earl's Court between 2001 and 2011, and at a far greater rate than the London average. Meanwhile, the number of households on social housing waiting lists in the area continued to increase. Hence excess demand for social housing increased whilst its provision fell. For the period after the 2011 Census, our qualitative analysis of residents in the West Kensington & Gibbs Green Housing Estate highlights the anger caused by the planned Earl's Court Regeneration Scheme. A potential solution to future privatisation may lie with "Right to Transfer" legislation, allowing residents to take control of their own housing estates to protect against demolition.

The fall in the provision of social housing in Earl's Court cannot be decoupled from the wider societal consequences on poverty and inequality. In promoting private rental-led gentrification, London's neoliberal housing policy is resulting in the displacement and social exclusion of the most vulnerable members of our society. In our study, the decline in social housing provision and the continual threat of housing estate demolition tell a narrative of 'marginalised voices,' increasingly helpless to the threat of market forces. Heightened distrust and social tension between local authorities and community members will likely continue unless councils work in the best interests of local communities. However, if residents continue to be ignored in the face of wider privatisation, the only guarantee is a further worsening of their welfare.

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