

Progress on twenty 'unpopular' estates, 1980-2005

This study by Rebecca Tunstall and Alice Coulter of the London School of Economics is based on research carried out on 20 council estates in England over 25 years. The estates were tracked through visits and interviews in 1982, 1988, 1994 and 2005. In 1980, the estates were all unpopular, had serious management problems and many also had physical problems. The research has tracked their progress and this latest project comments on the whole period, with a focus on the last ten years. The team found that:

- In 16 of the 20 estates, housing managers and residents felt there were improvements between 1980 and 1995, which continued between 1995 and 2005. In the remaining four, progress had halted or reversed: two faced major redevelopment.
- Key changes included: improved popularity, more diverse housing ownership, management reorganisation and improved performance by housing managers. There was significant regeneration and investment in many of the estates and major redevelopment in six.
- In the 1990s, concentrations of unemployed residents, lone parents and children decreased and unemployment levels halved, reversing trends of the 1980s.
- Over the same period, educational performance at secondary schools improved – faster than average for their local education authorities.
- Levels of crime and residents' concern about crime decreased, although concern about anti-social behaviour grew.
- Gaps between the estates and their local authorities and the national average have narrowed on a range of measures, for example employment, popularity and educational performance. However, significant gaps remain on all measures, and the gap on economic inactivity has increased.
- The estates have become more typical of social housing, for example in their residents' patterns of employment, but social housing in general has also become more marginalised in relation to the national norm of home ownership.
- This evidence shows it is possible to make long-term progress, but narrowing the gaps takes years of commitment to capital funding, revenue funding and attention from central government, housing managers and residents' groups.
- The researchers conclude that these estates are 'turning the tide', but improvements could be threatened by a loss of local and national policy priority, or any nationwide loss of jobs or demand for housing.



Background

This report is based on research carried out over a 25-year period on 20 council estates in London, the Midlands, the North East and North West of England. Most of the estates were relatively successful after they were first built, but by 1980 were unpopular, had serious management problems with poor services, many empty homes and unkempt environments, and many also had significant physical problems. The estates were chosen for research in the early 1980s because the councils that owned and managed them were introducing improvement initiatives, based on local housing management with increased resident involvement. The estates include every major type of council housing, from 1920s semi-detached homes to 1970s modernist estates, and are typical of less popular council estates.

Key changes in the estates 1980-2005

According to staff and residents' assessments in 1988, 1995 and 2005:

- Six estates had improved steadily over the 25-year period.
- Ten more had experienced threats or reverses after initial progress, but had improved by 1995 and again by 2005.
- The four remaining estates were in an uncertain position in 2005 – one had declined from an uncertain position in 1995; two were subject to plans for major redevelopments after earlier initiatives had not achieved all that was hoped; and the other estate's problems had not been overcome by a redevelopment in the 1990s.

Untangling the causes of these changes is very difficult: many factors have operated together, often with knock-on effects leading to other changes. Since 1980, the estates have been affected by a complex mix of mainstream housing policy; government regeneration initiatives targeted at less popular estates; the actions of councils, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and residents; and broader social and economic trends, including falling unemployment, falling crime and rising school performance.

Most of the estates received several different types of central government regeneration funding over 25 years. This was important in delivering redevelopment and also

paid for basic refurbishment to many homes, as well as improving estate environments. Local authorities also contributed funds. Over the last ten years they have sought routes to investment, passing ownership to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and management responsibility to new Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) they have set up. Estates have increasingly financed their own redevelopments through sale of land and new building.

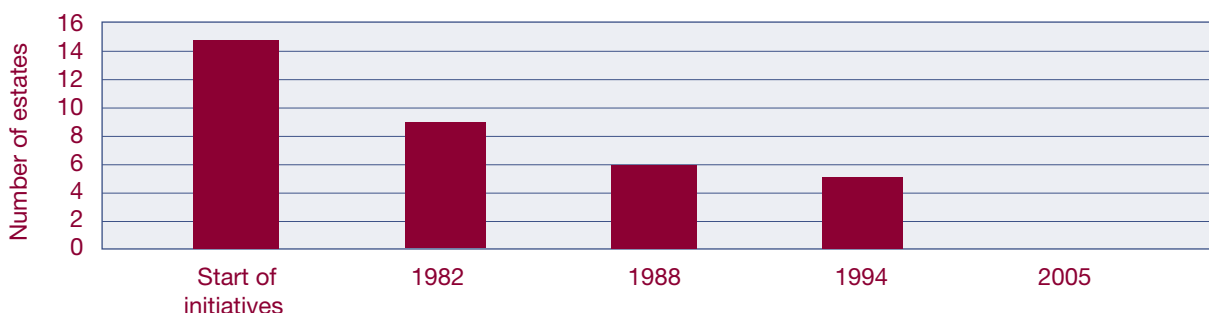
Throughout the 25 years, governments pressured local authorities to improve their housing management. In 1995, 18 of the estates were managed by councils, falling to nine by 2005. Three estates were owned by RSLs, which had taken over management. Seven were run by ALMOs, and one was managed by a private sector contractor. However, by 2005 only half the estates had estate-based or area offices because of pressures for efficiency, availability of new technology, and a perception that problems had reduced.

Performance in the estates has improved markedly, evident in the reductions in empty homes, the end of neglected, rubbish-strewn environments, and, in most cases, speedier housing repair services. Some residents' groups were involved in management and regeneration initiatives in the estates in 2005, and in two sites, Tenant Management Organisations were responsible for estate management. However, only 14 estates had active residents' groups in 2005, compared with 18 in 1995.

Demand for these once unpopular estates rose between 1980 and 1995, and continued to increase during the next decade. By 2005, vacancy rates had fallen to local authority and national averages for social housing. None of the estates was seen as 'difficult to let' (Figure 1), decades of stigma connected in some estates to slum clearance had faded, there was moderate demand for homes in most cases, and three had even reached 'high demand' status.

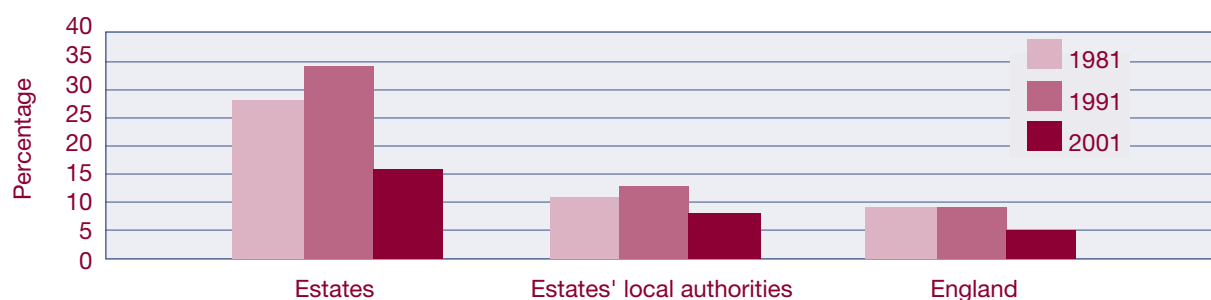
In 1980, all the homes in the estates were council-owned but, following tenure diversification, which accelerated markedly after 1995, social housing made up an average of 81 per cent of homes across the estates by 2005. In three estates, all the social rented homes had been transferred from councils to RSLs, while in six there were significant redevelopments, mostly after 1995, involving

Figure 1: Estates considered 'difficult to let' by managers



Sources: Interviews 1982, 1988, 1995, 2005

Figure 2: **Unemployed residents as a percentage of economically active residents aged 16-74**



Source: Census 1981, 1991, 2001

the demolition of council homes, new building by private developers and RSLs, and some sales of council homes to developers.

Between 1981 and 1991, concentrations of residents who were unemployed or economically inactive (those not in paid work but not seeking work), children and lone-parent-headed households increased sharply in the estates. However, most of these trends reversed in 1991-2001. The gaps between the estate populations and their local authorities and the nation decreased on unemployment (Figure 2) and employment rates. The concentrations of young people and lone-parent-headed households also decreased, suggesting that the estate populations in 2005 were not as disadvantaged as at the time of the past studies.

Performance at estate-linked secondary schools improved significantly between 1994 and 2004, and the gaps between these schools, their local education authorities and the nation reduced. Attendance rates also improved faster for estate-linked schools.

Crime had been a major concern for residents and managers in the 1980s and early 1990s. Its salience had reduced significantly by 2005, although anti-social behaviour had replaced it to some extent.

Economic inactivity had increased, going against the national trend and suggesting that the fall in unemployment may have been partly due to people leaving the labour market. Residents' health was also significantly worse than the local authority or national average.

Closing the gaps and becoming more 'normal' areas

Over 25 years, the gaps between the estates and their local authorities and the nation reduced in terms of resident employment and unemployment rates and achievement at estate-linked schools. The estates also progressed in terms of increased popularity, changes in tenure mix and the physical form, condition, appearance and maintenance of homes.

These formerly very unpopular estates have become more 'normal' as majority social housing areas and by 2005 were close to the national average for social

housing tenants in terms of resident satisfaction and levels of employment, unemployment and economic activity. Meanwhile, however, the amount of council housing has halved, and social housing has become more marginalised. In 1981, twice as many heads of social renting households were in work as were outside the labour market, but by 2004 the situation had reversed.

Explaining the changes

In 1995, research on the 20 estates concluded that progress over the first 15 years could be attributed to a combination of sustained local housing management, periodic capital investment and resident involvement. By 2005 progress had continued, and these factors still appeared important, but the explanation was more complex.

Vicious circles or 'spirals of decline' can set in for deprived neighbourhoods, and these were certainly operating in the 20 estates in 1980. By 2005, however, most estates were instead showing at least some virtuous circles, creating complex but positive knock-on effects. For example, increasing popularity could reduce the difficulty of management, and increase the likelihood of less deprived residents applying for homes.

In all the estates, regeneration funding and other capital expenditure has been an important part of sustained improvement in conditions, popularity and resident satisfaction. Investment and redevelopment had other knock-on effects, such as cutting the number of estates with design features that made them hard to manage and prone to crime. The estates with the least investment stagnated in the 1990s – in some cases, limited results from early investment led to further initiatives. Five of the six estates that were redeveloped experienced notable improvements, but in the sixth, introducing mixed tenure caused problems, as homes intended for low-cost home ownership failed to find a market.

Local, intensive and improved management and the involvement of resident groups appeared important to progress and to trouble-shooting throughout the 25 years. However, by 2005 the connection between local management, resident involvement and improved estate trajectories had weakened, because in some improved estates, landlords withdrew local management and residents' groups faded.

In addition to national policy, other factors outside the estates appeared to have a greater influence from the late 1990s. National and regional trends that contributed to change included:

- rising employment;
- increasing house prices;
- demand for social housing and homes for sale;
- falling crime;
- rising educational achievement.

Local factors including the improvement of estate reputations, investment in homes and spending on crime prevention helped the estates to benefit from these wider trends.

Conclusion

In 1995, the 20 estates appeared to be 'swimming against the tide', with improvements threatened by increased social polarisation, but the researchers found that by 2005 the estates appeared to be 'turning the tide'. Some of the long-lasting problems appeared to have ended, 'virtuous circles' were in place, and the estates had become more 'normal' as neighbourhoods. There are, however, some major points of caution for interpretation and policy:

- Significant differences remain despite the reduction in gaps between the estates and their local authorities and the nation. In 2001, in its National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal the Government pledged to end gaps between different areas so that "*in 10-20 years, no-one is significantly disadvantaged by where they live*". The experience of the last 25 years shows it is possible to make long-term progress, but narrowing the gaps takes sustained commitments of capital funding, revenue funding and attention from central government, landlords and housing managers and residents' groups. Fully closing the gaps is likely to take more than 10 or 20 years.

- Some of the improvements also appear to be linked to wider social and economic trends, which may not continue.
- Major physical and tenure change did not guarantee improvement, and even where it had been successful, staff and residents were anxious for careful management to prevent, for example, the emergence of drugs problems.
- Achievements could also be threatened by 'normalisation' leading to, for example, reduced priority for central government support and landlord attention, and less local management.
- Given that the estates are increasingly typical of social housing and majority-social housing areas, these points apply across the national social housing stock.
- While almost all of the estates are now significantly better places to live than in 1980 or in 1995, the lives of individual residents may not necessarily have changed for the better. Some of the changes in population may be due to disadvantaged people leaving, and both mixed tenure and increased popularity may make it more difficult for the most disadvantaged to gain homes in these estates.

About the project

The research in 2005 involved visits to the 20 estates and interviews with senior and local housing managers and residents' groups, comprising 69 interviews in all. In ten areas the team briefly interviewed a total of 89 residents on the street who were not involved in groups. The team also reviewed reports on social landlord performance and analysed data from the last three censuses and national surveys, including the Survey of English Housing. Overall, the four rounds of research in 1982, 1988, 1994 and 2005 involved 225 visits and 241 in-depth interviews.

For further information

The full report, **Twenty-five years on twenty estates: Turning the tide?** by Rebecca Tunstall and Alice Coulter, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 935 1, price £12.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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- This report builds on earlier work on the same 20 estates. Read a summary of the earlier findings at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/H151.asp>

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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