



Contesting social housing demolition through community co-design: The Alton Estate's People's Plan

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Abstract

In recent decades, many social housing estates in London have been demolished and replaced by mixed-tenure developments. These schemes have been strongly contested by residents and campaigns, who argue that the schemes produce displacement, loss of social connections, and loss of socially rented homes. These alliances of residents and campaigners occasionally include researchers. This paper explores how co-design and participatory action research approaches can contest top-down demolition and redevelopment of social housing estates. It uses Alton Estate, in South-West London, which Wandsworth Council planned to demolish and redevelop, as a case study. Through a partnership with resident-led group Alton Action, a team of researchers co-designed an alternative approach to regeneration with local communities, building on collectively produced evidence and focusing on improving the neighbourhood using the existing built environment. Through a series of knowledge exchanges and co-design workshops, communities and researchers co-produced the Alton Estate People's Plan, a community vision to improve the neighbourhood. This process empowered residents to participate in decision-making regarding the future of their neighbourhood.

Keywords Co-design · Social housing · London · Regeneration · People's Plan · Communities

Introduction

The regeneration of social housing estates has been featured in national and local political agendas in the UK since the late 1990s. From Tony Blair delivering his first speech on the Aylesbury Estate in 1997 (Campkin 2013), to David Cameron depicting housing estates as “concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers” (Cameron 2016), adopting a rhetoric linking social housing estates’ urban design to crime. Consequently, many social housing estates have been demolished and redeveloped into mixed-tenure developments, on many occasions resulting in the displacement of residents (London Tenants Federation et al. 2014; Lees and Ferreri 2016). Often, these redevelopment schemes were executed by selling off estates or entering a joint venture with a private developer, which in cases like the Heygate Estate in Southwark has meant loss of socially rented homes (Lees and Ferreri 2016). Although there is extensive evidence of the social and environmental benefits of retrofitting existing social housing estates rather than demolishing and redeveloping them (Crawford et al.

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2014), the latter approach remains the prevalent choice for local authorities and housing associations.

These redevelopment schemes have been actively contested by residents, and the communities living in and near them. Residents have collaborated with campaign groups, professionals—and scholars—to use diverse mechanisms to oppose the demolition of social housing estates. Some collaborations have produced alternative plans—e.g., People's or Community Plans (Sendra 2018; Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020, 2024)—for which residents collaborate with architects and urban designers. Although not a statutory planning framework nor required to follow any specific format—and while lacking legal enforcement—a People's Plan is a community-led vision that aims to influence the formal planning process and deliver a scheme that responds to the aspirations of the residents and communities living in an area.

Alton Estate is one of the more than 100 housing estates in London facing redevelopment (EstateWatch, n.d.). Residents and community members have contested its regeneration, including through the development of a People's Plan. In July 2020, the resident-led campaign Alton Action contacted a group of urban design and planning scholars proposing a collaboration to explore community-led alternatives for regeneration. The researchers and Alton Action carried out a knowledge exchange project that would lead to putting together an alternative scheme for the area, co-produced with the residents, and exploring more sustainable solutions to regeneration. This consisted of a series of knowledge exchange and co-production workshops, as well as a residents survey and conversations with community organisations, with the following aims: (1) co-produce an analysis of anticipated effects of Wandsworth Council's proposed regeneration scheme on the lives of residents—i.e., a Social Impact Assessment (SIA); (2) understand residents' priorities for the regeneration of the estate, and co-produce with them a community vision for the future of their neighbourhood, with evidentiary documents such as a feasibility study, a heritage impact assessment and a Whole Life Carbon Analysis (WLCA) comparing regeneration approaches; (3) exchange knowledge between communities and researchers to empower residents and increase their capacity to influence decision making. This project started in October 2020 and was completed in July 2021.

This paper addresses the three objectives outlined above. It first provides a theoretical framework on opposing social housing demolition and People's Plans as a form of contestation. It then explains the participatory action research (PAR) methodological approach as well as the co-design methods used. Third, it analyses the potential impact of demolition and redevelopment on residents. Next, it explains the People's Plan, which is a proposal co-designed by residents, communities, and researchers. This is followed by presentation of the evidence base for the People's Plan, including

a WLCA comparing regeneration approaches, a financial viability study and a heritage impact assessment. Finally, the paper discusses the impact this knowledge exchange project has had on residents' capacity to influence decision-making. Overall, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about how scholars can impactfully collaborate with community groups to support their struggles and the current debate on social housing regeneration in London.

Contesting the demolition of social housing estates

The so-called “regeneration” of social housing estates has been heavily contested by residents. In London, estate regeneration has taken different approaches—complete redevelopment, partial redevelopment, or refurbishment with some infill development. Overall, the cumulative result in recent decades is the loss of socially rented homes, aggravating the impact of Right to Buy legislation and the steep decline in building public housing since the 1980s (Watt and Minton 2016). Additionally, council estates have been treated as spaces for densification to meet house-building targets; and real estate consultancy firms like Savills (Savills 2016) and think tanks like Centre for London (Hanna et al. 2016) have produced studies to support this. The concentration on housing delivery has impacted the quantity and quality of social infrastructure (Klingenberg 2018)—those places where people meet and connect—in regenerated estates; while housing density increases there is no equivalent expansion of community facilities and in some cases, there is even a loss (Sendra 2023).

Social housing demolition and redevelopment does not only happen in the UK. Watt and Smets (2017) have explored how estate redevelopment has taken place in different countries through their edited book, with contributions from scholars discussing these processes in the US, Europe, and Australia. The impact on residents has been mixed depending on the redevelopment programme and the context. In Watt and Smets's (2017) volume, Deboulet and Abram (2017) discuss similarities between these processes in England and France. They discuss the anti-demolition coalition that emerged in France in the mid-2000s—“Coordination anti-démolition non-concérteé” (“coordinaton against demolition without consultation”) (Deboulet and Abram 2017: 149), and how in both countries “early promises for participation gave way to an imperative for demolition, justified on purely technical grounds that were not shared with participants” (Deboulet and Abram 2017: 141). In the US, Shamsuddin & Vale (2017) have explored the effects of the HOPE VI programme in the redevelopment of Boston's Orchard Park Public Housing Project, which increased residents' satisfaction and improved their living



conditions. In Australia, Cheshire (2017) has studied how in the Logan Renewal Initiative in Queensland there were two had two competing agendas between different stakeholders, one which promoted to improve and increase the provision of social housing—which saw gentrification as an unintended outcome—and another one which welcomed gentrification and therefore did not see the increase of social housing as desirable.

In London, scholars (Watt 2021) have studied the effect of estate regeneration on residents through its different phases, including experiences of resistance. Some have explored tactics used by residents have to contest demolition, and how different forms of activism affect estate regeneration processes. Lees and Ferreri (2016) consider the different forms of contestation that emerged on the Heygate Estate (London Borough of Southwark) and their role in exposing the effects of demolition (the Heygate Estate was demolished despite opposition). Sendra and Fitzpatrick (2020), in a study of seven campaign groups in London, provide a toolkit that explains planning mechanisms and presents tools and tactics that other communities can use to contest the demolition of social housing estates and/or propose community-led schemes to improve their neighbourhoods. Some of these campaign groups succeeded in preventing the demolition of their homes, such as West Ken and Gibbs Green Community Housing, a resident group that used a mixed formal and informal tactics such as creating a People's Plan, community organising, demonstrations, a judicial review, and submitting a Right to Transfer notice, among other strategies. Further details of these strategies can be found at Sendra and Fitzpatrick (2020).

One such tool is the development of a People's Plan or a Community Plan: a community-led vision put together by residents, generally with the support of various professionals (volunteer or paid), including architects, planners, sustainability specialists, quantity surveyors, community organisers, researchers and others. A People's Plan differs from a Neighbourhood Plan—the statutory planning framework for community-led planning established by the English Localism Act 2011. It is not a statutory planning framework, but rather a community vision that aims to influence the formal planning process to deliver a scheme that responds to the aspirations of the residents and communities living in an area. People's Plans have their origins in the 1970s and some early iterations were supported by the Greater London Council's Popular Planning Unit (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2024). Some led to community-led housing schemes such as Coin Street Community Builders (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2024). The project Spaces of Hope: People's Plans (<https://www.peoplesplans.org>), documents the history of this form of "insurgent" planning (Brownill and Inch 2019, quoting Miraftab 2009). Since the 2010s, People's Plans have been used by communities on council estates facing

the demolition of their homes. These communities have worked with architects to co-produce alternative schemes that explore options of refurbishment and infill densification, rather than demolition, with evidentiary support including financial viability studies. In some cases, People's Plans—alongside other campaigning strategies and planning tools (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020)—have contributed to preventing the demolition of the estates, as in the case of West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates (London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham). Architects for Social Housing call this approach "Resistance by Design" (Architects for Social Housing 2016).

Local context

Wandsworth Council has planned to regenerate Alton Estate since 2004. Initial £33-million plans to redevelop Danebury Avenue and surrounding areas were abandoned in 2009 during the global financial crisis and declared "unviable" (Henderson 2009). In 2013, the council appointed Bilfinger GVA and Studio Egret West to produce a Masterplan for the area (WBC 2015), completed in 2014. This Masterplan proposed building "750–800 new homes including houses, maisonettes and apartments, which included the replacement of 323 existing homes, 5000 m² of retail space, 400 m² of dedicated workspace, 5500 m² community uses, potential for up to 400 student units" (WBC 2014: 10). The Masterplan was translated into a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in 2015. The SPD proposed a net increase of 500 homes and the potential for 250 student bedrooms or further homes (WBC 2015). In 2016, the council launched a competition to choose a development partner and chose Redrow as the preferred bidder in early 2017 (McFarlane 2017). The firms Hawkins\Brown, Barton Willmore (Design), Tate Hindle and Gillespies produced detailed proposals for Wandsworth Council and Redrow for the Alton Estate regeneration. These proposals included the demolition of 288 homes and some existing community facilities, and the construction of 1103 new homes (Redrow and Wandsworth 2019) and 9572 m² of non-residential uses (Hawkins\Brown et al. 2019).

In 2019, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced "serious concerns" about the scheme, calling it "unacceptable" (Waite 2019; referencing Greater London Authority 2019). These included lack of "like for like replacement of social rented units", "shortcomings in the consultation process" (Greater London Authority 2019), lack of detail in the decanting process, the need for studying "the impact of the CPO process", the segregation between tenures, and the proportion of affordable and social rented homes. Additional concerns related to community and commercial spaces, play space, equalities, urban design, heritage, inclusive access and fire safety, energy, sustainable drainage and flood risk,



urban greening and transport (Greater London Authority 2019). Following amendments, the scheme was greenlit by the Mayor.

In August 2020, Redrow pulled out of the scheme, scaling back on its London work due to COVID-19 (Bayley 2020a). The next month, Wandsworth Council announced they would continue going forward despite losing their development partner (Bayley 2020b).

The Alton Estate People's Plan and this PAR project emerged in this context. The People's Plan was developed between October 2020 and July 2021. The details are explained in the methodology section further below.

In May 2022, the Labour Party won control of Wandsworth Council (following four decades of Conservative control) and pledged to build 1000 new council homes. In September 2022, the council announced that they were scrapping the Masterplan for redeveloping Alton Estate and would explore alternative options.

In July 2024, Wandsworth Council announced a new regeneration approach to the Alton Estate, which they call the “People-Focussed Proposal” (WBC 2024a) and which involves retrofitting some of the homes that were previously earmarked for and demolition, as well as some demolition and redevelopment, improvement of community facilities, youth facilities, shops and businesses, and a commitment to “meaningful and inclusive community engagement”. This latest update will be discussed at the end of the paper.

Methodology

In this paper, we explore how academic research can engage with and support residents contesting the demolition of their homes. To do so, we combine lessons learnt from studying the contestation tactics used by other campaign groups (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020) with a PAR approach. Fals-Borda (1991) saw PAR as a vehicle for “empowering the oppressed”. PAR combines two types of knowledge: the lived experience of those within the oppressed groups and academic knowledge. He does not establish a hierarchy between these two forms of knowledge, seeing them both as essential components of scientific knowledge:

“academic knowledge combined with popular knowledge and wisdom may result in total scientific knowledge of a revolutionary nature which destroys the previous unjust class monopoly” (Fals-Borda 1991: 4).

The context of social housing demolition and redevelopment calls for a PAR approach. In many regeneration processes, residents' lived experiences are not considered relevant sources of evidence—or are considered in tokenistic and controlled ways where there are opportunities for participation but not for influencing decision-making. PAR,

however, combines the lived experiences of those living in social housing estates with the academic knowledge with a shared goal of action and transformation (Fals-Borda 1991). In such partnerships, Aernouts (2020: 74) highlights the importance of “recognizing differences between the knowledge of spatial professionals, communities and other stakeholder” to overcome “an imposition of false equality”.

In this project, PAR was used in four different ways:

- Through the creation of a partnership between academic researchers and the community group Alton Action, based in the Alton Estate, in which the researchers and the community group collectively design the brief and structure of the project, apply for funding, follow up the whole process, and all feel ownership of the output.
- By acknowledging power imbalances within the partnership (Fals-Borda 1991) and taking specific actions to address them, including through training and knowledge exchange initiatives that empower Alton Estate's residents to participate in decision-making by expanding their planning knowledge.
- By considering and being receptive to different forms of knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1995).
- By ensuring the communication of results is accessible to those affected by the project and by the public, exploring diverse formats of communicating (Fals-Borda, 1987, 1995).

Central to this was a learning through co-design methodology, where residents—while co-designing proposals—learned about urban planning, sustainability, heritage and other built environment-related topics (Sendra 2023). In doing so, they interacted with researchers and other communities experiencing similar struggles. Knowledge exchange with other community groups was carried out through the London-wide network Just Space, a partner on the project and responsible for delivering a workshop on the policies that could support residents in protecting their homes and their rights. Just Space is a London-wide network of community organisations, which mission is to amplify the voices of communities in London planning (Just Space, n.d.). At that time, Just Space and the London Tenants Federation were hosting a platform called EstateWatch (Estate Watch, n.d.), which provided tools for residents to contest the demolition of their homes and hosted regular online meetings with residents from housing estates all over London.¹ Alton Action

¹ This platform EstateWatch.London emerged from a research project led by Loretta Lees, in which Just Space and the London Tenants Federation collaborated with the University of Leicester and King's College London. Further details of the project can be found in Lees and Hubbard (2020). This paper is not connected to this project, but EstateWatch was part of the support that Just Space was giving to housing estate residents facing the demolition of their homes in Lon-



also collaborated on a university short course on participatory urban design: they took the course for free, learned about participatory urban design and collaborated directly with students to develop proposals.

This approach involved the methods elaborated below:

Alton Action's continuous engagement approach:

Alton Action was responsible for the call for participation. They produced engaging graphics, flyers, posters, an informative website to document all processes, a strong presence on social media, a newsletter and publications in local newspapers. They connected with other community organisations and solidarity networks in the area. As England's third COVID-19 lockdown eased in Spring 2021, they began organising in-person events, including exhibitions and presentations of the People's Plan.

Nine online co-design and knowledge exchange workshops: The project was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, so workshops were conducted online using Zoom and Miro. Researchers and Alton Action planned collaboratively the workshops. Each workshop started with a plenary session in which Alton Action and the researchers explained the context of the project; the researchers explained workshop aims and provided all necessary information to understand the topics to be discussed; and participants broke out into groups for facilitated discussions over a shared canvas² in Miro. Finally, the groups returned to the plenary session to report on discussions.

Workshops were organised around different themes (Table 1). Participants in each workshop ranged from 15 to 40. Names of the participants were not recorded for data protection reasons, but Alton Action estimates that over 50 different residents attended at least one of the workshops.

Online survey: An online survey was used to understand people's relationships to their homes, neighbourhood, and neighbours. This was a mixed-methods survey, which combined quantitative and qualitative data collection through open-ended questions to gauge deeper insight of the participants. Survey questions provided additional evidence for the Social Impact Assessment. The survey considered resident preferences for regeneration, including options for retrofit with infill development and complete redevelopment.

Footnote 1 (continued)

don. In 2025, there is an updated version of the website at <https://estatewatch.london> (accessed 3 July 2025).

² These canvases built on various methods for facilitating collective discussion, including Di Siena's Civic Design tools: <https://civicdesign.tools>

Finally, the survey asked questions aiming to understand the energy performance of existing buildings and building pathologies. The survey was responded by 47 participants, of which 26 lived in the area demarcated for regeneration (which had 288 homes), 19 lived in other areas of the estate, and two were estate residents that were not sure whether they lived in the area demarcated for regeneration.

Regular meetings with Alton Action: Researchers and Alton Action met regularly to discuss the progress of the project, plan the upcoming workshop, and analyse the previous workshop. This supported the equal partnership approach.

Discussions with other community organisations in the area: The project included discussions with other community organisations in the area, to ensure their contribution to the People's Plan.

Public presentations: Two public presentations with Q&A sessions discussed project outputs: an interim session in July 2021 and a final presentation in September 2021. Alton Action organised additional exhibitions and opportunities to further disseminate the People's Plan.

University collaboration: In the last stages of the project, Alton Action collaborated with a university short course on participatory urban design (Civic Design). Students and residents worked on topics not fully covered in the knowledge exchange workshops, including community gardening and management of community spaces. Alton Action members were invited to take the course for free and received a certificate of participation. This aligns with Aernout's (2020) conclusion on involving higher education programme in community-centred design.

Data analysis: After each workshop, researchers analysed the co-produced data and provided a summary presentation. This was uploaded to Alton Action's website and presented to participants attending the following workshop. These summaries were the basis for developing further proposals, discussed during future workshops and further modified according to feedback. Where consensus proved challenging, the People's Plan identified what additional evidence was necessary for addressing these issues. Survey results were statistically analysed.

The follow sections present the results of implementing this methodology: the co-produced Social Impact Assessment, the co-designed People's Plan, and the evidence supporting the People's Plan: Whole Life Carbon Analysis, Heritage Impact Assessment and Financial Viability Assessment.



Table 1 Workshop topics

Workshop	Title	Aims	Topics/activities
1	Project launch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of Alton Action, UCL team and Just Space • Introduction of residents • Agreeing on timeline and collaboration framework • Co-producing qualitative data for the Social Impact Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is most important for you about living in Alton Estate?
2	Co-producing a Social Impact Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The induction of collective thinking; stimulate residents to think about what they need and aspire, as well as about what the neighbourhood needs; contributing to community empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community and social spaces • Green spaces and biodiversity • Maintenance and repair • Housing and tenure
3	Co-assessing Wandsworth Alton Estate Masterplan and priorities for regeneration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with residents the general aims and specific details of the Masterplan proposed by Wandsworth Council and understand how this relates to residents' priorities • Understanding residents' priorities for improving their neighbourhood • Discussing how the residents' proposals could relate with Wandsworth Council's vision for the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-assessing Wandsworth Council's Masterplan • Co-assessing priorities for regeneration • Collective mapping: Community facilities—new ones or re-using existing buildings. Outdoor facilities and green spaces. New shops and workspaces. Potential spaces for building new homes • Testing options for new buildings
4	Presentation of preliminary proposals and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss preliminary proposals emerging from previous workshops and get feedback • Facilitating a discussion with residents so they could collectively propose ideas for the improvement of their neighbourhood • Learning activity opportunity, where residents can learn about urban planning while they discuss about what they want for their neighbourhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-evaluating and discussing the preliminary proposal • Comparing the emerging proposal with Wandsworth Masterplan
5	Exploring opportunities for environmentally sustainable regeneration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the participants to environmental impacts • Based on the information provided on low-carbon materials and building systems, collectively discuss preferences with community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-workshop poll to understand participants' familiarity with environmental sustainability terms and impacts • Knowledge mobilisation on global warming and calculating carbon footprints • Co-design activities on low-carbon material selection, carbon negatives and biodiversity, and transport • Evaluation poll about the impact of the workshop on their selection of materials and on their lifestyle choices
6	Evaluating a draft proposal for regeneration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect feedback on the updated proposals that emerged from previous workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General overview of the proposal through an axonometric perspective showing the overall approach and new functions by colours • Zooming into specific areas to discuss detailed proposals
7	Knowledge exchange on London Plan and Mayor of London's policies. Facilitated by the London-wide network of community groups Just Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing a general overview of policies from the Mayor of London supporting communities and London Plan 2021 regarding policies affecting housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing and estate regeneration • Climate emergency • Small businesses

Table 1 (continued)

Workshop	Title	Aims	Topics/activities
8	Exploring opportunities for architectural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (internal workshop facilitated by author 5) • Discuss the findings from workshop 5 • The results of this workshop prepared the researchers for discussions around development costs and for conducting the Life Cycle Assessment studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation on low-carbon building systems and materials • Based on the results of workshop 4, discussing low-carbon building systems and materials
9	Co-assess the heritage value of Alton Estate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding residents' lived experiences on the estate • Recognising the relevance of heritage assets alongside the memories, experiences and thoughts of the residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reflection and review of the Wandsworth Plan on the heritage of the estate • Reflecting upon the lived experiences of Alton Estate residents in relation to heritages

Social impact assessment

As part of the preparation for the People's Plan, the project co-produced with residents a SIA, which evaluated the anticipated effects of Wandsworth Council's then-proposed regeneration scheme on the lives of residents, and set the key priorities for residents for developing an alternative proposal.

In their proposal for a Community-Led Plan for London, the network of community organisation Just Space (2016) see Social Impact Assessment as a necessary tool to implement a community-led vision, which should "assess existing uses in an area, allow the consideration of alternative proposals and give a high value to social sustainability" (Just Space 2016: 60). Joint work between the UCL Development Planning Unit (DPU) and Just Space demonstrates that SIAs can help challenge expert-led planning practices at neighbourhood or local levels, especially around strategic issues (Lipietz et al. 2018). Lipietz et al. (2018) identify a co-produced Social Impact Assessment as participatory, pluralistic, independent, accessible and inclusive. The phasing and structure of the SIA carried out for this project built on previous experiences, including the work by Lipietz et al. (2018), Colombo et al. (2021), and the Just Space guidelines/protocol for collaboration between universities and communities (Just Space 2018), adapted for local context.

The first step of the SIA was the implementation of cross-thematic framework (Colombo et al. 2021) to evaluate the impact that the then-proposed scheme for Alton Estate, including demolition and redevelopment, would have on residents. This framework focuses on social networks and social spaces; green spaces and biodiversity; maintenance and repairs; and housing and tenure.

The project applied this framework to identify the potential impacts of demolition and consequent rehousing on the social relationships and networks of support between residents—especially given existing challenges connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. This supported discussions about community and social spaces, and the effect of demolition on such infrastructure. The community shared concerns about the lack of youth facilities and places where the community could mix; the rundown nature of many green spaces; the lack of dog walking facilities; and the need for more play areas for different ages including under-5s and disabled children, facilities for mental health as well as physical health, improved library space, and affordable meeting spaces such as community halls.

Discussions about green spaces and biodiversity focused on specific green areas within the estate, provided evidence of existing wildlife in the estate and discussed how best to preserve it. The discussions included air quality, noise and other type of pollution as perceived by the residents.



Following a similar methodology to Colombo et al. (2021), participants diagnosed the quality and design of buildings, including maintenance, and identified need for repairs, refurbishment and improvements, as well their experience and levels of satisfaction. This linked to discussions about housing and tenure, and the potential impact that the redevelopment scheme could have on residents. The activity also included a collective exercise in which participants narrated memories they had in relation to their homes and their neighbourhood, which contributed to discuss place attachment and generate collective empathy toward each other views.

When discussing residents' priorities on the regeneration approach, most participants preferred refurbishment of the existing buildings and additional housing through infill over demolition and redevelopment (Fig. 1). The workshop, therefore, explored alternatives to demolition and in particular community-led strategies for regeneration. Improvement or refurbishment was needed, but different areas in the estate would need to be treated differently in the regeneration process. Residents also identified a lack of three- and four-bedroom homes on the estate, leading to overcrowding.

The research team and residents assessed community priorities for regeneration. The following emerged as the most urgent: the refurbishment of flats affected by problems related to dampness and other issues that affected comfort and health; the improvement and maintenance of green spaces; the importance of providing community and youth facilities; the need to focus on social rent homes and family-size homes; making the buildings fire safe and more secure.

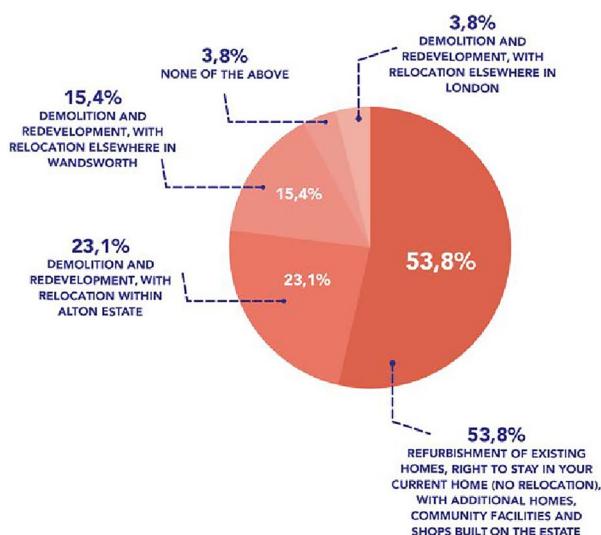
These priorities were the starting point for the elaboration of the People's Plan.

People's Plan

Building on the above assessment, on the survey, and on further workshops, residents and researchers co-produced proposals for community and social spaces, including improving and repurposing existing facilities and creating new ones; for green spaces, outdoor facilities and biodiversity; for retail and workspaces; and for housing, focusing on maintenance and repair, retrofitting, tenure, and the potential for delivering new homes.

Evidence from the workshops and the survey made clear that participants believed that regeneration was necessary, given the long-term neglect of the housing estate, outstanding disrepair and needed improvements. However, participants did not agree that this regeneration should be full redevelopment. Notably, when responding to the Wandsworth Council Masterplan, workshop participants generally agreed with its main aims to improve the quality of life of current residents in the area. However, residents did not agree with site-specific proposals that implied wholesale demolition of the area demarcated for regeneration. Survey results also showed that the majority of residents prefer the option of "refurbishment of existing homes, right to stay in your current home (no relocation), with additional homes, community facilities and shops built on the estate", in contrast to any option involving demolition (Fig. 1). As the co-design

(a)



(b)

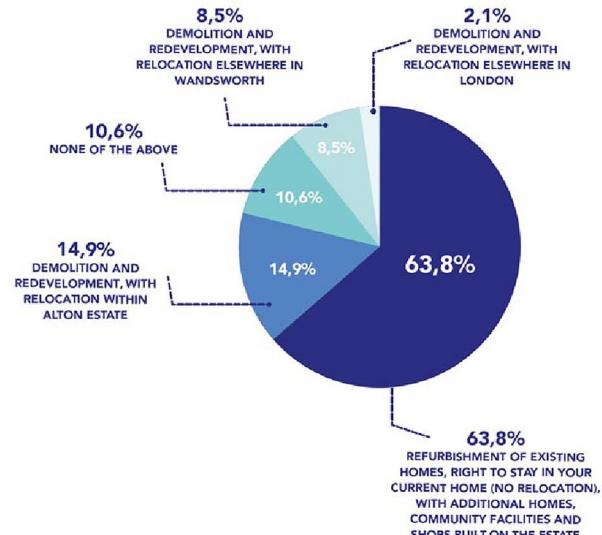


Fig. 1 Survey: If you had a choice on the future of Alton Estate, which form of regeneration would you prefer? (a) surveying residents living in the area demarcated for regeneration only, or b surveying all Alton Estate residents)



Table 2 Indicative figures of what the People's Plan could achieve

Homes	425 homes: 274 refurbished and 151 new built. At least 50% would be at council rent
Community facilities and services	11,792.38 m ² of community facilities (5896.59 m ² refurbished and 5895.79 new built), including two health facilities/centres
Shops	9098.73 m ² of retail spaces (7395.25 m ² refurbished and 1703.48 m ² new built), including a large supermarket
Workspaces	1065 m ² of new built workspace, with a focus of affordable workspace

workshops progressed, the chosen approach became more mixed, with residents preferring refurbishment and infill development for some areas, and complete redevelopment for others, given their greater potential to build additional community facilities, shops, workspaces, and homes.

While the aim of this paper is not to explain the Alton Estate People's Plan in detail, the sections below provide an overview of the proposals emerging from workshops, including estimate delivery figures for the People's Plan (Table 2). Figure 2 illustrates the overall proposal.

Retrofitting existing homes: The Mayor of London (2018)'s good practice guide for estate regeneration advocates for exploring other options before considering demolition. This sentiment was repeated in the London Plan 2021: "When considering options to deliver estate regeneration projects, boroughs, housing associations and their partners should **always consider alternative options to demolition first**" (London Plan 2021: 187, same emphasis). This contrasts with the reality in London: redevelopment is typically the default option. The evidence from workshops and the

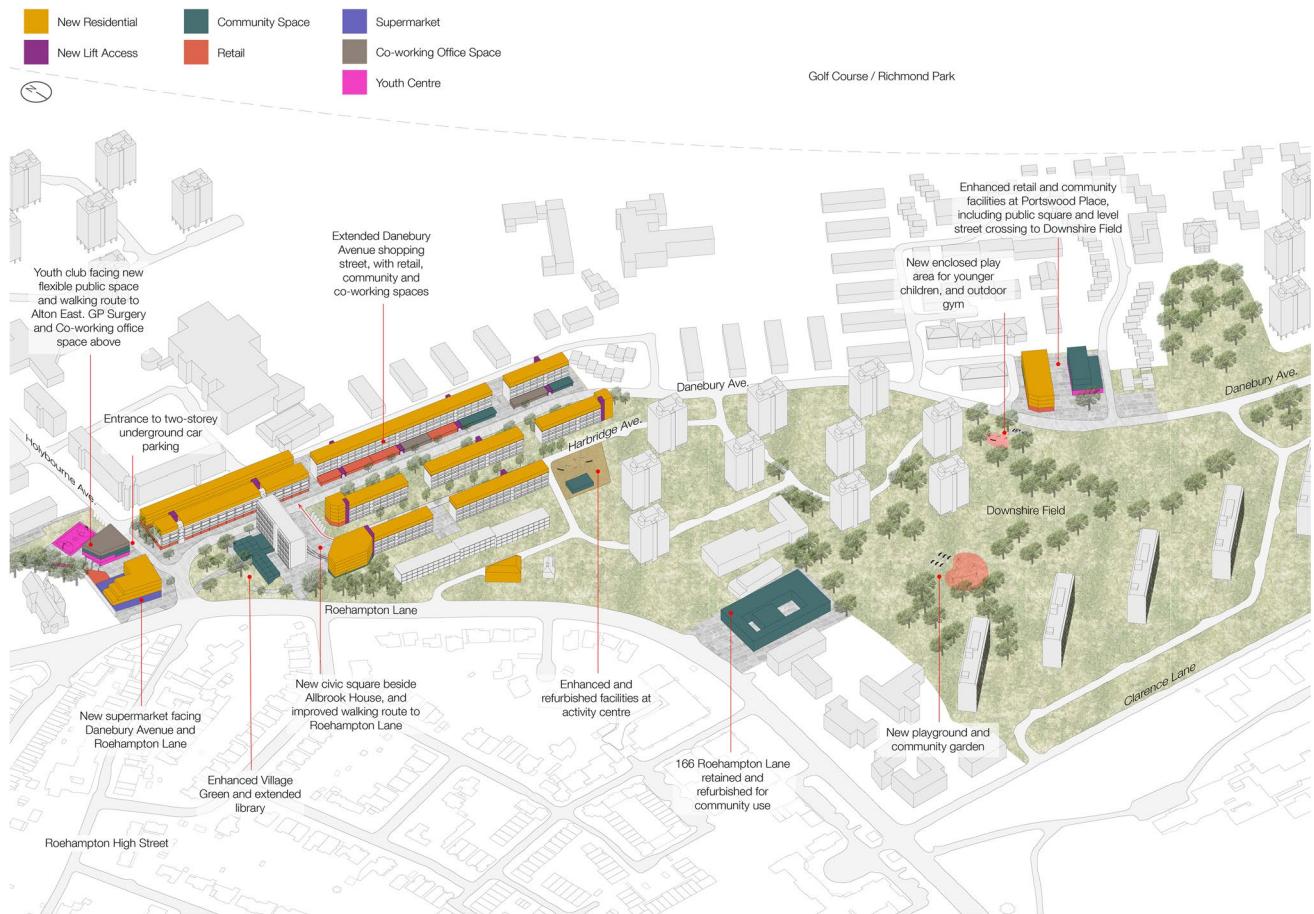


Fig. 2 Axonometric view of the People's Plan proposal. Elaborated by the authors from Ordnance Survey Maps © Crown Copyright/database right 2020. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA-supplied service





Fig. 3 Walterton and Elgin Community Homes, community-led scheme that builds new social rent homes through roof extensions, which also include the installation of solar panels. Photo: Rachel Ferriman. Courtesy of WECH

survey suggest refurbishment as the preferred option. The People's Plan proposes refurbishing 274 out of the 292³ homes within the area demarcated for regeneration. Many of these homes are maisonette blocks with a very similar architectural style and construction system. The only high-rise block in the regeneration area, Allbrook House, has 40 maisonettes and ten flats. Given that the project was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, the evidence for identifying the type of work needed was collected through the online survey (including questions and opportunities for participants to upload photographs), the online workshops and a site visit with a quantity surveyor.

New homes through rooftop extension and sensitive infill: Participants reported during the workshops that new developments should avoid losing green spaces. Thus, the People's Plan includes both roof extensions and infill homes that do not compromise green spaces. Adding one storey to every maisonette block within the regeneration area provides

the possibility of adding many new homes. These roof extensions can be added as a very light structure on top of the existing buildings. Other schemes evidence the feasibility such roof extensions: recently, in Walterton and Elgin Community Homes (WECH), a community-led scheme provided new socially rented homes through roof extensions in blocks with a similar type of architecture and age (Fig. 3). In WECH, this also provided the opportunity of installing solar panels on the roof extension, a proposal also included in the Alton Estate's People's Plan via a community-owned energy cooperative following the model proposed by organisations such as Repowering (<https://www.repowering.org.uk>). The rooftop extensions, and infill developments attached to existing blocks, provide opportunities to add lifts to every block, improving accessibility. Potential sites for infill developments and ways to integrate into the existing built environment were identified with participants during workshops. These include blocks attached to the existing maisonette that also provide opportunities to reconfigure the public realm and provide new community facilities (Fig. 4).

Redevelopment sites: As the co-design workshops progressed, residents identified two sites that could be

³ According to the Wandsworth's Masterplan, there are 288 homes in the demarcation area. However, the researchers counted 292 and worked with this figure for consistency.



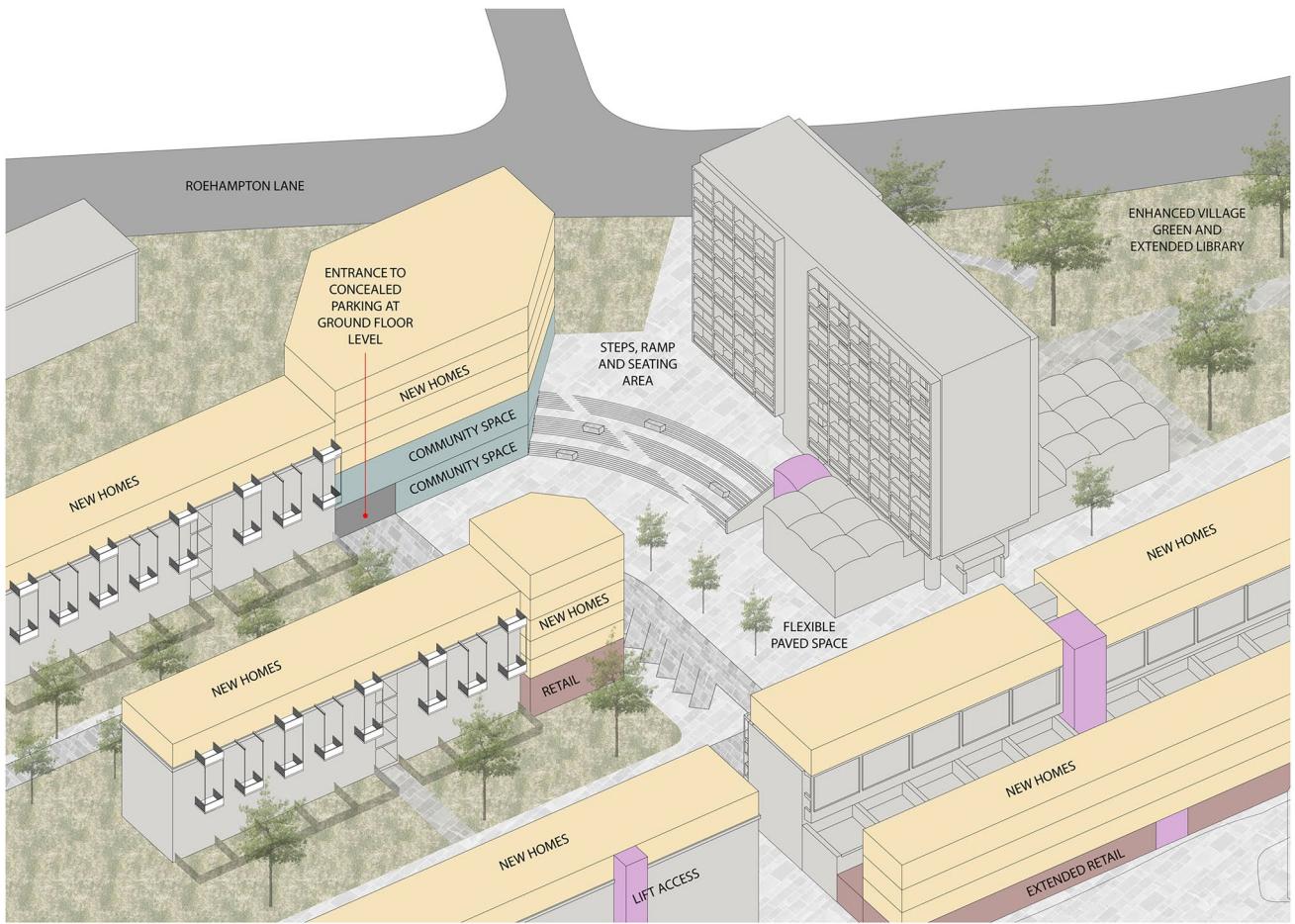


Fig. 4 New homes through rooftop extensions and infill development and providing community facilities and shops

redeveloped through the demolition of a limited number of homes. These are the sites near St Joseph's Church and Portswood Place. In both areas, the spatial configuration of the sites make infill additions difficult as they would compromise the quality of the built environment and provide little flexibility to accommodate the facilities that residents and community organisations demand, including a large supermarket, workspaces, retail, cafés and health, youth and community spaces.

Approach to community facilities and social infrastructure: Workshop participants identified the need for community facilities, youth centres, health centres, workspaces, retail, supermarkets and other community spaces. The People's Plan proposes increasing the activities in the Alton Estate, providing residents with more opportunities for socialising, leisure, and accessing basic needs within the area. The proposals included new youth, health and community facilities at the site near St Joseph Church and Portswood Place; improving and supporting existing youth and community facilities in the Alton Activity Centre and 166 Roehampton Lane; and a community-led management

structure of certain community spaces, building on existing community organisations in the area. The infill strategy also includes extending and repurposing some of the ground floor of the maisonette blocks in Danebury Avenue to provide shops and workspaces (Fig. 5). The People's Plan proposes an approach that applies market rent for some of the commercial properties and varied discounted rents to local businesses, charities and community-based organisations. It also proposes having community spaces for residents to hire at low cost to develop their activities.

Community gardening strategy: This strategy was co-designed by a group of students⁴ of the Civic Design postgraduate module, in collaboration with residents from Alton Estate. Proposals were co-designed over a 4-day knowledge exchange with residents and local community members, as well as with community gardening

⁴ Proposals developed by students Agnes Marsden Jeeves, David Gösta Dawson, Luis Barraza Cárdenas, Lukman Oesman, Saffron Mustafa, Sarah Goldzweig as part of the Civic Design postgraduate modules. See details at Sendra et al. 2021.





Fig. 5 Collage showing a reconfigured Danebury Avenue with community gardening and shops

organisations from neighbouring estates. Conversations with community members revealed the following concerns: (i) a sense of insecurity and exclusion (ii) exacerbation of existing perceptions of inaccessibility of public spaces by the extended third COVID-19 lockdown and (iii) the success of Alton Estate-based mutual aid efforts aimed at alleviating food poverty, social isolation and poor mental health. Accordingly, the proposals aimed to address residents' expressed desires to strengthen community cohesion, increase opportunities for neighbourly connections and community members' sense of ownership over and belonging in communal spaces. Community gardening spaces can better fulfil these needs than traditional allotments, as the former better facilitate collectiveness and resilience, and are more inclusive (Armstrong 2000; Kingsley & Townsend 2006; Okvat & Zautra 2011; Veen et al. 2015; Hou 2017). Plans for these gardening spaces frequently recalled other components of the People's Plan, ensuring cohesion throughout the Plan and laying the groundwork for incremental, community-led change that supports the more substantial proposals. Co-designed proposals included (i) a nature-learning space on the new playground, including sensory play areas, a gazebo space

for outdoor education, a greenhouse, a shared tool shed and a composter; and (ii) modular gardening bed benches with storage, to green walkways and provide resting places for older or less-physically able community members.

WLCA comparing different regeneration approaches

WLCA involved three interconnected activities to assess the environmental impacts of different regeneration approaches. The first was a knowledge exchange to explain different concepts relating to environmental sustainability and impacts, low-carbon materials and building systems, renewables, and considerations for green roofs and facades. The next activity, following the selection of materials and systems, was the calculation of the carbon footprints of different regeneration scenarios (explained below). The third was the co-creation of a community-centred approach to sustainability assessment (see Nava et al. 2023a, 2024).

WLCA experiments were used to explore the Global Warming Potential (GWP) impacts of different regeneration scenarios (existing buildings, different refurbishment



Table 3 Overall 60-year operational and embodied carbon kgCO₂e/m² for different approaches to regeneration

Scenario	GWP (kgCO ₂ e/ m ²)
1: Existing building	2156
2: Basic retrofitting of the existing building to meet the building regulations	1204
3: People's Plan (moderate retrofit, top floor extension, added balconies, and locked entrances)	638
4: New build replicating People's Plan (based on the energy statement of the previously approved scheme)	1476

scenarios, and the redevelopment scheme proposed by Wandsworth Council). These were conducted using data from desk-based research, stock model, site surveys, building regulations, retrofit case studies and guidelines, and the planning documents of the Council's scheme. The WLCA results support findings from some of the current studies that favour of refurbishment and regeneration scenarios over demolition and rebuild schemes (Hasik et al. 2019; LETI 2021). The results present the People's Plan as having the lowest overall GWP impact compared to other scenarios (Table 3), and as the only option meeting the requirements for net zero. This is largely due to the high embodied carbon connected to demolition and replacement of building structures and materials, and selection of fossil-fuel-free systems for operational energy (Nava et al. 2023b).

Financial viability and delivery

The project also assessed the financial viability of implementing the People's Plan proposals, reflecting recognition of "the social and the economic as interrelated facets of the urban development process" (Guy and Henneberry 2000: 2413). Local context is, however, an important contributing factor: although development is "often characterised as entrepreneurial and risky, and returns vary with the nature, location and timing of each scheme" (Crosby et al. 2020: 171), each (re)development appraisal is contingent upon local micro as well as macro influences across social, economic, political, and environmental perspectives. Therefore, the construction of the viability assessment is considered through an assessment of risks involved, as "different risk priorities...translate to different development objectives" (Brill 2022: 1500). Key concerns include fluctuating construction costs (allowing for 3% inflation), timings (phasing was introduced) and, ultimately, ensuring affordability.

The economic appraisal of the Alton Estate and its associated risks and opportunities takes the form of a residual site valuation (RSV), which ideally demonstrates that a redevelopment's "existing use value is below the market value" (IVSC 2016: 5) and that a more optimum use could be achieved. Put simply, this approach assesses site potential by modelling value, costs and returns; calculations indicate

viability when the overall cost of the development does not exceed the gross development value (GDV), with "completion and cost calculated in current-day terms" (French and Gabrielli 2018: 395).

Models use comparative market evidence to justify inputs (such as rental and sales prices, developers' profits, construction costs). As valuation is both a process and an outcome, it is essential to ensure that the methods and approaches used to assess the financial viability of the project are considered and appropriate (see Wyatt 2022; French 2023). Property developers are key to "articulating and delimiting what constitutes legitimate urban expertise in decision-making regarding large-scale regeneration projects" (Robin 2022: 205). The use of such development appraisals models is largely due to the central role of viability in the UK planning system (Coleman et al. 2013). According to this scale, the People's Plan proposals were viable. The People's Plan proposes 425 homes, almost 12,000 m² of community facilities, over 9000 m² of retail spaces (including a supermarket), 1000 m² of new workspace and 370 car parking spaces.

There are always, however, uncertainties inherent within the valuation process, as markets are not static and it is "impractical or impossible to verify every feature of a development proposal which could impact on future development" (IVSC 2016: 6). Assumptions concerning the proposals and the market were justified through the introduction of related evidence to support decision-making throughout the compilation of the RSV: for example profit was set at 15% of the gross development value (GDV), 50% of homes were affordable and provided at social rent levels (from ~£160 per week), with the other 50% sold privately. Calculations assumed that the GLA would provide £70 k funding per new social home,⁵ and anticipated that savings could also be made on Mayoral CIL payments. The proposals met policy requirements around affordable housing and estate regeneration in the London Plan, the London Housing Strategy, and the Good Practice Guide for Estate Regeneration.

⁵ The Mayor of London's funding guide for the 2021–2026 (Mayor of London 2020) programme does not have a specific ceiling of funding per home and this could be potentially more, which could allow for more social rent homes or for using council rent rates instead of London Affordable rent (council rent is slightly lower than London Affordable Rent).



Table 4 Three main heritage designations (as relevant to the Alton Estate) as per the Planning Act 1990

Grade I
HOUSES Date listed: 14 July 1955
Mount Clare, Minstead Gardens
Parkstead House, Holybourne Avenue
Grade II*
SLAB BLOCKS Date listed: 22 December 1998
Dunbridge House, Highcliffe Drive
Denmead House, Highcliffe Drive
Charcot House, Highcliffe Drive
Winchfield House and abutting chimney, Highcliffe Drive
Binley House, Highcliffe Drive
HOUSES Date listed: 14 July 1955
Downshire House, Roehampton Lane
Temple in grounds of Mount Clare, Minstead Gardens
SCULPTURE Date listed: 15 April 1998
The Bull Sculpture, Downshire Field Recreation Ground, Danebury Avenue
Grade II
HOUSES
Garden gates to Downshire House, Roehampton Lane Date listed: 7 April 1983
26 Bessborough Road Grade II Date listed: 16 July 1986
BUNGALOWS FOR THE ELDERLY Date listed: 22 December 1998
245–255 Danebury Avenue
257–261 Danebury Avenue
1–13 Minstead Gardens
2–26 Minstead Gardens
15–33 Minstead Gardens
POINT BLOCKS Date listed: 22 December 1998
Blendworth Point, Wanborough Drive
Eashing Point, Wanborough Drive
Hindhead Point, Wanborough Drive
Hilsea, Wanborough Drive
Witley Point, Wanborough Drive
Westmark Point, Norley Vale
Cadnam Point, Dilton Gardens
Dunhill Point, Dilton Gardens
Longmoor Point, Norley Vale
Grayswood Point, Norley Vale
SCULPTURE
The Watchers Sculpture (behind Downshire House), Roehampton Lane Date listed: 15 April 1998

Source: Alton Conservation Area Appraisal & Management Strategy (Wandsworth Conservation and Design Group 2010)

Market rents for the commercial units were calculated through comparable evidence. Upon completion, it can be assumed they will provide active income streams through rents. Overall, the GDV was calculated as £90.5 m, with total costs of £72.3 m, reflecting an overall profit on costs of 25.1%, 10% above the threshold target, and an encouraging financial contingency, if the development risks become more costly over time.

Heritage impact assessment

A Heritage Impact Assessment was undertaken as a response to the rich web of heritage assets on the estate that are currently protected both statutorily and non-statutorily. The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) provides the basis for statutory heritage

protection in England. It outlines three main heritage designations (as relevant to the Alton Estate): Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, and Parks and Gardens (see list in Table 4):

- The Alton Conservation Area was designated in 2001, covering 58.1 hectares comprising two main parts: Alton East and Alton West. The Conservation Area's "special sense of place is the environment created by its atmospheric landscaping, historic layout and the architectural quality of buildings. The area's built form, while contemporary with the surrounding area, derives from the range of building scales and overall consistency and use of materials. The special character of this conservation area is derived from these unique characteristics expressed in its architectural and urban qualities" (Wandsworth Conservation and Design Group 2010: 8).



- A building is listed when it is of special architectural or historic interest considered to be of national importance and therefore worth protecting. Listing can be made at one of three grades: I, II*, or II depending on the significance of the asset. The Alton Estate Conservation Area contains the largest number of listed buildings of any Conservation Area in Wandsworth. These are outlined in Table 4.
- The Alton West Estate Park and Garden is a Grade II open space in the estate. The site incorporates two adapted 18th-century landscapes including the remnants of one by Capability Brown from around 1774–1775.

Buildings can also be protected through the local planning process, via non-statutory designations. Wandsworth Council “holds a list of buildings that are of special architectural or historical interest at a local level” (Wandsworth Conservation and Design Group 2010: 40) (Table 5). “There are no additional planning controls over locally listed buildings other than those that already apply to the building” (Wandsworth Conservation and Design Group 2010: 41).

The People's Plan was assessed in relation to the heritage assets on the estate, using a heritage impact assessment. The assessment maps proposed actions in the plan and their potential impact upon heritage assets' significance. As a guiding principle, the People's Plan tries to avoid development proposals that impact the estate's heritage assets. This principle informed all stages of the evolution and co-production of the plan with the estate's community. Where there may be impacts—in relation to the Conservation Area and registered Park and Garden—these are minimal and flagged as key issues in the implementation of the plan in the future. The People's Plan intentionally attempts to propose works that avoid harming heritage assets. Indeed, the Plan is an exercise in developing a community vision, with this principle at its heart.

Two sets of impacts are mapped:

- First, on the Conservation Area: Proposed new community facilities at Portswood Place (outlined in above).

Table 5 List of buildings of special architectural or historical interest

Cedars Cottages—1 Cedars Cottages, Roehampton Lane
Ibstock Place School (remaining historic part) and Lodge, Clarence Lane
Maryfield Convent and Chapel—Mount Angelus Road
170 Hartfield House, Roehampton Lane
66 Alton Road
33 Bessborough Road
68–78 and 80–86 Minstead Gardens

Source: Alton Conservation Area Appraisal & Management Strategy (Wandsworth Conservation and Design Group 2010)

Development of a sympathetic proposal not only necessitated respect for the significance of the character of the Conservation Area, but also contributed to it through its enhancement. Key considerations include be views, vistas and integrity of the landscape.

- Next, on the Alton Estate Park and Garden (Alton Estate West): Impacts on the registered park were a key consideration in the development and evolution of the plan with the community. Although minimal, attention to the form of development of the proposed new community facilities at Portswood Place is still important. Given that the registered park description indicates that the approaches to the landscape (particularly from Danebury Avenue), and views within and across the site, are fundamental to its character, these aspects needed to be a guiding principle in the design of the buildings. Notably, views/vistas are not only static in that much of the value of the landscape is in the experience of either passing through or wandering amongst it.

Discussion

This paper presents two key contributions. Methodologically, it provides relevant lessons on the process and impact of creating partnerships between researchers and community groups through a PAR approach. Additionally, the paper contributes to the debate on the understanding of social housing regeneration and the need for more sustainable approaches that involve those directly affected in decision-making.

Methodological contributions

Fals-Borda (1991) discusses that PAR involves both academic researchers and those directly experiencing a struggle—in this case, residents facing the demolition of their homes. They should have shared goals. This results in mutual benefits across the partnership. On one hand, researchers can explore a topic through an in-depth, live case study. On the other, this type of partnership can be a boost for community groups and campaigns.

Alton Action began campaigning in 2020. The collaboration between researchers and Alton Action began with shared aims and interests: the need to explore a more holistically sustainable approach to regeneration that does not involve wholesale demolition and the need to involve residents in decision-making about the future of their neighbourhood, given the substantial impact of such change on their lives. This project was Alton Action's first major activity, and it brought momentum to motivate other residents to join and contribute to co-creating the People's Plan. The collaboration with the researchers allowed community members to gain expertise in urban planning and related built



environment aspects, which empowered them to influence their neighbourhood's future.

Accordingly, this work highlights the value of learning through co-design. This learning is evident in several ways. First, it takes place through “collective research” (Fals-Borda 1991: 8), in which the researchers and Alton Action engaged collaboratively through co-facilitating co-design workshops, having regular planning meetings to discuss the results of the workshops, and working collaboratively on each stage of knowledge exchange. Second, learning took place within the workshops themselves, which included didactic elements such as explanations in accessible language of important aspects within urban planning and related built environment disciplines that are necessary for understanding regeneration. Thirdly, learning took place through formal university education, since community members were offered free spaces in a university short course on participatory urban design, where they attended lectures that explained theoretical underpinnings, principles and methods for participatory urban design, and engaged in a collaborative project ultimately contributing to the People's Plan. Gaining this knowledge and expertise helps empower communities affected by social housing regeneration by giving them greater agency to contest demolition and engage in conversations about alternatives.

The development of this project through a co-design process, the outputs emerging from it (the People's Plan and related evidence), and the learning through co-design approach have all had lasting impacts on the area and the community, and beyond. Alton Action consolidated its agency for advocating for holistically sustainable and participatory approaches to regeneration in the area. Some of its members are involved in other local initiatives, which has allowed the group to connect with others in the area. Also, as explained below, the Wandsworth Council withdrew the plans for full demolition and is currently proposing a different approach.

In May 2022, the local government changed from Conservative to Labour. In September 2022, Wandsworth Council announced they were cancelling their tendering process for the selection of a new development partner, were withdrawing the redevelopment Masterplan, and would consider other approaches to regeneration. After considering options, Wandsworth's Council Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee approved a recommendation on the 17th of July 2024 to explore a “People-focussed Proposal” that will be developed in consultation with the local community (WBC 2024a). This includes exploring retrofitting Allbrook House and some of the blocks in Danebury Avenue, demolition and redevelopment of part of the regeneration area but with over 50% affordable housing and a focus on council rent. In Autumn 2024, Wandsworth Council announced the appointment of new architects (HTA Design) and further details

on the Masterplan, which are already hosting consultation events (WBC 2024b). Local resident Angus Robertson published a commentary on the new council proposals on the local magazine Roehampton Voice, which gives a clear overview of the plan and compares it to the old council proposal (Robertson 2024). Before announcing this “People-focussed Proposal”, the council had started engaging in projects within the Alton Estate, such as improvements to Alton Activity Centre and Downshire Fields, as well as infill home developments outside the regeneration area (WBC 2024c). There are also a series of Participation Panels, including a Youth Advisory Panel, an Alton Community Panel, and an Access and Inclusion Steering Group (Alton Renewal Plan, n.d.). This new approach aligns with some of the principles of the People's Plan, such as retrofitting homes, the focus on social rent homes, on delivering new community facilities and improving existing ones, and the commitment to community participation and creating partnerships.

While the local authority's decision may be more related to the change of party in local government than to the People's Plan, having a clear and shared community vision gives residents agency to explain their vision for their neighbourhood during the process of revising the Masterplan. In this sense, the objective of the People's Plan of exploring other alternatives different from full demolition was achieved. Additionally, the impact of the project can be seen beyond the Alton Estate. Alton Action members have become very active in various London-wide networks, helping to generate regional momentum on this topic.

The PAR approach adopted has demonstrated that partnerships with community groups have different levels of involvement, aligning with different rungs on Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation. Corresponding with the highest rungs of the ladder—citizen control—core members of the Alton Action campaign (approximately ten members) have engaged with the project in a leadership capacity and have similar agency over the project as the researchers. Epitomising participation beyond the consultation run, and touching on the partnership rung, approximately 50 community members have attended the workshops, actively shaping the proposals (see Sendra 2023). Finally, following project completion, Alton Action has run further engagement events explaining the People's Plan and collected signatures of residents supporting its approach to regeneration, expanding consultation on the plans. This combination of participatory approaches that combine different rungs of the ladder of participation promotes genuine co-creation.

However, the process followed in this project did not aim to substitute the engagement that a local authority should do. The regeneration area has 288 homes, and the whole Alton Estate (East and West) has a much larger population. A participatory process carried out by a local authority needs to ensure that it is representative of the population



of the area. This piece of research does not claim that its number of participants are sufficiently representative for the type of participation process that a local authority should run, but it does provide robust evidence for research purposes and constitutes an experiment in co-creation that can inspire local authorities on how to engage into co-design. The mixed-methods survey included open-ended questions to gauge deeper insights of the participants, and the workshops provided a space for in-depth collective discussion and co-creation for participants, which is something that co-design processes should have (Sendra 2023). The survey collected demographic data to ensure that different demographics were represented. For example, when asking about housing tenure, 21 participants declared being council tenants, 14 leaseholders, four freeholders, three living on temporary accommodation, four on private rent, and one preferred not to say. The COVID-19 pandemic brought some limitations for engaging a larger number of participants, as the data collection period coincided with social distancing measures in England.

Contributions to the social housing debate

The project addresses interconnected debates on the social and environmental sustainability of different approaches to estate regeneration and on community participation in decision-making about regeneration. The project evidences that co-design processes generate a sense of ownership towards the outcome of a project. This does not mean there is no conflict. Rather, the workshops were full of disagreement that seemed difficult to resolve. However, the project included a vision that generated agreement around general aims and approaches (despite disagreements around other aspects). Once the project was completed, the People's Plan generated a sense of ownership by residents who had participated in its generation, and provided them with something they can refer to when asked: What is the alternative?

The project also contributes to these debates by countering, with evidence, the position that delivery of more socially rented homes and densification of council estates requires total redevelopment, as is currently argued by local authorities and their development partners in their justifications for demolition. The People's Plan includes a financial viability assessment, co-developed by one of the researchers and a quantity surveyor. Through this financial viability assessment, research partners demonstrate that over 50% of the new homes can be delivered at social rent levels.

When exploring financing for the scheme including potential grants, the project found a gap in funding available for refurbishing and retrofitting existing social housing stock, in comparison to the funding available for new social rent homes. While the Mayor of London has a scheme that allows all local authorities and housing associations to apply

for grants to deliver new affordable housing, it does not have an equivalent scheme for retrofitting. The closest scheme is a pilot scheme—Retrofit Accelerator—run with specific local authorities and construction companies. This lack of funding support contrasts with the Mayor of London's policy and guidance, which prioritises "alternative options to demolition" (Mayor of London 2018: 8). This lack of funding for retrofitting and the availability of funding for new buildings can make redevelopment a more appealing option to local authorities and housing associations.

This project—through the research of author 5—also explores community-centred approaches to identifying a holistic Life Cycle Sustainability Assessment and making decisions on the approach to regeneration by combining various criteria, including carbon footprint calculations, other environmental and socio-economic impacts, physical and mental well-being, community benefits, and participation (Nava et al. 2023a). The proposed framework suggests the selection of relevant criteria depending on the needs of the communities, as well as legislative requirements (Nava et al. 2024).

Conclusions

As this paper shows, project objectives—co-producing a Social Impact Assessment of the redevelopment scheme proposed by the local authority, co-designing alternative community-led proposals supported by an evidence base, and carrying out a knowledge exchange with communities—illuminate key implications for policy and practice. This concluding section addresses these three objectives and explores their implications.

First, as previous studies have also found (Lipietz et al. 2018; Colombo et al. 2021), Social Impact Assessments should be co-produced with communities affected by a scheme, so they truly reflect how development might impact resident lives. The (now cancelled) redevelopment proposed by Wandsworth Council would have caused substantial disruption to people's lives and social and solidarity networks, with only a marginal increase in socially rented homes (only 43 more). In fact, as Lipietz et al. (2018) point out, the Social Impact Assessment is the basis for developing community-led proposals. The evidence co-produced in workshop 2 (see Table 1), which aims to understand the social and community spaces where people gather, people's relationship to green spaces and nature within their neighbourhood, and various issues related to housing, was essential to start co-designing proposals from workshop 3 onwards.

Second, the process of co-designing proposals for the Alton Estate in the collaborative workshops—although not free of disagreement and conflict—has produced an output, the People's Plan, with which people identify and which



provides a collective vision for the area. The (co)production of evidence-based documents in support of People's Plan proposals—such as a financial viability assessment, an environmental sustainability assessment through calculating the carbon footprint of various options for regeneration, and a heritage impact assessment (which looks at what people value in the area and the impact that different regeneration approaches could have in the built and cultural heritage of the area)—makes the proposals more robust while simultaneously equipping community members with the knowledge and agency to propose their own vision. Community members have been involved in co-producing supporting evidence for these studies, helping to increase their collective understanding of how decisions are made and empowering them to participate in decision-making.

Third, knowledge exchange between researchers and community members enables learning through co-design, which brings a mutual benefit to both researchers and those affected by regeneration. Scholars gain the opportunity to advance knowledge through an experimental live case study that allows for further innovation, and community members are more empowered to participate in decision-making.

These objectives have implications for policy and practice and point towards a need for further work with which public authorities should engage to deliver more holistically sustainable and participatory approaches to estate regeneration.

The experience from this project—carried out as a knowledge exchange between urban scholars (with experience in practice) and community members with a relatively low amount of funding—demonstrates that local authorities could adopt a similar approach and bring strong benefits to the area. This approach involves hands-on co-design through multiple collective discussions (rather than consultations), themselves requiring equal partnerships with community groups to put them at the centre of decision-making; provision of appropriate training and knowledge exchange opportunities for community members; and development of proposals through an open door process, where co-design starts from understanding people's experience of place, and the identification of problems and needs (see Sendra 2023). Co-design should extend to the proposal and early stages and may require multiple iterations. This contrasts with the approach that many local authorities take: developing proposals behind closed doors and seeking validation from residents through a consultation process.

This piece of research also points towards the need for knowledge exchange between local authorities (and housing associations too), where those that have delivered schemes which combine substantial retrofitting, infill and rooftop extensions can share their experiences. The knowledge exchange should include community groups and built environment scholars, who contribute to generating knowledge on this.

Finally, there is a need for more funding (not just policy) support for retrofitting existing homes. Where funding predominantly concentrates on new build, local authorities and housing associations may favour demolition. In the current context of climate emergency, demolition should never be a priority.

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Data availability This manuscript reports on data from a survey. The results of the survey are provided on the manuscript in percentages or numbers and there is no further data to report.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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