

# The Social and Economic Impact of Large-scale Housing Investment:

## Summary and Conclusions

*Report for the Housing Corporation and Gentoo Group  
March 2008*

**Alan Middleton**

*The Governance Foundation*

**Alan Murie**

*University of Birmingham*

**Patrick Loftman**

*The Governance Foundation*

**Julie Gowland**

*Gentoo Living*

**Emily Smith**

*Birmingham City University*



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## **1. Background**

This is the first stage of a longitudinal study that seeks to analyse the wider social and economic impact of large-scale housing investment in Sunderland and to develop a methodology that can be used by government agencies and other organisations involved in improving well-being and quality of life in deprived communities. It has its roots in another piece of research carried out for Optima Community Association in Birmingham, funded by the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice Programme, which found that there was no methodology for measuring the broader impacts of large-scale housing investment. The Optima study proposed an outline of a methodology that the Sunderland study sought to implement and test.

Through the investigation of the relationships between secondary data available from a variety of government agencies and primary data gathered by surveys, interviews and focus groups, we were looking to create a model baseline analysis for measuring the impact of Gentoo Group's £600 million investment in Sunderland's social housing, following the transfer of more than 36,000 housing units from Sunderland City Council in 2001. From the beginning we were clear that we were not looking for causal relationships between variables at this time but, using both quantitative and qualitative information in a methodology that was both empirical/scientific and interpretative, we intended to refine and test the viability of the Optima model. In addition, the social and economic impact of Gentoo's work is not just a matter of their investment in the physical housing stock, but depends on their collaboration with other agencies that have primary responsibility for services such as education, health, crime reduction and employment.

There is a consensus across government departments that there is a need for evidence-based policy. There is also agreement that there is a need for multi-agency working to tackle problems in deprived communities. There is however, little evidence of the impact of multi-agency working on deprived communities beyond case studies of good practice, which are mainly anecdotal. In multi-agency working, evidence has to be shared and this is happening between front-line professionals within the constraints imposed by the need for client confidentiality. For resource allocation purposes, however, this information sharing needs to be formalised. If we are concerned with creating sustainable communities, it needs to be formalised at the level of the community or the neighbourhood. Depending on local issues, different combinations of agency collaboration are needed in different neighbourhoods. A key question, therefore, was whether the model could be adapted to provide evidence that would allow the agencies responsible for housing, education, health, crime reduction and employment to collaborate more effectively at a neighbourhood level.

There are two sets of overall conclusions in this report. The first points to national and regional issues for government and the second is concerned more specifically with what has happened with Gentoo and housing in Sunderland over the past seven years. The national and regional issues are mainly concerned with evidence-based policy for the creation of sustainable communities.

## **2. The Policy Context**

The most recent policy statement of the Department for Communities and Local Government indicates that the key components of the new policy are likely to be that every place is different, that there will be local priorities and that local communities will be involved in shaping their own futures. Local councils will provide strategic and political leadership to key local partners and they will have a specific responsibility to engage with and empower local communities. No one will be disadvantaged by where they live, communities will have power to influence the things that matter to them most and citizens will be able to shape the services that are most important for them. Social housing is at the heart of this vision and, in response to the Housing and Regeneration Bill, one of the main aims of the new Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will be to support the creation, regeneration and development of communities. Working with local authorities within strong regional frameworks, the HCA will not only support the empowerment agenda but will also seek to develop more effective forms of investment in communities and create more thriving communities through an integrated approach to investment.

Since 1999, the Government has also been committed to evidence-based policy. A key assumption of this project is that this commitment applies not only to national policy but also at the regional, local and neighbourhood levels. Local policy should be informed by evidence at an appropriate scale. However, if the delivery of sustainable communities is to be based on local partnerships, evidence needs to be gathered that will serve inter-agency collaboration, particularly in the fields of housing, health, employment, education, crime and social welfare. The complex interaction of these variables is reasonably well understood at a national level, but there is little systematic knowledge of how they relate to each other and interact to affect the lives of people in specific neighbourhoods. Some of the evidence exists in different government departments and in different local and regional agencies, but there is no common, agreed method for collating, storing and analysing it. This is particularly important for evidence that is relevant for neighbourhood regeneration or any other policy that seeks to challenge the so-called 'post-code lottery' in spatial units below the level of the local authority.

The relationship between social science indicators is complex, but this relationship is obscured by different custom and practice in different government agencies. Creating sustainable communities through evidence-based policy requires clear national and regional policies for gathering and analysing information at a neighbourhood level. Inter-agency consistency in knowledge gathering and dissemination is a prerequisite for empowering communities. It is clear that CLG's Neighbourhood Statistics, as they are presently constituted, are not fit for this purpose. The Census information can be reconstituted at the level of neighbourhoods, but it is out of date. Other information cannot be aggregated to neighbourhood boundaries, as understood by either local managers or residents. The question is whether at a regional or local level the situation is any better.

Sunderland lags behind the Region, which in turn lags behind the rest of the country, in terms of social and economic indicators relating to economic activity, employment, education, qualifications, health, earning capacity and the value of houses. In this

context, regional policy stresses the need to support people in deprived communities to take up employment opportunities by promoting job opportunities in these areas, improving basic and key skills, encouraging businesses to engage and providing support services such as childcare. To achieve inclusive economic growth, people's aspirations will be raised and social capital will be developed. The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) recognises that a robust evidence base is required to underpin its Action Plan and, in response to the Government's empowerment agenda, One NorthEast promises to concentrate on the most deprived communities.

There is, however, no indication of what constitutes a community in this context, no coherent framework for gathering social and economic data from the range of agencies that will be involved in delivering sustainable communities, and what community-based evidence might be appropriate to tackle the priority target groups of incapacity benefit claimants, those with disabilities, offenders and ex-offenders, lone parents, women returners, carers, older people, younger people and BME groups. The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) sets out a number of social objectives for delivering sustainable communities, but in setting out the content of the Annual Monitoring Report, there is no mention of these social objectives, nor of the impact of policy on the spatial distribution of investment. For both the RES and the RSS, the concept of 'community' appears to be confounded with 'local authority' and responsibility is passed down. The need for multi-agency collaboration in achieving sustainable communities is recognised, but the question of evidence that would support this and the consequences for monitoring outcomes at the neighbourhood level are assumed to be un-problematical. The concept of community is vague, the question of shared evidence to support inter-agency working at a neighbourhood level is ignored, the role of social housing in meeting social objectives is marginalised, and the spatial redistribution of services to meet an acknowledged changing population structure is not considered, except in the context of new housing developments.

In the Regional Housing Strategy (RHS), the problem of evidence is recognised but the responsibility for gathering and analysing information is passed on to others. The RHS recognises that the creation of sustainable communities call for a holistic approach that integrates housing strategies with community and neighbourhood renewal strategies; and that community and neighbourhood-based strategies should be a key activity for local authorities. Meeting specific community and social needs is seen as being particularly challenging to deliver, because of the number of issues and the number of agencies involved. The lack of robust evidence is acknowledged and the North East Housing Board sees its role as supporting sub-regional housing strategy teams in their role of bringing together the expertise that is needed to address the Supporting People programme and ensuring that housing investments are better aligned with health and social service provision. Meeting the needs of vulnerable groups is a priority, which means the work of different agencies needs to be coordinated and integrated. In summary, the RHS recognises the problem but the responsibility for dealing with it is passed on to the local authorities in the region. The question is whether a local authority that has no responsibility for the delivery of housing can address this responsibility.

Sunderland City Council's Housing Strategy (SHS) promises to ensure that housing needs and aspirations are identified and that resources are spent on meeting local objectives, for housing is seen as the cornerstone of any sustainable community and

integral to ensuring the highest quality of life for residents. Addressing housing issues is part of creating sustainable communities, which means working in partnership to achieve shared outcomes around health, social care, education, community safety and the local economy. The SHS sets out ten priorities, including dealing with vulnerable people, working in partnership and addressing the respect agenda. Partnership working is the key to delivering the strategy, and a number of partnerships are identified. However, according to the strategy, it is these partnerships that have a responsibility to ensure that the priorities are delivered, monitored and evaluated, rather than the council. Since stock transfer in 2001, in fact, responsibility for achieving the Council's vision has largely fallen to Gentoo. This is a responsibility that Gentoo has embraced, for it has not only invested in social housing but it has also committed resources and staff to activities that address social and economic issues in the city. It is unrealistic, however, to expect Gentoo, or any of the non-statutory partnerships in which it is involved, to be responsible for gathering the evidence for monitoring and evaluating inter-agency collaboration in the delivery of sustainable communities. Gentoo has a role to play, but the problem of evidence affects all the potential partners.

### **3. The Problem of Evidence**

There is no overall framework for gathering the data that is required for community-based policy and there are certain conditions that hamper the successful gathering of evidence that can be used for its implementation and evaluation. These conditions relate to gathering, storing, accessing and collating the information.

- The staff who have responsibility for gathering the information do not do so with any rigour. They cannot see the point of gathering it because it does not directly affect their day-to-day job. Much of what is gathered is not used. This is sometimes because what is gathered is so partial and incomplete that it is unusable; and sometimes because it is not needed for any clear organisational purpose.
- It is often held by people who have no interest in or understanding of how it might be used. Policymakers often do not know who has what data and, consequently, it is extremely difficult to track it down.
- When it can be tracked down, it can be difficult to gain access to it for other reasons. These include genuine reasons relating to data protection and privacy but this is often used as an excuse for the bureaucratic preservation of knowledge and power or the hiding of information to avoid political embarrassment. It can also be difficult for commercial reasons, where government encourages its agencies to charge for information that should be freely in the public domain for the purposes of non-commercial research and policy analysis.
- When information can be accessed from different agencies, it is difficult to collate it. Different organisations use different spatial units of analysis and these units change over time. The Census moved from the use of Enumeration Districts to Output Areas in 2001, Sunderland's wards were reconfigured in 2004 and some organisations have not yet responded to these changes. Others

have information based on postcodes and most have management areas that are not based on any rational use of the changing national geographies.

- Some of the information that is available is technically good, but out of date. Others have information that does not address the spatial unit of interest, especially in relation to communities and neighbourhoods. This is particularly true of data that is presented in Lower Super Output Areas, such as in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Where collaboration requires that useful information can be shared by a variety of delivery agencies in deprived neighbourhoods, these issues are particularly problematical. Partial and out-of-date information, based on different geographies, is obscured by organisational culture and is extremely difficult to collate, even when it is made available.

There are pockets of poverty in affluent local authorities all across the country and within affluent wards in many authorities there are pockets of deprivation that are hidden from sight. Because of the way that information is gathered and organised, resources do not focus on these hidden areas. The situation with the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) has improved since 2000, when analyses were carried out at the ward level, but there are still difficulties with the use of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in 2004.

In 2004, Sunderland was ranked the 22<sup>nd</sup> worst local authority in England for deprivation, placing it in the bottom 7%. Four of the city's LSOAs were in the bottom 1%. Of these, two were in Southwick, the worst ward in Sunderland in 2000, but the other two LSOAs were in wards that did not appear in the bottom 20% of the most deprived wards in the country. Of the worst 10 LSOAs in Sunderland in 2004, only five were located within the four most deprived wards. The ward is clearly a highly unreliable spatial unit for identifying where action on deprivation is most needed.

Within the study area, there were 11 LSOAs that fall within the 3% most deprived in England. Three of these straddle ward boundaries. More importantly, however, most of the LSOAs cover more than one neighbourhood and of the 11 most deprived, two involve four Gentoo Management areas and a further four cover three management areas. That is, the LSOAs are too crude for neighbourhood analysis purposes and, consequently, inadequate for the management of areas of deprivation.

The evidence that is available at the LSOA level is better than was available previously, for it gets us closer to where inter-agency activity is needed. However, within the overall IMD score there is another issue that also needs to be considered. The overall scores are made up of constituent elements that do not score evenly in each area. The worst overall area in Sunderland, for example, does not come out worst in any of the constituent elements, such as education, health, employment, crime, etc. The spread of indicators makes this an area for multi-agency collaboration, but it raises a question about what the priorities might be for different agencies.

The third most deprived LSOA in Sunderland is clearly within Gentoo's East End management area. However, the East End management area has three LSOAs within it, sharing two of them with Central Hendon and South Hendon. In the LSOA it

shares with South Hendon, only its results for the employment indicator appear in the bottom 10 in the city. If this experience is repeated across the city for different agencies, with different management geographies, the possibility of collaboration based on rational resource allocation becomes extremely difficult. This is compounded by the fact that the lower one goes down the ranking, the need for inter-agency working becomes less clear and the need for specialised help appears to be more relevant.

These management issues could be at least partially overcome if the basic building block for neighbourhood analysis was uniformly the Census Output Area. Even these sometimes cross management areas but this can be accommodated easily. However, to effectively deal with inequalities in housing, health, income, employment, education and crime, we need to have greater detail at the local level than is currently available from most of the key agencies. Different types of illnesses require different collaborative responses, as do different types of crime and levels of education and training. If, as the Government intends, policy becomes more concerned with prevention in the future, this means that the integration of the work of service providers in the community will become more important. For effective collaboration, professionals from different agencies will need to share information and managers should take this information into account when making strategic resource allocations. As far as we can determine, this is not currently possible. A major issue for the future, for example, will be older people living longer in the community, with slowly deteriorating health. Addressing an issue such as this implies not only an alignment of resource allocation policies at a strategic level but also an implementation plan at the local or neighbourhood level. Decisions about these issues require more than statistical information, but reliable secondary data at the right geographical level is fundamental for informing any debate about resource allocation.

When we looked more closely at three estates where deprivation was amongst the highest in Sunderland, there was considerable variation in the number of elderly in each estate and there were even wider differences within estates than between them. A key issue is the extent to which partnership working across organisations need to focus on particular locations, but not on others, For decisions to be made about this and for targeted inter-professional long-term strategic responses to be effective, spatially defined information need to be available at the lowest management levels within the organisations concerned. The geographies of these management areas will be different for different agencies but if the basic spatial building blocks are the same (OAs for example) coherent pictures of communities and neighbourhoods can be shared.

#### **4. Overcoming the problem**

In order to begin to overcome these informational blockages, we have developed a model that allows us to link the information for Gentoo's management areas to OAs, LSOAs and post-coded external data. The technical detail can be found in the main report and in the spreadsheets attached to it.

Using these spreadsheets, it is possible to produce social and economic profiles for neighbourhoods and housing management areas. We have tested the model using Census data, thanks to the collaboration of the Tyne and Wear Research and

Information Office (TWRI), and it is possible to produce neighbourhood profiles for social and household structure, employment and unemployment, crime and aspects of health. Similar profiles can be produced for Gentoo management areas and, following the next census in 2011, longitudinal studies of social and economic change can be carried out. These can be analysed in the context of the investment that has taken place in each area, in terms of both finance and human resources.

In addition, we contracted TWRI to provide a more updated analysis of reported crime figures for each of the Gentoo Management Areas, as a demonstration of how the model could be used if reliable Output Area information were to become available from the agencies concerned with the delivery of sustainable communities in Sunderland. TWRI produced maps of the different types of crime in different housing management areas. Setting aside the well-known difficulties with reported crime figures, the information provides guidance as to the types of collaboration with the police that different local housing offices might pursue.

Other researchers have had the same problem as us when trying to access health and education data and TWRI themselves have had difficulty in accessing this information. Within the City Council, education data that does exist and that could be useful for neighbourhood analysis is not even shared between departments. When this information does become available, the model can be used to guide the types of collaborations that will help link community-based solutions to inter-professional issues. It also provides the basis for upgrading Gentoo's Neighbourhood Assessment Matrix.

## **5. Gentoo's Contribution to the Sustainable Communities Agenda**

One year after stock transfer, in March 2002, almost 60% of social housing in Sunderland failed to meet the Government's decent homes standard. By March 2004, this had been reduced to 4% and the target set for Gentoo for 2010, that all their homes should meet this standard, has already been achieved. Before stock transfer, the quality of housing and the quality of the environment were the main push factors for people leaving the city for other parts of the region. In response to these challenges, Gentoo has invested in social housing and has committed resources and staff to activities that address the social and economic issues in the City.

The organisation has made considerable progress in investing £600 million in the refurbishment and renewal of flats and houses; completed a mixed-tenure renewal area at South Hylton Green; completed the development of new private sector apartments in the centre of Sunderland; introduced choice-based lettings; tackled anti-social behaviour in its housing management areas; developed activities with partners in support of community safety, employment and education; developed specialist housing projects for single homeless people, young parents and people with physical and learning difficulties; helped reduce fuel poverty through energy-efficient design of new and refurbished housing; and worked with health and social care providers to meet the needs of the elderly and disabled households. This has taken place in the context of management and cultural change within the organisation, which has also entered into a new set of relationships with partner organisations in Sunderland and across the region. It has become involved in numerous community initiatives and staff

have been encouraged to contribute to social development in the city through voluntary activities.

The most important of Gentoo's activities is the £600 million that is being invested in the City's social housing stock, which is clearly improving the quality of life of tenants and other residents in the most deprived areas of Sunderland. However, delivering sustainable communities requires a commitment to other community-based activities in partnership with a variety of organisations and Gentoo have been involved in a wide range of such initiatives.

The improvements to the stock, the commitment to the community and the changes in the organisation since stock transfer, are reflected in the positive responses to Gentoo in the interviews we conducted with their stakeholders, in the focus groups with residents and in the household survey. With one or two qualifications, staff were enthused, tenants were satisfied and, with the exception of the City Council and some sections of the voluntary sector, external stakeholders were impressed with the change that Gentoo was bringing to Sunderland.

Gentoo staff said they had more resources to do the job than before and that they felt that, after many years of frustration, they now felt they had a real opportunity to 'make a difference'. They had more freedom to make decisions, rather than refer everything to higher levels of the corporate structure, and therefore could make a positive impact on tenants' lives. This had led to a new working culture and a change in the relationship with tenants. They also pointed to a culture change in the community itself, as people responded to the change in the way housing was delivered. Management was much better, there was more information about what was happening in the organisation, more collaborative working and a decline of departmentalism.

Some staff, who were positive about the changes overall, were nevertheless less optimistic about culture change in both the organisation and the community. Some professionals in the organisation had still to recognise that the users of housing and infrastructure also knew something about design and, within the community, there were still strong peer pressures on young people not to make a positive contribution to the environment in which they lived. There were also some fears about new levels of accountability that came with the ability to make decisions, growing levels of paperwork and the introduction of new technology, but all of these concerns were expressed by staff who were nevertheless positive about the new direction of the organisation.

The resident representatives we interviewed were also hugely positive overall. From their perspective, the whole of Sunderland had vastly improved, they were kept well-informed, there was a high level of consultation, and they spoke of improvements in homes, in places and in the people who were their neighbours. There was a very high level of satisfaction with the modernisation of their homes and they were impressed by the range of choices they had. They felt they had real influence over the design of their kitchens in particular and they were treated sensitively when the work was being done. The elderly and disabled were taken care of, particularly if they had to move out of their high rise flats when they were being modernised. They spoke of how the process had improved over time, as Gentoo became more experienced in dealing with

the work, and of the professionalism of the workforce. For some, the environmental improvements had improved community spirit. The responses of the resident representatives were not uniformly positive, but they were overwhelmingly so

A very important aspect of their new circumstances was that anti-social tenants had been dealt with there was now a good mix of people. 'Boy racers' had been designed out and stigmatised areas were now liveable. Views on the use of Excellent Customer Status were mainly positive. It was seen as being responsible for getting rid of anti-social tenants and an excellent tool for 'rewarding decency and good neighbours', particularly by the elderly. It secured the quality of the living environment. However, it was also seen as being biased in favour of those in employment and against the disabled, the unemployed, the elderly and the poor. There was thought to be a highly uneven way of dealing with complaints, with procedures depending on the interpretation of the staff of local offices. There was an argument for the better training of staff to ensure consistency and equality. It was also pointed out, and accepted by Gentoo, that there was no policy for dealing with malicious complaints, which itself is an example of anti-social behaviour that can be divisive in a community.

The issue of a displacement effect was raised during these interviews, relating to what had happened to the people who had been moved out and where they were now. There was some anecdotal evidence about this but the overwhelming feeling was relief that they had moved.

There was also concern about the pace of renewal. The rate of reconstruction was not fast enough, areas of dereliction were not being dealt with and not enough properties were being rebuilt. It turned out that this was related to the relationship between Gentoo and the City Council.

## **6. External Stakeholders**

The people we interviewed were from formal sector organisations across the city and the region, including Sunderland City Council, and the voluntary sector. Some organisations in the voluntary sector felt that Gentoo should not be getting involved in what they saw as non housing matters and that they did not have the expertise to deliver better social outcomes to deprived families. Gentoo, on the other hand, were quite clear that this was part of the sustainable communities agenda and they saw it as their duty to improve their tenants' quality of life to a level where people did not need voluntary sector support. They work with partners in the voluntary sector to achieve this aim, essentially working themselves out of a job at the same time.

The formal sector organisations across the city and region were extremely positive about Gentoo – the organisation, what it was trying to achieve and how it was going about it. They spoke of its impact on the city, its role in regeneration and the growing contribution they were making to retaining and attracting people to Sunderland. Its commitment to the city and region was seen as important for the future. They were complimentary about Gentoo's efficient delivery of quality homes and their contribution to the environment. They were also positive about the organisation's commitment to sustainable communities, its support for education and training and its efforts to engage with hard-to-reach young people and bring them into the

employment market. The impression was that Gentoo was seen as a model housing provider for the region. The only exception to this was Sunderland City Council.

The relationship between Gentoo and the City Council is best described as one of ambivalence. Gentoo and the Council are partners in the Sunderland Partnership and in a number of related activities. The Council also spoke positively about the regenerative impact of Gentoo's activities in city centre, where they have refurbished old buildings, creating flats for young professionals and encouraging private sector investment in leisure activities. Nevertheless, there was clearly a history of conflict deriving from stock transfer. The conflict was explained in terms of clashes of personalities and the jealousies that arose when staff in what is now Gentoo were no longer subject to the same financial constraints that Council staff had to endure. Relations appeared to be slowly improving and there was a willingness to work together in the future. However, there are certain systemic contradictions in the large-scale stock transfer process that make it difficult for willing professionals to pursue a common purpose.

As distinct from what happened when council housing was transferred to Housing Action Trusts (HATs) in the 1990s, when HATs were given statutory planning powers, Gentoo did not inherit planning powers with the stock when housing was transferred in Sunderland in 2001. Whereas HATs had powers of compulsory purchase, Gentoo does not. Gentoo appears to have underestimated the difficulties this would mean for site assembly and, in their eagerness to push ahead, they did not initially consult the Council about their proposals for redevelopment. Whilst they did consult the Council about the principle of renewal, in their eagerness to push ahead, they did not consult in detail about the delivery. On the other hand, within the Council, what remained of the housing section was marginalised, its role was not clear and, mainly because of departmentalism, there was very little discussion of housing issues. With the transfer of the stock, housing was off the Council's agenda. There was no clear agreement about the roles of the two organisations, other than a vague and false distinction between strategy and delivery.

Most of the properties have now been acquired by Gentoo, but problems persist because of this initial lack of clarity about the respective roles of Gentoo and the Council. However, this is compounded by the fact that, while planners have a statutory responsibility for all residents in the city, Gentoo's primary responsibility is to its own tenants. This is a fundamental contradiction which has implications for the creation of sustainable communities. While Gentoo has taken on board the aims and objectives of the sustainable communities agenda by accepting a wider social responsibility than that of the traditional role of a landlord, the demolition of stigmatised properties which may be physically sound but socially unacceptable will inevitably bring them into conflict with planners whose primary concern is to maintain the city's housing stock levels.

In 2005, it was agreed that each of Gentoo's renewal proposals had to fit with the Council's strategic priorities and that Neighbourhood Renewal Assessments (NRAs) would be carried out. Some properties that were initially earmarked for demolition were reassigned for rehabilitation, but there are still major delays with validating NRAs that are having an impact on the quality of life of residents. Within the Council, housing and planning staff are now working together and relations between both

organisations are gradually improving. However, the systemic problems behind the above difficulties are not peculiar to Sunderland. It is important that they are recognised more widely and managed, prior to any large-scale transfer taking place.

## **7. Community Cohesion**

There are very low levels of all types of social capital in Sunderland. Compared with other areas, there are stronger family ties but weaker connections between neighbours and a lower propensity to join civic organisations. Bonding social capital is based primarily on the family and there is little evidence of bridging social capital. There is also little evidence of or interest in linking social capital. When asked if they wanted more influence over the management of their homes, a very high proportion said they did not know. Having more influence on housing management is not something they aspire to. The Government's housing and sustainable communities agenda places great emphasis on empowering citizens and giving them more say over how their homes are managed but it would appear that in Sunderland there is very little demand for this. Gentoo takes tenant participation and consultation seriously and there are many opportunities for tenants to get involved. If tenants are satisfied with the service they are getting, they may have reached the limits of participation.

There is a good deal of historical literature that claims that housing renewal activities have destroyed community cohesion. During our interviews with staff and residents it was also suggested the social disruption caused by redevelopment had a negative impact on community relations. In South Hylton Green, the one area that has been redeveloped, there was a higher level of trust and interaction between neighbours than was the case over the whole study area. It was much higher than in neighbouring Pennywell, where bonding social capital was much more dependent on the family and where interaction between neighbours was even lower than elsewhere. There may be other factors at play here, such as age of respondents and household structure, which are worth investigating further but, on the face of it, redevelopment appears to have enhanced community relations rather than destroyed them.

## **8. Satisfaction with Homes and the Environment**

The household survey found very high levels of satisfaction with homes and the environment. Ninety per cent of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with their homes. There was no difference between tenants whose homes had been renovated and owner occupiers who had bought under the right-to-buy since Gentoo took over the stock. Only 6% of tenants thought their rent was poor value for money an even amongst those who had not benefited from renovation, only 7% thought it was poor value. There were also low levels of reported problems with the homes. There were high levels of satisfaction with improvements that had been carried out and with Gentoo as a housing manager. As indicated above, there was very little interest in more participation in the management of housing and the environment.

Ninety four per cent expressed satisfaction with their neighbourhood as a place to live, with 'peace and quiet' being the most important reason for this. However, two thirds said there had been no change in their neighbourhoods over the previous five years. Of those who did say there had been a change, the main reason for improvement was the condition of properties and the main reasons for deterioration

were increasing anti-social behaviour, problems with young people, vandalism, crime, bad neighbours and lack of youth facilities.

In South Hylton Green, the one development where Gentoo have been able to deliver neighbourhood renewal to their customers, 96% of respondents said they were satisfied with their homes and a similar percentage thought the design of their homes was excellent. They were much more likely to say that their home was better than it was five years ago, twice as likely to say that their home was very good value for money and much more likely to be very satisfied with Gentoo. In terms of satisfaction with the area, however, their responses were no different from those of residents across Sunderland as a whole. Nor was there any statistical difference in satisfaction with access to different social facilities and services, perceptions of crime and worries about crime, although they were less likely to say they felt 'very safe' in and around their homes.

When we looked at the situation in a number of other key estates in Sunderland, differences in satisfaction with their areas as places to live were not significant. There were, however, differences in satisfaction with Gentoo in general, with their homes and with amenities for teenagers, young people and the elderly. In six out of twelve estates, more than three quarters of residents thought that facilities for teenagers were unsatisfactory and in four estates the facilities for the elderly were thought to be inadequate. Despite highlighting a number of problems, there was a low level of interest in participation and no one in Pennywell, Redhouse or Castletown wanted a bigger say in how their neighbourhood services were managed.

## **9. Vulnerable Groups**

Most of the survey findings were reflected in the focus groups with vulnerable residents but in these meetings the participants had more opportunity to pursue particular interests that they thought could have been dealt with better. The over-65s were very positive about their homes and mainly positive about their environments. They were concerned about young people hanging around with nothing to do and this was connected to fears about security, particularly at night. Despite an overall positive attitude towards their homes, they pointed to design faults that they felt Gentoo should have picked up and learned from, rather than repeating them in successive developments. They also thought that there was scope for more handyman and gardening support, which they were willing to pay a reasonable price for.

People with disabilities were also very positive about their experience of Gentoo, referring to the refurbishment as 'brilliant' and praising the way some housing officers looked after them. However, they also pointed to design issues and, in some cases, disabled facilities being removed and not replaced. As in the case of the elderly, they highlighted the need for more support in home improvements. Again, they expressed concern about young people hanging around and under-age alcohol drinking where they lived. They also pointed out that they needed support in negotiating their way through the Gentoo and Council bureaucracies but a major concern was a lack of disabled parking spaces. They specifically highlighted the need for more inter-agency collaboration and they stressed how dependent they were on some of their neighbours.

For young people, the key issue was the impact of choice-based lettings, which they said was preventing them from getting decent accommodation. Some of them who lived in or had previously lived in Gantoo-run hostels were positive about this support, particularly about the role of their support workers. While facilities for young people were obviously an issue for them, in that there were not enough things for young people to do, they were clear that they were beyond the age of youth clubs and other commonly perceived solutions to this problem. In contrast to the fear they inspired in older people, these young people felt they were in the front line of the violence in the city, not as perpetrators, but as victims. Targeted by under-age drinkers to buy alcohol for them, they complained about the abuse they got from younger gangs when they refused to buy it. They also complained about the police, not as a threat to themselves but because they did nothing about dealing with younger teenage gangs. Alcohol, violence and gangs were a large part of their existence, but as a threat to their well-being.

Young families also had issues about gaining access to accommodation, in this case mainly to the right size of property in neighbourhoods where they did not feel threatened by difficult neighbours. They also complained about children drinking and taking drugs and about the threats they received when they refused to buy them what they wanted. They were critical of the way Sure Start was managed and concerned about the quality of schools where they lived. However, once again the issue of facilities for young people was an important matter. In this case, their main concern was that the facilities that they mentioned were set up for mixed genders between the ages of 11 and 19, prompting the question 'why would I send my 11 year old daughter to a club where there were 19 year old men'.

Sunderland is around 97% white. In Hendon, close to the city centre, there is an enclave of Bangladeshi families living in private accommodation, overwhelmingly as home owners. Like the young white people, the focus group of young people in this area also complained about lack of facilities, and security was a major concern. The experiences of the young white and young Asian people were very similar, but the Asian concerns were compounded by racism, especially in those parts of central Sunderland surrounding their neighbourhood (the East End and other parts of Hendon) and in areas such as Pallion, Pennywell and Ford. They were convinced that renovating these areas would not change them. They had white friends, whom they distinguished from the 'chavs' who abused them and their families. However, these young Asians did not present themselves as victims. On the contrary, they were defenders of their community and their elders in that community, from the same people who threatened the young white people.

In the focus groups, Excellent Customer Status was something that almost everyone had a view on, except the BME residents for whom it did not apply. As we found in the case of the interviews with residents representatives, there were different views about its value. For the elderly, it was a reflection of their way of life. They had no difficulty in meeting the criteria for achieving and maintaining the status and they saw it as an official acknowledgment of their responsible patterns of behaviour. They said they would not admit to not having it and they saw it as a useful tool for improving other people's behaviour. People with disabilities were much more critical of it. They thought it did not take account of the difficulties that disabled residents might have in keeping their homes and gardens to meet the strict criteria of the scheme and they

were concerned that there was a lack of flexibility in its application. They felt that some officers did not consider the special circumstances faced by people with disabilities.

Families with young children were also critical of the lack of flexibility, citing examples of no account being taken of the impact of children being sick or in hospital. They were also particularly concerned about the intrusive nature of the home inspections and the financial checks that were made, sometimes of their parents' affairs. For young people, it was mainly irrelevant. Only one person had it and another had lost it because she was sick and the payment of her benefits changed. The rest were either not interested or had not heard of it.

## **10. Refurbishment, Renewal and Displacement**

There has been very little re-housing associated with refurbishment. Some people who were temporarily re-housed did not move back in when the refurbishment was completed, but this reflected the exercise of choice on the part of these tenants. They chose to stay in their temporary accommodation.

With respect to renewal, there has been no plan to house people in the new housing that has replaced their old home. These households do not anticipate a temporary move followed by a permanent return. It is difficult to judge the displacement effect from the renewal process, partly because the renewal areas were unpopular and had a high level of voids before the clearing programme started and partly because the information on destinations has not been kept uniformly across the different housing areas. The demolition process tends to start with streets that already have high levels of voids, that is, in the least popular areas where properties were not being re-let.

Where statistical evidence exists, it points to a high proportion of tenants being re-housed locally. This implies a level of continuity for the existing community. However, we also know from our interviews that anti-social tenants were not re-housed locally. This happened to a small number of families, some times extended families, but where they went to is not picked up in the statistics. There is some anecdotal evidence about this, but it could only be clarified through gathering better data.

The survey data showed that the respondents in the renewal areas were considerably younger than those elsewhere, households were larger and levels of unemployment were significantly higher. These areas house people at an early stage of their housing careers and, comprising the least attractive parts of the housing stock, they have played a role as entry points for the social rented sector. Households move on from them at an early opportunity, especially if they are in more secure jobs and have been good tenants.

The reasons for moving in to the properties, however, were no different for those given by people in non-renewal areas. They are like other tenants in most respects, except that they are at a slightly earlier stage of their housing and family careers. Where refurbishment has been carried out, they are as satisfied with the work as tenants elsewhere. In general, however, they are less satisfied with their landlords and with the city council, less likely to view their rents as good value for money, less

satisfied with their particular house of flat and less satisfied with the area as a place to live. On the other hand, they are more likely to think that the area is better than it was five years ago. We can only speculate that this is related to the removal of relatively small number of anti-social neighbours through the process of demolition. Otherwise, there appears to have been disturbance, but little displacement.

The renewal areas are still regarded less favourably than other areas. This will be partly as a result of the delays experienced with the renewal process, but it will also reflect the stigmatisation of these areas, which may have lingering effects even after renewal is complete. There is a possibility that tenant attachment to area, the management of allocations and the excellent customer scheme are combining to make the concentration of different groups in different areas more marked, as tenants are being more systematically being sorted between estates. There is also anecdotal evidence that some are also being excluded from social housing and displaced into the private rented sector. This concentration of households with problems in some areas may be the unintended consequence of renewal and other processes, but it could result in different management problems in different areas in the future. Where estates have different reputations and where properties are of different quality, it is possible that the process will create a clear hierarchy that will affect the choices that tenants make. If this happens, the quality of stock overall will be improved and the quality of life for the vast majority of tenants will be better, but the next generation of tenants and managers will be faced with unequally attractive housing areas, including some that will be difficult to manage and live in.

If we generalise this away from Sunderland and consider the relationship between an improving social rented stock and the lower end of the private rented market, the Department for Communities and Local Government ought to reflect on what this might mean for different programmes within its remit. It is possible that a small number of anti-social families may be displaced from RSL stock into areas of private renting, living next to owner-occupiers, such as in NDC areas which are also attracting large amounts of Government funding. This will be celebrated by RSL tenants, but it may undermine the effectiveness of NDC funding, will have a negative effect on the residents of these areas, and will change the geography of the delivery of other services such as police, health, education and social services. There is no statistical evidence that this is happening in Sunderland but there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that this displacement effect needs to be monitored more closely.