

# 10 PLACE/Ladywell housing project, London

A temporary local project with metropolitan impacts

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## Introduction

This chapter explores the spatial justice impacts of a temporary housing scheme in the London Borough of Lewisham. The focus on spatial justice, as outlined elsewhere in this volume, reflects the concern of an expanded European Union with establishing cohesion between its diverse member states. As a relatively new approach to understanding the geographical aspect of justice, its conceptual value may be gauged through an exploration of the impacts of small-scale local projects and programmes across time and scales.

The interpretation of spatial justice set out in a recent paper issuing from the RELOCAL study (Madanipour et al., 2021) draws out three key components of the concept – spatiality, integration and inclusion – as follows. The spatial component addresses the justice impacts of geographical location. The integrative aspect implies the interdependence of distributive and procedural justice dimensions through this spatial component. Finally, the inclusion aspect spans boundaries and borders, embracing inter-regional justice as well as intra-regional justice (thus breaking down the convention of considering justice impacts as bounded within the nation state). This latter inclusion aspect also relates to inter-generational spatial justice, or the chronological aspect of spatial justice as it unfolds over time. Bringing these three dimensions together, the paper formulates spatial justice as: ‘the democratic process of equitably distributing social and environmental benefits and burdens within and between groups, territories, and generations’ (Madanipour et al., 2022: 812).

Based on its 60-year economic model, and the initial cross-scalar impacts in terms of planned replications at borough and regional levels, the PLACE/Ladywell scheme is ideally placed as a model for examining interwoven inter-generational/chronological issues and territorial/boundary issues in relation to spatial justice. Additionally, in its focus on the cash-strapped social housing sector in London, the case study is able to illustrate the all-importance of the changing political and economic contexts for the ultimate impacts of such place-based interventions.

The chapter is structured as follows: after a thumbnail sketch of the scheme and its location, we first present an account of the neighbourhood, borough-wide and metropolitan justice impacts of the scheme at two time points: its origins (2015–2016) and its initial implementation (2016–2017). We then move on to exploring the scheme’s chronological spatial justice impacts at each scale from 2018 to the present day. Finally, we review the longer-term prospects for its intended main beneficiaries, the homeless, as well as for the neighbourhood, borough and region. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the magnification, distortion and contraction of justice impacts of a scheme such as PLACE/Ladywell across space and over time.

### **The scheme**

The architect-designed PLACE/Ladywell modular housing scheme provides (at a minimum) 16 ground floor community business spaces and 24 apartments for homeless and insecurely housed families on a vacant site earmarked for future development in the London Borough of Lewisham. The scheme, which opened to residents in 2016, is planned and built as a temporary structure predicted to stand in sites under development for around four years. It was constructed to be fully demountable both as a whole and in its parts, so that it can be moved across a number of temporary sites as units or as a whole, over a total lifespan of around 60 years. The current site is on council-owned land, the site of a former public leisure centre, on a run-down section of the borough’s main retail thoroughfare, Lewisham High Street. The site is nevertheless conveniently placed for bus routes to the borough’s two main commercial centres (Catford and Lewisham Shopping Centres, located respectively at the south and north ends of the High Street). No less than seven bus routes, including two night buses (Lewisham Council, 2020a) call at the bus stops near the scheme. It is also around seven minutes’ walk from an overground train to central London (Ladywell station).

Additionally to its housing provision, the scheme not only provides a high-quality and eye-catching accent in a run-down section of High Street but also provides a new enterprise and retail hub for the area. It might be said to both mitigate the ‘planning blight’ impacts of the large vacant plot behind it (that it now conceals from view) and increase the appeal of the extensive land which it fronts to potential developers. The scheme has been enthusiastically championed by the media and policy-makers, winning several industry nominations and prizes (RTPI, 2019; Masker, 2020). This has influenced its planned replications, both in three more sites within the borough of Lewisham (the first, prior to the pandemic, slated for completion by 2021); and across the city of London under the auspices of a dedicated company, PLACE Ltd, coordinated by the London Councils association and part-funded by the regional governance body, the Greater London Authority (with the rest probably deriving from participating Local Authority loans – Interview 5).

## The location

### *London*

The Greater London region and the Southeast region with which it is linked with are the main growth poles for the United Kingdom and their economic activities are seen to be of national importance (UK 2070 Commission, 2019). Greater London is one of the few remaining areas of the United Kingdom to have effective and coordinated regional governance, through the Greater London Authority (GLA), which is led by an elected Mayor and Assembly. The Greater London region has undergone accelerated population increase over the past few decades, a phenomenon which has also been strong within the Lewisham local authority area. Some of the increase has been due to high birth rates, but a significant proportion is due to the relocation to London of new inhabitants from outside the United Kingdom, a factor which is clearly subject to both national factors such as Brexit and external, geo-political factors, such as international mobility in relation to pandemic restrictions.

The London region is an area of exceptionally low housing affordability compared with the rest of the United Kingdom and has the country's highest levels of homelessness. The most important tenure group facing homelessness in London are those who rent in the Private Rented Sector. Both the regional governance body, the Greater London Authority (GLA), and the voluntary collaboration between London's 32 boroughs, London Councils, are committed to tackling the region's exceptional homelessness problem and the linked housing shortage.

### *London borough of Lewisham*

Lewisham is a borough in the south east of London, classed as belonging to the Inner London group of local authorities, although unlike the majority of these, it has only a very small section bordering the River Thames. Lewisham is also unusual for England Local Authorities in being subject to two degrees of local devolution: it has an elected mayor, being one of only four London boroughs to do so; besides, in common with all London boroughs, being subject to regional level governance, through one of the few remaining regional bodies still operating in England (the Greater London Authority). At the lowest level of governance, the Borough of Lewisham is also divided into 18 different wards, each with three local councillors elected by residents (totalling 54 ward councillors). The role of ward councils – such as that for Lewisham Central Ward, where PLACE/Ladywell is situated – is to mediate between Lewisham council and local neighbourhoods, but in common with much metropolitan neighbourhood democracy, representation is an issue due to the impacts on neighbourhood involvement of belonging to a lower income group (e.g. Mendez et al., 2020).

In terms of the policy context for PLACE/Ladywell, it is broadly in line with the kind of cohesion approach that the EU terms spatial justice. Solely left-leaning Mayors have been elected in Lewisham since the post was introduced in 2002; while at the regional level a New London Plan (ratified in March 2020) has been developed under a left-leaning Mayor and Assembly, with a clear emphasis on inclusive growth (termed ‘Good Growth’ in the Plan) (GLA, 2017: XIV).

In terms of planning, Lewisham is a relatively low-rise, green and residential borough. Yet recent and forthcoming development in Lewisham and its environs shows a trend for increasing densification, in higher rise buildings and more infill (Manning et al., 2018), resulting in a more compact urban area. While somewhat dependent upon the way neighbourhood boundaries are drawn, using standard geographies, segregation in the Borough of Lewisham can be shown as marked. For example, Lewisham Central, the administrative ward where PLACE/Ladywell is situated, scores high on Indices of Multiple Deprivation but is sandwiched between two more affluent Lewisham administrative wards, Ladywell and Blackheath. There is also a degree of segregation, likely to increase over time, between the well-linked northern end of the borough and the less-well-connected south. Furthermore, typical of metropolitan areas with a legacy of large social housing estates, highly deprived and prosperous enclaves sit side by side in several of Lewisham’s Wards (London Borough of Lewisham, 2017: 8).

Lewisham is currently not served by any underground lines (plans to extend the Bakerloo line into the borough are likely to be further delayed by the economic consequences of the pandemic), and this, along with its bisection by the South Circular road, the former London orbital prior to the M25, has impacted its housing and rent prices, which are relatively moderate for an Inner London borough, the latter averaging around £1,275 per month at the time of the research (Valuation Office Agency, 2019). This may also be a factor in its young demographic profile. In common with the Greater London region as a whole, the London Borough of Lewisham is very young in demographic terms (20% of the population were under 16 in 2015 – London Data Store, 2018). It is also the second most ethnically diverse borough of London, and more than a third of its population at the last Census were born outside the United Kingdom. Related to the youth of its inhabitants and the lack of durable local connections of many, the Borough has considerable churning of population and residents who stay only a short period of time before moving on elsewhere. The affordability of housing in Lewisham is only relative: Greater London has the lowest level of housing affordability of the whole of the United Kingdom and the highest level of homelessness. Lewisham is the council with the twelfth highest level of homelessness in the United Kingdom and also has a low average income compared to other parts of London (Shelter, 2018).

*Lewisham central ward – former Leisure Centre site*

The strategic location of the former Leisure Centre site points to possibilities for gentrification: not only is it sandwiched between the two less deprived Lewisham wards of Ladywell and Blackheath, but it is also opposite a conservation area that features several listed buildings. These include an elegant 18th-century church with medieval tower set in extensive grounds, now a community garden that is linked by a riverside walk to Ladywell Fields park, near the overground Lewisham train station and location of well-designed modern office complexes, retail, cafes and pubs.

**Justice impacts from origins to implementation**

As the following section will explore, the origins and first two years of PLACE/Ladywell's existence saw hopes raised for largely positive spatial justice impacts from the scheme across scales. As the following account will demonstrate, however, a focus on symbolic, rather than effective, distributive and participatory justice is evident from the scheme's inception.

*Neighbourhood level: scheme origins*

In the case of PLACE/Ladywell, the neighbourhood scale was only partly taken into consideration by the council at the level of procedural justice. There seem to be two likely reasons for this: the first is that the original use of the site was an amenity of Borough-wide rather than merely neighbourhood benefit (a subsidized leisure centre, with use mainly open to residents of the borough). The second reason will become clearer in the next section: the Local Authority had strong motivations to deploy the site for economic benefits, even while vacant; neighbourhood voices would be unlikely to endorse this instrumental use of the site.

Yet Lewisham Leisure Centre's relocation to the top of Lewisham High Street, leaving a large footprint of vacant, council-owned land potentially presented an opportunity to substitute an amenity open to all residents of the borough for something of more immediate neighbourhood value. As noted earlier, Lewisham has a youthful demographic and a high proportion of young families. After the decision to relocate the Leisure Centre, various proposals were put forward for its redeployment, with local residents said to prefer a school in the location (Interview 1). Some expressed a hope that any new use for the site would not include high-rise developments, as these were becoming a feature of infill at the north of Lewisham High Street, based on urban densification policies. The low-rise nature of the scheme may be the reason it ultimately received only one planning objection (Interview 1). Nevertheless, despite the existence of ward-level councils representing residents' views and preferences, the Local Authority's plans for the scheme seem to have been largely imposed in a top-down and non-participative manner.

In line with the former use of the land, as a resource of borough-wide benefit, Lewisham Council exercised top-down control of the redevelopment of the old Leisure Centre site for benefit of the borough rather than the neighbourhood, putting in its place a resource for the borough's homeless (or about to become homeless) families, which would also partly subsidize the cost of housing them through their rent, mainly paid through unemployment benefits. The longer-term goal was to find a developer for the site, which forms part of a larger area designated for mixed-use, residential-led development in Lewisham's plans. In line with the estate regeneration approach used in other sites in the borough, this would create a mixed private and public housing scheme, so as to generate revenue to cross-subsidize the borough's estate regeneration elsewhere.

At a later stage, when the scheme was already in process, a concession was made to neighbourhood participation, in terms of a large-scale neighbourhood consultation about the use of the ground floor space (see next section). However, this feature of the scheme appears to have been almost incidental, relating to the planning requirements for new development along a retail strip such as Lewisham High Street; and indeed, a ground floor enterprise hub is not a feature of either the borough or city-level replication models.

#### *Neighbourhood level: scheme implementation*

Under the terms of Lewisham's most recent plan at the time, while new retail development and housing is designated for the existing shopping centre areas to the north and south of the High Street, the middle of the high street is classed as a secondary retail zone which may only be developed in ways that do not compete with the main shopping provision in the primary areas (Lewisham Council, 2014). Within these constraints, the use of the ground floor retail strip in PLACE/Ladywell was put to a single, costly and extensive local consultation once the scheme had been given the go-ahead, but before it was built, over five days in September 2015. It involved nearly 600 local residents and businesses, asking them what use they would like to see in the ground floor retail strip of the new building.

it wasn't necessarily, 'How big do you think it should be?' or 'What colour do you think it should be?' like that's all set, but 'What should we do with it once it's finished because we're going to have a whole floor and it's available to the public and community and what would you like it to be?' That was very successful for us, and I think that did create a positive sentiment around the development.

(Interview 1, 2018, Housing Strategy, Lewisham Council)

The Council's regeneration webpages note of the consultation results: 'The five most popular ideas were a cinema, a creative workspace, sports facilities, a community event space and a support centre'. Additionally, 30% of

local business owners said they wanted ‘a space for networking, alongside their other business needs’ (Lewisham Council, 2016). The initial uses of the ground floor premises responded to these neighbourhood aspirations to a considerable extent, including a maker’s market, cinema and spacious NGO-run café with a dual function as a place of safety for young people encountering threat on the streets. At least in its first year or two of operation, therefore, it might be said that the scheme made a concession to participatory justice at the neighbourhood level.

### *Borough level – scheme origins*

At the borough scale, Lewisham has a history of pioneering housing innovation, yet mainly at a small, niche-innovation scale. Perhaps its best-known project was the self-build social housing scheme, Walter’s Way, in the 1970s and 1980s (Wainright, 2016), where people could obtain a plot of council land on land too small or sloping for the council’s own housing programme. Here they could create their own design of social housing and the value of their labours was deducted from future rent paid to the council. A latter-day Community Land Trust scheme, long in the planning, finally launched in 2019 in Church Road, a road opposite Place/Ladywell leading to Ladywell station. The scheme, run by the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS) will provide 33 homes with a mix of affordable tenures that unlike Walter’s Way will remain in the hands of the Trust and thus retain affordability in perpetuity (*ibid.*).

‘Pre-fab’ housing has tended to be associated in the United Kingdom with shabby appearance and poor quality and comfort, while later modular construction methods, such as ‘system-built’ permanent council homes, were very unpopular with tenants in the 1970s and 1980s due to structural flaws (Boughton, 2018). Lewisham had substantial numbers of pre-fabricated homes, built to house those displaced by bomb damage in World War II, which was by contrast, beloved by many inhabitants, a few properties enduring well into the 21st century before being replaced by a mixed public-private regeneration scheme (Lewisham Council, 2021a). In another London borough, Ealing, at about the same time as PLACE/Ladywell, transport containers were repurposed to provide housing for the homeless; here cramped conditions as well as thermal comfort were to emerge as major issues for tenants (Butler, 2019).

A housing strategy officer at Lewisham council noted the council’s current mixed programme of newbuild, estate regeneration and innovation: ‘the other thing that we’ve been doing in the last three or four years is I would say sort of demonstrator and niche projects that try and point towards how things might be done differently’ (Interview 1). At niche-innovation level, Place/Ladywell aimed to take pre-fabricated housing to a new level in terms of both interior and exterior quality. With its aesthetically appealing design and appearance of permanence, PLACE/Ladywell

was intended to transform the image of temporary modular housing in a way that not only benefits the tenants but also transforms the image of the locations where it is sited. A borough-wide benefit envisaged for Place/Ladywell was to develop the precision-built, factory-made modular housing industry.

It's an alternative to the current contracting arrangements where there's a very small number of contractors, developers, they use traditional skills that haven't changed in 100 years. The employment market for those skills is hugely based on European labour, which is a massive risk under Brexit. It's very difficult to see through the supply chain on construction, so people outsource all the way down, subcontract all the way down to individual small packages and it's very hard to get quality control, it's very hard to scale, it's really . . . it's very hard to do anything really imaginative or interesting with it, whereas if you're automating in a factory you get the benefits of scale.

(Interview 1)

The intention was to create demountable housing modules that meet or exceed regional (i.e. Greater London) design standards, including better thermal comfort and energy efficiency, and that visually enhance the area where they are located. Furthermore, while vacant urban sites have found temporary uses for retail, sports and leisure uses (e.g. the Art Park in the neighbouring Borough of Southwark), making such sites available for residential accommodation is a relatively new and untested use. Another innovation of PLACE/Ladywell was therefore to develop planning tools for the temporary residential use of vacant sites.

It might also be argued that by creating rental value from the vacant Leisure Centre site, the Borough has put its public land ownership to good use in generating an income while providing new public facilities. However, the picture looks more complex when the financing of the scheme is considered – the larger part of which is derived from the council's prior sale of public land (Interview 1; Harris et al., 2019). In terms of this site alone, there has so far been no net loss of public amenity, because the Leisure Centre has been reconstructed in the regeneration zone in the north of the Borough ('Barratt had built us a new swimming pool as part of the town centre development so we no longer needed this one.' (Interview 1)). Despite the apparent origin of the move in 'planning gain' the new location has a higher footfall and is arguably more accessible and amenable to public transport – thus can benefit more of the Borough's residents. It is not clear, however, whether the new Leisure Centre disposes of an equivalent amount of land as the large site now fronted by PLACE/Ladywell.

Another borough-wide benefit is for Lewisham families categorized as homeless or under threat of homelessness, who are drawn from across the Borough by the agency that manages the apartments, Lewisham Homes.

While the scheme houses only 24 such families at any one time, tenure is expected to be around 18 months on average, the time the council expects to take to find these families permanent social housing. Thus, if the scheme is expected to stay in each location for around four years, then about 48 families will be supported to stay in the Borough for this time.

However, at present, tenants will mainly be rehoused outside of Borough, due to the scarcity of social housing in London (and in spite of 80% of social housing becoming available in Lewisham being prioritized for homeless families – Interview 1). Some Lewisham homeless families have been rehoused in converted office blocks in cities such as Bristol and Harlow (Butler, 2019). Thus, the justice benefits for tenants of being able to stay connected to their original borough of residence are currently strictly temporary.

#### *Scheme implementation: cross-borough replication plans*

Very much in the manner envisaged for a niche-innovation model, PLACE/Ladywell has triggered plans for Borough-wide replication in at least three other sites of council-owned vacant land in Lewisham. The first of these is in Edward Street, Lewisham, a former council-owned sports field in a disadvantaged residential area of Deptford.

The plans for the Edward Street scheme as published in the local press demonstrate strong aesthetic and architectural qualities, although in a more sober style than PLACE/Ladywell, one more in keeping with the mainly residential surroundings (Lewisham Council, 2021b). The plans for the ground floor spaces in this scheme have been discussed in terms of a community centre or communal nursery with some neighbourhood-level consultation on the best use of the space: this implies the possibility of some direct neighbourhood benefits for the scheme at the local level. Ultimately, should the three PLACE/Ladywell replication projects come to fruition, both borough-level and neighbourhood-level benefits are likely to result from the PLACE/Ladywell niche-innovation. But the nature of the benefits may be more narrow and temporary than appears at face value, as discussed in the section below on ‘intra-regional’ benefits.

#### *Metropolitan level – scheme origins*

The idea of replacing the Lewisham Leisure Centre with a temporary use that draws attention to the site and raises its value for development may have been inspired by the burgeoning of ‘meanwhile’ projects taking place in neighbouring boroughs, for example, the well-regarded ‘Art Park’ in nearby Southwark (Interview 4; The Artworks, 2019). A more direct genealogy can be traced to the 2014 Y-Cube project for single homeless people in the Mitcham district in south west London (Merton Local Authority), a permanent modular scheme by the same architects (YMCA, 2014; RIBA Journal, 2016).

However, prior to PLACE/Ladywell, it appears that temporary residential use had not been considered for vacant sites, outside of accommodation for construction workers. New planning legislation that allows commercial premises to be converted to homes came into force in the United Kingdom temporarily in 2013 and was made permanent in 2016 and expanded in 2020. There is now no obstacle to housing homeless people in former offices; this option has been taken up by some Local Authorities in England, and notably provides accommodation for homeless Londoners in places like Harlow and Bristol, when, as is frequently the case, their Local Authority is unable to rehouse them in the city (Butler, 2019). The lack of ‘meanwhile’ residential uses before PLACE/Ladywell is thus likely to be related to a generally more restrictive and regulated context for the provision of residential accommodation prior to deregulation in 2013/2016.

A further disincentive might be the cost of providing additional infrastructure for residential utilities such as waste, water and power; perhaps on a scale greater than the preceding land use required, but unlikely to be on an adequate scale for future development; something which the larger PLACE Ltd replication was in the course of working out at the time of the interview in 2019 (Interview 5). In the case of a small scheme like PLACE/Ladywell, however, it seems unlikely that the infrastructure needs of the flats and offices would exceed the infrastructure in place from the former leisure centre, although, no doubt, adaptations were required. Thus, in addition to innovation in terms of its demountable modular building, PLACE/Ladywell provides an opportunity to explore the infrastructural and economic implications of ‘meanwhile’ residential use, with the potential to create rent from many vacant sites across the wider London region.

Part of the original £5 million funding for PLACE/Ladywell (£400,000) was derived from the regional authority: this was specifically for the ground floor commercial space (Harris et al., 2019: 50). Modular offsite housing was promoted in both the draft new Greater London Plan (GLA, 2017), where it is termed ‘precision manufacturing’, and in central government guidance promoting offsite manufacturing as a solution to the housing crisis (UK Government, 2017a, 2017b) and customized modules built offsite for difficult sites in the city (Homes England, 2018). In line with this positive policy context, the London Councils group soon made moves to draw back regional benefits from the GLA’s initial investment, as explained in the next section.

### *Scheme implementation: roll out*

In 2018, the London Councils group came to the decision to add the PLACE/Ladywell strategy to its varied raft of interventions to mitigate the city’s homelessness crisis by setting up a dedicated company called PLACE Ltd. The purpose of this organization is to improve the region’s provision for homeless individuals and families, by rolling out its own version of the PLACE/Ladywell model across a number of participating London Boroughs,

thus producing a potential regional-level distributional justice benefit for the scheme. The initial model at the time of launch was to acquire a number of modules (around 200 initially) and lease them out to London local authorities as and when they have vacant sites (Interview 1, 5).

coincidentally I was working at Lewisham when the scheme in Ladywell was procured. I wasn't actually on the procurement team for that one, but I was in daily contact with [Interviewee 1] and his team, and I was doing other housing development work in Lewisham at the time. So for me personally I was certainly very aware of that product and what had been achieved, and, so I would say that was quite an inspiration. And also lessons learned, because it wasn't . . . didn't go perfectly. [Interview 5]

Although a different architect and contractor will be used for the wider London replication, and it will take place only in a small number of signatory boroughs in the foreseeable future, it has the potential to amplify at the regional level the spatial justice impacts of introducing temporary residential accommodation for the homeless onto vacant sites in the metropolis. It is doing this by developing its own specifications, organizing a bid process for the contractor, and developing the planning tools required for temporary residential uses on vacant plots. Importantly, the PLACE Ltd replications will not only use local authority land, as in Lewisham, but may extend to leasing land in private ownership or owned by other local authorities (Interviews 5 and 6).

The precision-built, factory-made housing industry is relatively undeveloped in the United Kingdom, compared with other European countries, but promises improvements in terms of lower costs and construction times, adaptability to different sites and scales, and with equal or better space, comfort and aesthetic standards as standard on-site construction. Part of the purpose of the roll-out of the action at both the local and regional levels is to develop the industry so that it can refine models for more permanent housing. This is in line with central government policy to promote flexible modular approaches to creating infill, building extensions and newbuild blocks (GLA, 2017; HE, 2018).

## **Justice impacts from 2018 to the present**

### *Neighbourhood level – emerging problems for tenants, enterprises and community*

The neighbourhood consultation described in the previous part of this chapter may have resulted in the consultees' desired mix of amenities and business types in PLACE/Ladywell's ground floor enterprise hub – a makers' market,

cinema and community café. But these were not of long duration and all were closed or replaced by late 2018, the longest-lived of them being the café. In all the consultation-inspired enterprises lasted just over half of the scheme's anticipated four-year life in this location.

Diverse reasons were adduced by enterprises and management organization interviewees for the failure of most of the initial uses, most of which indicate that the ground floor enterprise hub was not fully integrated into the strategy and budget for the scheme. These included: the inexperience of the traders; the lack of footfall in this part of the High Street; the lack of parking for the scheme and neighbourhood; the ineffective management of the building, split between three different, disconnected organizations; the unsuitability of the building for the purpose; and a lack of promotion budget, due to the high cost of the initial consultation (Interviews 1, 10 and 12). Poor security was also an issue, and by the beginning of 2019, keypad access to all businesses, as well as gated security for the flats, had been introduced.

The withdrawal of these enterprises left a few voids, alongside a somewhat isolated and disparate group of small traders, NGOs and two different rented desk space areas remaining on the ground floor of the scheme; these latter were said to be successful by two interviewees (10 and 12). Two of the NGOs that endured in the hub can be said to have been of direct neighbourhood benefit: the DEK enterprise agency and the Rushey Green Time Bank. The former, funded by the European Regional Development Fund, operates one of the two deskspace rental schemes in PLACE/Ladywell and helped small businesses to upskill and grow. The Time Bank provides a range of mutual support and co-teaching activities, social opportunities and local reward schemes for volunteers (mainly older people) and helps to combat isolation. Other businesses surviving in the ground floor, however, did their main trade through the Internet and seemed to have chosen the scheme for its provision of a photogenic backdrop for their displays, and as a place to meet with wholesalers.

What we have instead are businesses that could run anywhere, because they do most of their trade online, but that can also at the same time put together a really decent shop front and have a showroom, so they might as well have it at Ladywell as anywhere else. So they don't depend on trade there to make it happen but they can be there and they activate the space.

(Interview 1, 2018, Housing Strategy, Lewisham Council)

More 'niche' enterprises such as a specialist tailor for older ethnic minority women, there from the start of the scheme, had been moved back from the façade window space, although a large haberdasher was permitted a prominent street front window.

The general lack of promotion of the enterprise hub extended to links with neighbouring businesses (Interview 12) which did not feel connected with or informed about the scheme and its future. Once the café closed at the end of 2018, its former space was given over to sporadic exhibitions and events; paradoxically, the organizers' using the pub opposite for their meetings was the first time the pub manager considered the scheme's potential as a community facility for the neighbourhood (Interview 11). The fact that the 'enterprise hub' at PLACE/Ladywell did not make any economic contribution to the scheme's cost recovery model (Interview 1) may also be behind its ultimate neglect and abandonment.

Neither the managing organization nor the Local Authority responded to requests for access to interview residential tenants; this was following an early research study of tenant's experience, reporting mixed experiences, in that the space allocation and quality of the apartments were appreciated while the open-plan interior design, use of white surfaces and precarity of the placement were found problematic, particularly in relation to the needs of families with young children (Harris et al., 2019). It became clear from interviews for this study that at no point had homeless families or homelessness organizations been consulted on the layout of the interior or external design aesthetic (which was also problematic for some tenants, as calling too much attention to their situation). Two ground-floor enterprise interviewees thought that the block could stay in place for longer than projected (Interview 2); as a permanent feature on the high street, it would have a role in separating traffic and shoppers from the new housing development that was planned for the extensive plot of land behind it. As seen in the next section, this may yet turn out to be its ultimate destiny.

*Borough level – decreasing direct benefits for the local authority and its residents*

The case study took place in a context where the local authority was looking for ways to deal with its homeless families in a cost-neutral way, or at least to reduce their impact on its annual expenditure. In line with Coalition and Conservative government policies in response to the financial crisis, there has been a greater than 40% cut to the local authority's budget since 2010.

While for an Inner London borough, Lewisham's average private rents are lower than the Inner London average, they have risen rapidly in the last decade (by 53% between 2011 and 2019 – Valuation Office Agency, 2019). The Local Authority is obliged by law to find temporary housing for homeless families and where the rent is not covered by Housing Benefit (for the unemployed), the Local Authority must top up the deficit. In practice this is a major expense for London Local authorities, to the extent that even a £5 million pound scheme such as PLACE/Ladywell can be portrayed as cost neutral. The timeline envisaged for cost neutrality is either in the first ten years of the scheme (Harris et al., 2019) or, somewhat less feasibly given the

increasing unpredictability of post-Brexit, post-pandemic economic futures, half-way through the scheme's 60-year time span (Interview 1). The Local Authority calculated that it would make a saving not only because it would remove the requirement to top up tenants' housing benefit, but because rents will be indirectly paid to the Local Authority for all the flats via the Unemployment Benefit, provided at the level of Broad Rental Market Area (BRMA)<sup>1</sup> Local Housing Allowance (in 2018, this raised £220,000 for the Council per year, while rehousing families in the private rented sector would be expected to cost around £100,000 per year, meaning a total of £320,000 benefit per year, although no net income was generated from the ground floor retail area – Interview 1) which also might be expected to rise over the course of the scheme's lifespan.

At the time when the Local Authority was interviewed about the scheme in 2018, the future of the economic model was already looking uncertain, perhaps due to the absorption of the original building contractor, SIG, into an organization with a very different remit, Urban Splash. Various alternatives to maintaining it as housing for the homeless were considered:

I've always had this idea in my head that we should just take it apart and lease it to Kensington and Chelsea where they could put it on the Fulham Road or something and we make an absolute fortune out of it for five years, because the standard's good, the space standards are good, the fit out quality is good, it's nice quality housing and you just put it in a 'nice location' and get your money back that way.

(Interview 1, Housing Strategy, Lewisham Council)

While rents in central London have fallen during the pandemic, in other parts of London they have risen as people re-locate from central areas, perhaps for health and security as much as for economic reasons. However, at the same time, it is predicted that many overseas workers and economic migrants have left the city due to the loss of work during the series of lockdowns that took place between 2020 and 2021, thus reducing rental demand over the city. Whatever the extent of the post-lockdown bounce-back, it is likely that Lewisham rents will not continue to rise at the pace seen in the preceding decade. The recent (May 2021) re-election of Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan for another four-year term implies greater protections of tenants' rights, in particular the right to contest eviction, will be upheld in the capital – potentially somewhat reducing numbers of families at risk of homelessness. A further contextual change relates to the impact of the pandemic on plans for linking Lewisham with the London underground system, initially to take place by 2030 (Transport for London, 2021) but now suspended as the cost of the pandemic diverts funds from new infrastructure projects.

But perhaps most importantly there has been some internal re-assessment of the model, probably based on initial higher-than-anticipated costs of

creating the onsite components linking the modules, including the entrances and common parts (Interview 1). Maintenance costs may also be higher than expected: various structural flaws emerged during the first 30 months of the scheme's operation (Interviews 2, 9, 12). The scheme's builder, SIG had been subsumed into another company, Urban Splash by 2018, so were no longer available to undertake the move (Interview 1). These may be the reasons that a local news story in 2021 proposes that council officers consider the scheme may simply be 'too costly to move' (Cuffe, 2021). Substantiating this, the scheme is still in situ on Lewisham High Street more than a year after its projected relocation. And it remains unclear whether any progress has been made on the first Borough-located replication scheme, on Edward Street in the Deptford district of Lewisham. As, according to the Lewisham council interviewee (Interview 1) Edward Street's financing depended on loans, rather than cash receipts (which the council used to fund PLACE/Ladywell), the far more restrictive lending of the post-pandemic era may reduce the likelihood of the replication taking place.

*Regional level – niche-innovation or warning beacon?*

The regional-level impacts of the scheme began in 2018, with the setting up of PLACE Ltd by London Councils. Although at the regional, Greater London level, PLACE Ltd had appointed a contractor and begun plans for the first roll-out of the initiative outside Lewisham in late 2019, the emergence of the pandemic in early 2020 appears to have led plans to be suspended. In the meantime, London Councils has focused on the other strands of its homelessness policy such as a collaboration between London Local Authorities to procure good quality housing that enables its homeless families to stay within their borough (London Councils, undated; Interview 5).

The regional PLACE scheme tests both what is now termed 'precision manufacturing' (the preferred term for off-site fabrication) and procurement at scale, on a collaborative basis, by cooperating Local Authorities (Interview 8). It is intended to increase the appeal of the temporary modular housing to boroughs because it removes the pressure on them to find the next site in their local authority area – the modules can be transferred to any of the collaborating boroughs (Interview 7). Because of the variety of sites considered, it uses an accommodation-only model and it was considered unlikely that any of the proposed vacant sites under development would include a street-level retail requirement (Interviews 5 and 6), thus the problems encountered with PLACE/Ladywell's enterprise hub would be unlikely to feature in the Greater London roll-out scheme. Additionally, in terms of timing, the regional scheme was well-placed to learn from and avoid the pitfalls that have emerged from the PLACE/Ladywell pilot – including perhaps the flaws in the initial cost of relocating the modules.

At the time of interviews with PLACE Ltd a lot of work was going into developing a planning practice note for participating Local Authorities

(Interview 7). They were also working up financial models for the scaled-up model – this time over a predicted 40-year lifespan – including whether local authorities or PLACE paid for site improvements and infrastructure (Interviews 5, 6 and 7), and whether cross-subsidy between schemes might be possible, given the variation in Local Housing Allowance (housing benefit) at sub-borough levels (BRMA) (Interviews 5, 6 and 7). At the time of the interviews in 2019, due to the design of the funding, the first 200 units for PLACE Ltd needed to be on site by March 2021 (Interview 7); it is possible the timeline has been extended due to the pandemic. However, it seems equally possible that the volatility and uncertainty of the London rental market in the foreseeable future could baffle attempts to create reliable economic models and lead to longer-term suspension of the project.

## The mid-term and long-term impacts of the scheme after 2021

### *Homeless families*

The long-term *intra-regional* spatial justice contribution of the scheme goes beyond its impacts on neighbourhoods, council taxpayers or London citizens, to its capacity finally to further the longer-term housing needs of homeless families; in most cases, this implies finding permanent housing within the borough, so as to maintain social networks and continuity of employment and schooling. As we have seen, at present on its own, the scheme cannot assure this long-term outcome due to the dearth of permanent social housing available within the borough. But since about 2014, the Local Authority began constructing new social housing again, as easing of regulatory and funding constraints began to make this possible for the first time in many years. By late 2018, around 500 new homes had begun building with another 500 targeted within the next five years (Interview 1). The question would then arise about the current estate tenants displaced by the rebuilding programme.

The PLACE/Ladywell scheme itself aims to provide part of the solution to this in the mid-term. One of the multiple, borough-wide benefits for the scheme envisaged by the council is that the tenants of these estates might in future be housed in demountable modular buildings on-site while their homes are redeveloped (ASBP, 2018: Slide 27). To what extent, however, can it be assumed that the council's housing initiatives – such as that planned to take place on the larger PLACE/Ladywell site, whether or not the modules are relocated – and other regeneration taking place on Lewisham's major estates, will have the net impact of increasing local social housing availability? Whether there is enough alternative housing to support Lewisham families in need at social rents will depend upon a number of policy and fiscal factors that are difficult to predict with certainty.

The 2011 Localism Act has empowered Local Authorities to act as developers in generating income from their estate that can be used to support their services. In Lewisham and elsewhere in London, this has meant that council

land is redeveloped with a mix of public and private housing, the latter being used to cross-subsidize the former (Minton, 2017). The new private provision is likely to result in a reduction in the number of homes at social rents on each estate site; and may equally lead to an erosion of genuinely affordable social rents (see UK Government, 2021) in favour of so-called ‘affordable’ (80% market rate) rents (see Witton, 2019). While Lewisham’s own estate regeneration has (at least in the more recent schemes) densified land use, resulting in 2,000 homes, only 50% of these are classed as ‘affordable’ (Interview 1); and the majority of those classed as affordable will not be at social rents (see later).

Another factor is the continued erosion of the available pool of social housing due to the continuation of the 1980s ‘right to buy’ policy, which means that even if Local Authorities use new powers to increase their supply of social housing, tenants have the right to buy it for lower than market rates and thus remove it from the available pool of social housing. Ironically, some of the £5 million cost of PLACE/Ladywell came from Right to Buy revenues received by Lewisham (Interview 1; Harris et al., 2019). Thus, public money used to construct permanent homes at social rents has effectively been diverted to generate highly temporary ones, largely unsuitable for families and with unknown properties of durability and viability, over time and space.

One longer-term aspect of regional and local spatial justice has been overlooked in the foregoing account: the aspect whereby, in transitioning to a development rather than a redistribution role, Local Authorities may have managed to wrest back some long-term control of their finances and housing portfolios from central government. Once estates such as that projected for the site behind the PLACE/Ladywell building are up and running, the council will be less dependent on the political orientation or ideology of central government for its housing finance and can make more autonomous decisions about future development and the breakdown between its provision of social rent, affordable rent, market rent and shared ownership provision. This is the argument explored in a book on the impact on housing of the new municipal entrepreneurialism (Morphet and Clifford, 2021). This might appear at face value to deliver a spatial justice dividend, allowing more local control of housing policy, especially crucial in a very centralized governance system such as the United Kingdom (see, e.g. Ladner et al., 2015).

The effects of redeveloping the great London social housing estates under the new cross-subsidizing model whereby some sales and private rents provide the funding for social housing creation and maintenance are after all likely to mitigate the mosaic of deprivation in the Borough and generate neighbourhoods of mixed tenure which might ultimately have an impact on intra-regional segregation. But, as pointed out by a housing activist in a neighbouring borough interviewed for the case study, there are more losers than winners in estate regeneration – including more recent

tenants with insecure tenancies (which may make up around a fifth of tenancies), right-to-buy leaseholders the value of whose homes may exclude them from the local market, those who have bought from the right-to-buy owners, or those renting from them (Interview 4). While public-private partnerships and development schemes may be seen by councils as essential due to the huge reduction in government housing grant (Interview 7) or ‘the only game in town’ (Interview 4), the cost of such policies in terms of distributional justice are high: councils such as Lewisham and neighbouring Southwark increasingly describe their housing strategy in terms of ‘we will provide homes for people on all incomes’. In practice, this means that they cannot provide all the housing that those on the lowest incomes need (Interview 4). Increasingly much of the benefit of publicly funded housing schemes is falling to those with better levels of earnings and prospects including students, keyworkers, and even young professionals (Interviews 1, 4). The London Tenants Federation collected proportions of social to other kinds of housing built by councils in 2018/2019. Just 16% of the new housing built in Lewisham was at social rents (making it somewhat higher than the London average of just 5 %) (London Tenants’ Federation, 2021).

Lewisham, the Lewisham Gateway, the renaissance quarter as they call it, . . . it’s got 800 new homes, it’s giving 35% affordable housing. Seventy percent of that is social rented, that’s about 140/150 units, but it did entail the demolition of the Sundermead Estate, and I don’t know how many units that had on it, it might not have had that many, but even leaving that aside you know, 146 units out of 800 is something that you wrest - getting back to local authorities - they’ve wrested that from the developers, Barratt’s. And really we should be looking at these huge big developments for the solution of our housing crisis.

(Interview 4, 2019, Housing Activist)

### *Neighbourhood, borough and region*

Visiting the scheme in a rainy late February in 2019, water-staining of the concrete parts and unattractive securitization of tenants’ entrance had reduced the initial visual appeal of the building, first encountered in the previous year. This raises a cross-scale issue that affects both the original scheme and its borough and regional replications (should the latter materialize). While future sites for the modules may be less visible and high profile in terms of their location, there is an implicit assumption that the modules will nevertheless enhance these sites. In other words, it must be assumed that the modular housing manufacturing industry and construction industry and the local authority had a sufficient long-term stake in the durability of the building

facades. There appeared to have been much thought applied to making temporary homes look permanent, in both the original and regional replications:

we also have to be able to move it without spending a long time taking off all the façade that's been used to make sure it doesn't look like it's modular. So you're kind of asking for these two paradoxical things; it's got to look permanent, but it's got to be really easy to move. But the designers we're working with are coming up with some great ideas, so it is doable.

(Interview 5)

It does seem that at the planning stage of PLACE Ltd, the regional scheme, the potential for costing in re-cladding the modules at points in their future existence was considered (Interview 8), not only on the grounds of the appearance of the modules after a move, but so that the look and feel of them can be adjusted to fit into the new site. It is not clear to what extent this was incorporated into the final business plan for the larger scheme.

According to an interviewee at Lewisham Council, 'so it's been guaranteed for five moves as part of the warranty for five moves, but the proof will be in the moving' (Interview 1). Should the buildings significantly and visibly deteriorate between moves, and over four or five site relocations envisaged to take place over the course of their 60-year lifetime, an important element of their supposed mitigation of the planning blight of vacant lots for the communities where they are located – in terms of both improving the appearance of the area and attracting new development to it – will be forfeited.

Should the urban design contribution of the scheme prove durable, however, the development of the off-site, precision-built modular housing through experiments such as PLACE/Ladywell has the capacity to lower the costs of creating new social housing without forfeiting civic and human dignity, thus potentially allowing more families to be housed permanently at lower cost, either through the public or the private sector. An interviewee from the GLA pinpointed the main benefits of the PLACE Ltd scheme for the region:

But the main one [i.e. rationale] is the scale of house building that we need to see now and in the future. So already now we have a very constrained labour market in terms of construction skills, a very low productivity sector and issues like an aging workforce in the construction sector, a very heavily EU migrant . . . I think it's about 50% of London's home building construction workforce is from the EU, and I think for the rest of the country it's about 15% or something, so really quite heavily skewed in London. All those pose additional challenges to the existing issues that are present now. Added to that, speed of construction, quality of construction.

(Interview 8)

There may yet be a substantial intra-regional benefit for the scheme; but, as the various iterations of the model appear to be in the process of exposing, this may be further into the future than was originally hoped.

### **Conclusion: the image of justice**

For a housing scheme that appears to present a heady combination of social objectives, high-quality urban design values and construction process innovations, PLACE/Ladywell, in existence since 2016, has yet to prove its value on any of these dimensions. Its initial provision of needed facilities and opportunities for the neighbourhood largely fizzled out within the first two years; at Borough and regional level, its positive contributions to spatial justice remain largely in the to-be-hoped-for future – be they through supporting homeless families to transition to secure local housing, supporting tenants to stay on-site through the estate regeneration process or increasing confidence in off-site construction as a solution to metropolitan housing needs.

In common with other urban case studies in the RELOCAL project, however, its symbolic power is undeniable: it appears to achieve the impossible – to attach glamour and energy to the desperate human situation of homelessness, at the same time as cutting the public costs of keeping families off the streets. This might go some way to explaining its appeal, and why it was taken up locally and regionally with such enthusiasm, but hindsight shows the extent to which any justice impacts of the model were dependent upon a uniquely complex mix of policy and economic factors pertaining in Lewisham and London. The measured words of a national homelessness agency about the scheme show the high level of context dependency:

given the constraints on Lewisham's ability to build new housing for social rent, or to intervene more fully in the private rental market to sort out the problems in the PRS [private rented sector], then it's a positive way to square the circle.

(Interview 3, 2019, officer at national homelessness organization)

The impacts of Brexit, followed by the fall-out from the global pandemic, have revealed the model's fragility and contestability, at least over the short to mid term.

### **Note**

- 1 This level is set at sub-local authority level, so will vary between different areas of Lewisham and is subject to change when factors such as transport infrastructure or school assessment ratings improve.

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