

Good Homes: lessons in successful public housing from Newcastle's Byker Estate

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Public housing has been the victim of decades of negative propaganda so that it has come to be seen as a failed experiment.¹ Those of us who defend and fight for the concept of affordable rented public housing would not seek to deny that there have been some very real problems – and we need to recognise these and learn from them - but, at the same time, we can point out the less headline-grabbing successes. We need to look at what has made public housing good homes in the past, and can continue to do so into the future. The economic crisis has high-lighted the need for public housing, and public housing could and should have a much greater role to play. This paper uses lessons from past and present history to help us think about what it is we are fighting for.

As a focus for a potentially huge and amorphous debate, I want to look at Newcastle's Byker Estate, which I first encountered as the paramount model of housing design when I was an architecture student and it was just being completed. In concentrating on such an outstanding example, I do not mean to suggest that other public housing cannot make good homes. It can and does. But I do want to show both what can be achieved with a bit of extra investment in design, and how even the best designed homes can suffer from poor maintenance and management and from wider socioeconomic changes. Byker has been a Mecca for touring architects, a byword for multiple deprivation, and, recently, the subject of a 2* listing for architectural and historical importance, and of major plans for refurbishment. When it was listed, English Heritage explained, 'The Estate's groundbreaking design has been influential across Europe and has proved a pioneering model for its approach to public participation.'² So what can Byker teach us?

To begin at the beginning. The Byker we see today was built in phases through the 1970s and consists of nearly 2,000 homes on a 200 acre south-west facing site overlooking the Tyne, about 1 ½ miles east of Newcastle City Centre. It replaced serried rows of Tyneside flats – terraces with separate homes (generally privately rented) on ground and first floor, and barren back alleys between small back yards containing outside toilets and coal sheds. The redevelopment came in the latter part of the great wave of slum clearance schemes that created so much of our public housing. By 1968 there had been a reaction against the disruptions of slum clearance, and Newcastle City Council was ready to give a positive response to residents' requests that the existing close community be able to remain together in the new Byker. They appointed Ralph Erskine, a British architect who practised in the more liberal environment of Sweden, and he produced a much-quoted design statement that concluded: 'The main concern will be for those who are already resident in Byker, and the need to rehouse them without breaking family ties and other valued associations or patterns of life.'³

¹ In 2007 the recently appointed Scottish housing minister was asked in a radio interview about the possibility of building more council housing. His response - we do not want more 'sink estates' – exemplifies this view. (Stewart Maxwell MSP, interviewed by Lesley Riddoch on BBC Radio Scotland, 20 July 2007)

² Carol Pyrah, Planning and Development Regional Director for English Heritage, quoted on <http://www.davidlammy.co.uk/da/49866>

³ Quoted in Malpass, Peter (1979) 'A reappraisal of Byker', *Architects Journal* 9th and 16th May. Accessible on <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/peter-malpass-on-byker-from-the-archive/5215878.article>

So the first thing I want to look at is the development process. Many neighbours were able to stay together, and this is an established and appreciated part of the Byker story; however, as Peter Malpass showed, of the 12,000 people still living in old Byker in 1968, only a minority were rehoused in the new scheme, which had fewer homes than before and was almost half occupied by people from elsewhere. This was partly the result of major delays in the building process; but Malpass put the blame firmly on the council, for whom the commitment to retain the community, despite its high public profile, remained a relatively low priority.⁴ Many (especially young families) had also left before the Erskine scheme, driven away by two decades of demolition plans and planning blight, and by demolition for a never-built motorway. Erskine attempted to co-ordinate rebuilding and demolition by reducing the numbers of homes demolished at any one time to around 250;⁵ and, in response to the uncertainty caused by the building delays, the council was persuaded to allocate homes 6 months before they were completed.⁶ Additionally, in 1974 the council started buying up homes scheduled for demolition so that they could ensure basic maintenance was kept up until the homes were empty.⁷ All these things helped, but while the council's focus remained on the building process rather than the residents, such measures could not be enough.

There are lessons here for future redevelopments, but there are also more fundamental questions about the desirability of redevelopment at all.

Whatever the quality of Erskine's Byker, it is difficult to justify the violent disruption of redevelopment. Besides effecting a significant break-up of the existing community, the demolitions were the cause of years of gross discomfort and worry for a great many people. This has been sympathetically recorded by the photographer, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, who moved to the area in 1970 and lovingly documented the vanishing community,⁸ and also by Tony Hills who compiled an angry report as Community Development Officer. Hills observed,

Practical problems such as the rapid deterioration of housing conditions, an increase in vandalism, burglaries, poorly maintained pavements and roads, go hand in hand with the emotional problem of frustration, loss of pride in home and neighbourhood, insecurity about the future.⁹

Emotional insecurity was combined with physical insecurity. People were scared to go out as homes were being broken into through the empty houses. Many suffered severe depression and anxiety. The local *Evening Chronicle* reported a planning officer describing people living in 'blitz' conditions, and criticism was raised in the House of Commons.¹⁰ The planners of

⁴ Malpass (1976) 'Rebuilding Byker: Twenty years hard labour'. Report on a research project carried out in the Department of Architecture Edinburgh University, typescript in Newcastle City Library; Malpass, Peter (1979) p 964; Malpass and Murie (1999) *Housing Policy and Practice*, 5th Edition, Macmillan, pp 213-214

⁵ Ravetz, Alison (1976) 'Housing at Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne – Appraisal', *Architects' Journal* 14 April, p736

⁶ Persuaded by the residents, architects and Community Development Officer, see Tony Hills (1974) 'Community Development Officer's Final Report 1972-1974', typescript in Newcastle City Library, pp 4-5

⁷ See CDO's report, above, pp 15-16

⁸ Konttinen, Sirkka-Liisa (1985) *Byker*, Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books; See also <http://www.amber-online.com/exhibitions/byker>

⁹ Hills, Tony (Ed) (1973) 'The Social Consequences of Redevelopment' typewritten report in Newcastle City Library

¹⁰ Malpass (1976) pp 178-9

the recent mass demolitions (which have included large areas of Newcastle) appear to have forgotten the traumas of this earlier period.

Even after years of neglect, with the planners' axe held over them, the old houses retained the potential for a rolling programme of modernisation. Remaining undemolished streets adjacent to the estate are a testament to the solidity of the building. A 1968 survey reported that 80% of people wanted clearance,¹¹ but the results of this type of survey depend on how the questions are asked and what the respondents understand about the options. Kontinen quotes one of the residents, who was busy packing up his home:

It's wicked. These homes have been under demolition order for twenty odd year, and you know – they could've been saved... They could've just given us a bath and hot water.¹²

They could also have carried out other improvements with some of the imagination shown in the new design. This might even have been achieved with less drastic rent rises: *Ideal Home* in 1976 gave an example of a household's rent going up from £1.50 in their old home to £9 (including heating) in their new one.¹³ At the same time as Byker was being redeveloped, Camden Council in London was buying up blocks of Victorian terraces, upgrading the houses and, with the agreement of a tenants' vote, slicing the ends off all the back gardens so that the land could be combined into spacious and protected community gardens and play areas for all the surrounding homes.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in Scotland almost 20,000 tenement flats were rehabilitated by local authorities or housing associations, with dividing walls generally rearranged to provide fewer larger dwellings.¹⁵ A recent DIY example of the transformational potential of the Victorian terrace is provided by Cairns Street Liverpool where residents have responded to threats of demolition by turning their street into a communal garden.¹⁶

All sorts of housing – including the big brutalist schemes of the sixties and seventies – has the potential to provide good modern homes with a bit of investment and imagination. Developments such as Urban Splash's Park Hill in Sheffield give an idea of what is possible,¹⁷ but these improvements should be being done for the benefit of existing social tenants and not as part of a speculative scheme involving large-scale privatisation and gentrification.

Before looking at the design of the new Byker, I also want to examine wider issues around its much-praised public participation. Not only were the majority of the tenants of old Byker excluded from relevant debate since they were re-housed elsewhere, but, as Malpass showed, although there was consultation, it is dangerously misleading to regard this as an example of participatory practice. The architects had an office on the site where people were

¹¹ Ravetz (1976) p 739; *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 838

¹² Kontinen (1985) p 8

¹³ *Ideal Home* March 1976

¹⁴ Information from residents, John Twigg and Angela Inglis

¹⁵ Gibb, Andrew (1989) 'Policy and politics in Scottish housing since 1945' in Richard Rodger (Ed) *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, p 175

¹⁶ The residents in this case are low-income home owners, see Glynn (2009) *Where the Other Half Lives* (London: Pluto) pp 308-9. More dramatic changes have been made by developers (e.g. Urban Splash's Chimney Pot Park in Salford), but these are gentrifying developments achieved through the displacement of the original residents.

¹⁷ *The Architectural Review* October 2011, <http://www.architectural-review.com/issues/october-2011/a-second-chance-for-sheffields-streets-in-the-sky/8620160.article>

free to drop in and raise their concerns (which were often only loosely connected to the buildings and generally focussed on when they would be re-housed), there was a liaison committee (initially invitation only), and council officers held meetings on the site; but power remained with the council, and the council rather than the tenants remained the real client. Tony Hills, the Community Development Officer, observed:

What is happening in Byker is largely an example of an intractable social and technical problem being handled by a Local Authority and other professionals with a lot of sensitivity and concern. At various stages people have been consulted about possible changes, and at others the expressed wishes of local people has been allowed to modify policy and practice. All this is admirable and in many ways successful, but it is not participation.¹⁸

I wouldn't want to discourage consultation, but it has to be seen for what it is. Malpass rightly highlighted how this type of approach can be used as a management tool to sideline dissent. Recent regeneration schemes have reinforced his point – and shown how this tool has been refined. Energies are directed into an agenda set by the authorities, the rhetoric of participation sugars some unpalatable decisions, and alternative views are dismissed as disruptive of the consensus. Where the lack of real power mattered most for Byker, was in the tenants' inability to force the council to *prioritise* retention of the community and so reschedule the demolition programme to co-ordinate with the new building, as envisaged by the architects: especially as the place and time of their re-housing – rather than design details - was the issue uppermost in most people's minds.

The housing that had the greatest direct tenant input into its design was probably some of the least successful. This was the pilot scheme, and while care was taken to learn lessons from this so as to improve subsequent homes, its tenants came to resent their guinea-pig role.¹⁹ The aspect of this design approach that was arguably the most successful was the continued informal day to day contact with the architectural team. The resulting observation by the architects, and observations by the tenants all fed into the design brief. Architecture can't be designed in public meetings, but good architecture is the product of a sensitive and inspired response to a well-researched brief.

The housing that was built is characteristic of Erskine's style, at the same time as responding to the site and its residents' needs. It demonstrates a quirky delight in design and an attention to detail that lifts it way above more utilitarian responses – even though some of the original workmanship was unforgivably shoddy.²⁰ To the north is the famous Byker Wall, a snaking block of flats and maisonettes forming a barrier to noise and wind that is up to eight storeys high in places. The Wall turns an almost blank facade to a major road that was intended to be upgraded to an urban motorway, but breaks out into a seemingly random array of timber-slatted access-ways, balconies and planters to the south. At the bottom are maisonettes, with small private garden spaces for families, and above – for households without children - are flats with views across the Tyne. Within the protection of the wall, are acres of low-level high-density housing. Each area has its distinct characteristics and bright colours, and a careful hierarchy of small private gardens and semi-public communal spaces overlooked by the surrounding homes. Access roads and car-parking are kept segregated in

¹⁸ Tony Hills (1974) p 22

¹⁹ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 840

²⁰ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 841

the background, away from these spaces; and landscaping has all been meticulously and imaginatively planned, incorporating reused architectural fragments and pavings and numerous protected seating areas and play-shelters. The planting was integral to the design and carefully thought out both aesthetically and practically. One of the first development activities was the establishment of a tree nursery, plants were used to protect vulnerable architecture, and granite kerbs were used to protect plants.²¹ The architects' on-site office sold plants cheaply, and tenants who dug their own garden were offered plants in lieu of the saved costs. Landscape architects were available to give free advice, and Erskine's produced a gardening manual that was given to all tenants. While this raises echoes of earlier paternalistic managerial practices,²² a careful balance was struck between control by the municipality and opportunity for and encouragement of individual innovation. So, for example, the dustbin shelters had planters on top that were planted by the council but could be replanted by tenants.²³ The result of all this is unashamedly picturesque and village-like, and excites real enthusiasm in many residents as well as among visiting architects.

Key community buildings were preserved, and others rebuilt so as to give a more even distribution of facilities,²⁴ and the plans included corner shops (with subsidised rents) and hobby rooms. The retention of community organisations was considered important, and the old buildings helped root the new development, while providing architectural contrast and strengthening the village feel. The small industrial area in the south-west of the site was also kept.

Construction of the low-rise housing is timber frame with brick cladding, which was relatively quick and cheap to erect, and interest and overall coherence was achieved through the varied use of a palette of basic inexpensive elements such as timber slats. The site planning makes utmost use of sunlight and views, and internal layouts are generous. (The homes are bigger than they appear from outside, perhaps partly because of the use of larger specially-commissioned metric bricks, which can distort our sense of scale.) More conservative planners were surprised by tenants' enthusiasm for open plans and bright colours,²⁵ though, predictably, the major source of enthusiasm for most tenants was the modern facilities that we now take for granted.²⁶ A significant complaint was the inadequate acoustic separation between dwellings – despite improvements following the pilot development. The style of architecture, with its strong, irregular forms, facilitates later alterations and allows and encourages innovations by the residents – at least within limits.

The homes are heated by a communal heating scheme - an arrangement that is particularly common in the Nordic countries – and the heating ducts add to the idiosyncratic geometries. This system has the potential to be economical in both financial costs and damage to the environment, however, the Byker installation has not been without its problems. There have been times when heating bills for the Byker homes have been much more than for other similar houses; and a pioneering conversion to using incinerated waste

²¹ Buchanan, Peter, (1981) *Architectural Review* 170:1018 pp 334-343

²² Ravetz, Alison (2001) *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment*, London: Routledge pp 118-119

²³ Ravetz (1976) p 12

²⁴ *Architectural Review* 156 (1974) site plan p 346

²⁵ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 839

²⁶ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 838

had to be brought to an angry close after years of campaigning by local residents whose children were suffering from asthma attacks.²⁷

Despite such problems, and its troubled birth, the Byker estate succeeded in demonstrating the values of a dedicated and humane approach to the design of public housing – and tenants enjoyed showing off their new homes to visiting architects and planners.²⁸ But attitudes to public housing were about to change.

The Byker Estate was completed just in time for the onslaught of Thatcherism – or rather not quite completed as the development of the last cleared sites was handed over to private firms to build low-cost houses for sale to existing council tenants or people on the council waiting list.²⁹ The old Byker had been home to a poor but solid working-class community. The Eighties saw the disappearance of the old jobs in the shipyards and heavy industry and their replacement with rising unemployment and lack of hope. A generation was growing up with little stake in a society that had abandoned it, and with a growing drug culture. At the same time, better-off council tenants were becoming home owners under Thatcher's Right-to-Buy legislation, and the stock of good council housing was being rapidly reduced. Some Byker houses were sold under the Right to Buy, but not many in such a poor area. The increasing residualisation of social housing as a minimally-maintained safety net for those who could not afford anything else, meant that estates such as Byker became ghettos for many of those failed by society. Here, the anti-social behaviour of neglect by the authorities was increasingly echoed by the antisocial behaviour of alienated youth. The annual Report for the local Advice Centre for 1985-6 recorded unemployment at 30% and rising, with many families dependent on benefits. It observed that the resulting increase in stress was being manifested in an increase in enquiries from people whose marriages had broken down.³⁰

By the mid nineties, unemployment in Byker ward was still 27% (though this was by no means the worst in the city), and East End school results were significantly worse than the Newcastle average, which was itself significantly worse than the national average. A quarter of residents claimed that they did not feel safe living in Byker, and, although the levels of reported burglary were roughly equivalent to the city average, there was widespread under-reporting of crime through fear of victimisation. At the same time there was an acknowledgement that the reality was not as bad as the image being portrayed in the media.³¹ The Council's 1997 Community Appraisal, from which these statistics have been taken, stressed that there was now a lack of community facilities, especially for young people: and one of the suggestions from a 'Community Safety Day' was that the hobby rooms 'be used for play instead of storage'.³² Of course actual experience of Byker depended on individual

²⁷ *Evening Chronicle* 29 January and 4 November 2003; Konttinen, Sirkka-Liisa (2009) *Byker Revisited*, Newcastle: Northumbria Press, p 18

²⁸ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 837 described tenants arguing over whose turn it was to show visitors round

²⁹ The developers built and sold the houses and the council sold the land directly to the new house owners. There were also arrangements for shared equity. See *Evening Chronicle* 3 April 1980, 3 December 1981, 25 May 1982 and 1 July 1982

³⁰ Byker Advice and Resource Centre Annual Report 1985-86

³¹ Local and national media had especially enjoyed reporting the criminal career of one particularly recalcitrant young thief who they nicknamed 'Ratboy' after he was caught hiding in one of the ducts in the community heating scheme.

³² Newcastle City Council (1997) 'A Community Appraisal for Byker Monkchester and Walker' p 53

circumstances and the immediate neighbourhood and neighbours, but, as one of the residents put it:

It's about jobs, income, self respect and a stake in the future of our community. I don't own anything. I don't belong anywhere. I don't have any say in what happens to me or my family or kids or anything.³³

Byker ward was the third most deprived in the city, and was third again in the 2004 index of multiple deprivation, where it scored especially badly for employment, income, education skills and training, health and disability, and crime.³⁴

It is clear that Byker had – and still has - major socio-economic problems way beyond issues of housing, however conditions were made worse by national housing policy and local housing management. Reductions in social housing, and a political and economic system that favours home owners, have concentrated those without money or hope disproportionately in the remaining housing estates, and widened the gap between them and those who have achieved material success. This situation is not inevitable; it is the product of policy decisions.³⁵ And the physical decay of the estate is not just the result of a bit of mindless vandalism by younger residents, but also of the more culpable vandalism of a neglectful bureaucracy. This was badly aggravated by Thatcher's spending restrictions, but maintenance has always been underfunded (*The Architectural Review* had observed that there was insufficient finance for the estate's maintenance as early as 1974³⁶) and blame must also be laid firmly on the unresponsive and distant system of management that has suffocated so much of Britain's council housing. The care and joy that had gone into designing Byker's housing found no echo in its management.

In her 1987 book, *Property Before People*, Anne Power outlined how, as council housing expanded, management issues tended to be sidelined in favour of the more glamorous construction process, leaving the resulting homes to be run and maintained by a plethora of different departments in the far reaches of our city halls, unapproachable by and unaccountable to most tenants.³⁷ Her alternative solutions, using evidence from pilot projects, included devolving powers to locally-based offices that would take charge of caretaking and cleaning and also repairs and lettings. These offices would be open all day to tenants, who would ideally also have a management role. A more recent study of tenant management organisations in practice suggests that these can be especially important in facilitating the smooth running of small repairs, cleaning and general maintenance; though not all places will have tenants ready or able to get so involved.³⁸ Power also noted that tenants should be free to personalise their homes (as Erskine tried to encourage in Byker³⁹). She called for continuous planned programmes of renewal and maintenance, which would seem a basic

³³ Ibid p 26

³⁴ <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/your-council/statistics-and-census-information/index-multiple-deprivation-2004>

³⁵ An example of a very different housing model, which aimed to ensure that people did not gain material advantage through home ownership, is provided by the 'tenure neutral' policies followed in 1960s Sweden. See Kemeny, Jim (1981) *The Myth of Home Ownership: Private versus public choices in housing tenure*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Glynn (2009) pp 32-33

³⁶ Amery, Colin in *The Architectural Review* 156 (1974) p 362

³⁷ Power, Anne (1987) *Property Before People: the Management of Twentieth-Century Council Housing*, London: Allen and Unwin

³⁸ Cairncross, Liz, Caroline Morrell, Jane Darke and Sue Brownhill (2002) *Tenants Managing: An Evaluation of Tenant Management Organisations in England*, London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; Glynn, Sarah (forthcoming) 'Towards a New Era of Public Housing: an alternative agenda'

³⁹ *Architectural Design* 11-12 (1977) p 841

requirement of estate management but have clearly not been implemented,⁴⁰ and she envisaged greater security through resident caretakers, police officers on the beat and the guarding of access points.

Under the New Labour government, Newcastle City Council took a lead in instigating regeneration schemes based around 'engineered gentrification',⁴¹ and in carrying out the new wave of mass demolitions in the name of 'Housing Market Renewal' and its local precursor 'Going for Growth'. It is hardly surprising then, that in 1999, when faced with the decay of a group of 17 Byker flats - which had been used to house single men, many of whom had drug problems,⁴² and then been abandoned when they became vandalised and hard to let - the council voted for the building's demolition. Perversely, this may have set in motion the saving of the estate. The councillors had failed to anticipate the architectural outcry generated by their decision, which catalysed a process that resulted, six years later, in the heritage listing of the whole of Erskine's Byker. This time the emphasis on buildings rather than people should work in the interests of the community, thanks to the importance attached to Erskine's original design philosophy, to which any thought of rejuvenating the buildings in the absence of their occupants would be anathema.

By the time of the listing in January 2007, security had been improved with the help of controlled entry systems, the ubiquitous CCTV, and a team of community wardens tasked with working with residents to reduce vandalism and deter low-level crime. And work had started on improvements to bring the buildings up to the new Decent Homes standards of insulation and security. But government funding restrictions meant that there was not the money for all the work that needed to be done. Newcastle's council housing had already been handed over to an arms' length management organisation in 2004, but now they started looking for new ownership models to bring in more money. After a failed bid for PFI funding (they lost out in competition with other areas that were pursuing demolition, which was the officially favoured approach) they opted for stock transfer to a Community Trust, and this was approved by tenants' vote in July 2011. Government made sure that council and tenants had little alternative by promising to write off the large remaining construction debts, but making this contingent on transfer. The trust will thus be free to invest revenue from rent and any new development and to borrow against its assets.

The Community Trust will be a not-for-profit organisation run by a board that includes tenant representation, but, as in all stock transfers, there must be concerns about future control of the buildings and the possibility for dominance by commercial interests. This has, of course, been promoted as a vehicle for tenant participation, though experiences of previous stock transfers do not inspire confidence: and tenant involvement and management could have been promoted under council ownership without the risks attached to transfer. We will have to wait and see whether tenants on the board will have any real influence and be allowed to act as tenant representatives, or whether they will have to prioritise the interests and confidentiality of the organisation (- and whether the trust might consider anything as radical as adopting the informal consultative model initiated by Erskine and invite the architects to set up shop on the site).

⁴⁰ The recent programmes of improvement under Decent Homes legislation have highlighted not only lack of maintenance, but also lack of knowledge of the condition of millions of pounds worth of property and the homes of thousands of council tenants.

⁴¹ Cameron, Stuart (2006) 'From Low Demand to Rising Aspirations: Housing Market Renewal within Regional and Neighbourhood Regeneration Policy' *Housing Studies* 21:1 p 14

⁴² As described by a youth worker quoted in Konttinen (2009) p 72

Despite the shabbiness of neglect and the need for upgrading to modern standards of insulation, Byker's physical structures have born up well, and the estate retains the potential to be as good a place to live in as the rigours of wider socio-economic pressures allow. It is a beautiful, unique and fascinating place, and the strictures of the heritage listing will ensure a degree of quality and appropriateness in any new architectural work that is absent from most refurbishment - and open up possibilities for grant funding. However, on top of this, the spirit of the original design would demand an imaginative and community-centred response to new possibilities and ideas, such as the green agenda. Social housing has the potential to adapt particularly well to growing environmental demands, and facilitates the co-ordinated and long-term planning and investment required to make best use of environmentally friendly technologies. Such plans would need careful working out and the support of the local community.

For a start, the communal heating system might be made more efficient. The savings achievable by a well-designed modern installation are already being demonstrated by increasing numbers of schemes, such as the combined heat and power system used in many council flats and public buildings in Aberdeen, where it is claimed fuel use has been halved.⁴³ It has also been suggested that solar panels be installed on the roof of the Byker Wall. As a low-income community with low car-ownership and good public transport, Byker could benefit from the development of car pools that would allow non-car owners to have affordable access to a vehicle when they need it. An aborted improvement scheme designed in 2006 included a reed pond for sewage treatment and proposals for growing food.⁴⁴ The estate already has small private gardens and allotments, but there is scope for further promotion of vegetable growing, which can be particularly important in improving a low-cost diet.⁴⁵ The introduction of gardens and vegetables can have an even greater impact in estates that were previously devoid of greenery and lacked outside spaces conducive to informal interaction with neighbours - as a growing number of examples can demonstrate.⁴⁶

We cannot expect to return to the community spirit of Old Byker. This was the product of a time when most people worked for the same industries, women washed the family laundry in the communal washhouse and people shared because they all had very little. Communities have changed even where there hasn't been demolition. But there is clearly scope for improved community facilities, especially for young people who need to be provided with things they *can* do, not just told what they can't, and who can benefit from access to new types of activity such as recording studios. New uses need to be found for the hobby rooms and for the derelict former pub that dominates the main street. And, while few small shops anywhere have survived the competition of the big multiples, there must be opportunities for reopening some of the boarded up shops in Raby Street, which are quite a distance from the shopping area in Shields Road beyond the Wall. Some residents are

⁴³ Combined Heat and Power Association website, <http://www.chpa.co.uk>, including the Aberdeen case study by the Energy Saving Trust. [accessed July 2010] Central systems need to be combined with local metering to avoid waste.

⁴⁴ Kontinen (2009) p 72

⁴⁵ For a demonstration of the full potential of urban farming, we have the example of Havana, where necessity forced the cultivation of every spare space enabling a substantial proportion of the city's food to be produced within its boundaries. See Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions (2006) *the Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*, DVD (see <http://www.powerofcommunity.org>). Cuba's housing policy is rather less successful.

⁴⁶ See Women's Environmental Network and Sustain (2008) 'Growing Round the Houses: Food production on housing estates' (http://www.wen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/food_growing__social_housing.pdf)

concerned that shops that rely on alcohol sales become magnets for groups of youths,⁴⁷ but other shops, such as a food co-op, might be helped to survive through favourable rent schemes or links with community organisations; and there is also the less expensive option of market stalls.

The history of Byker has lessons for the estate's future and also for the future of other existing and new social housing. Byker's biggest need remains socioeconomic improvement through decent employment; however more can be done within the areas of housing and town planning. Although the financial costs would be high, they are not as high as the financial and social costs that will be occurred if this investment is not made.

The neglect of our public housing has been indicative of our society's disdain for many of its residents. We need to fight for a more equal (and less materialistic) society, but hand in hand with this, we need to fight for the better treatment of those who are least well off and who our existing society has left by the wayside. The Byker story shows the dangers of criminal levels of neglect and underinvestment and of bureaucratic managerialism, but it also allows a glimpse of what can be achieved by dedicated attention and local involvement, and by treating the people who live in public housing with respect. No one should be able to say, like a young woman interviewed by Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen on her recent return visit to Byker: 'People round here don't have the confidence, they don't think they deserve it.'⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Conversation with Byker resident November 2011

⁴⁸ Konttinen (2009) p 143