

**Orho Okorodudu**

Resident, 1989 – 2008



I moved into the estate the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1989. It was my home: my family was there, my friends were there - I had several very good friends on the estate. Other members of my family lived nearby on the Aylesbury estate, and my mother-in-law lives on East Street. My Auntie lives at the Elephant, my mother and sister in New Cross, and my cousins live in Peckham. I had my whole community within close reach - just a short bus ride away at the most.

The council kept saying that they had consulted the Heygate residents about the regeneration plans but this is false – nobody consulted me. I have spoken to most of my friends and neighbours – nobody had consulted them either.

Problems on the estate started after the regeneration plans had been announced, and when the council started moving temporary residents in. On several occasions, my flat was flooded by the temporary residents in the flat above.

They had stopped all repairs and maintenance on the estate some time before the scheme was announced. At one point, they had dismantled one of the lifts in my block in order to fix the other! This had caused much inconvenience.

The lift had broken down while I was inside on two separate occasions. They then finally decided to switch it off. I used to have to carry bags of shopping up 7 flights of stairs. Can you imagine undertaking such a task while carrying my son?

Once they had started moving people out, it became unbearable and far too risky. Several times we had come home to find that we had been burgled. At one point, we decided to install a metal gate over our front door to provide extra security which the council had failed to provide. But the council had frowned upon this. One day, we came home to find that burglars had knocked straight through the walls of the utility cupboard in order to gain access to our possessions inside the flat. This for us, was life threatening.

On two occasions we came home to find that squatters had moved in. Even though life was becoming more dangerous, I was ready to hold out on principle, but then realised that I had to put the safety of my family first. I could have endured it alone but these were no conditions for my wife and my son.

***“Once they started moving people out it became unbearable.”***

We were being offered just £80,000 as compensation for our home by the council.

We had a budget of £800

per month for a mortgage, but we looked at the few properties on the market in the area and realised that they had started at around £300,000 - plus they were much smaller.

We had looked further afield at Camberwell, New Cross, Peckham, Brixton, Kennington and Oval – but still there was nothing within our budget. Enough was enough! We weren't going to find anything we could afford and started to look outside London. We ended up in Slough - I didn't want to move to slough, and would much prefer to be in London with my family and friends.

We were comfortable at Elephant – we had friends and family around us. We also had the church and we were financially secure. If we had an emergency (with childcare or anything else), we could call my mum or mother-in-law and they would drop in - life was simple!

For us to make the decision to move outside London, it was as a last resort, it wasn't something that we wanted or planned – but we didn't have a choice. We couldn't waste any more time, effort or money in fighting the council. We did seek legal advice about fighting



the compulsory purchase, but we were told that the cards were stacked against us in the council's favour.

We don't have any family support here now: the childcare is expensive - when we first moved here, it was costing us over £800 per month. Back at Elephant, there was no cost - my mother-in-law looked after my son, now we have lost that. But it was not just the financial cost: moving meant we had to remove our children from the care of loved ones and put them in the care of strangers - the council cannot replace the cost of that.

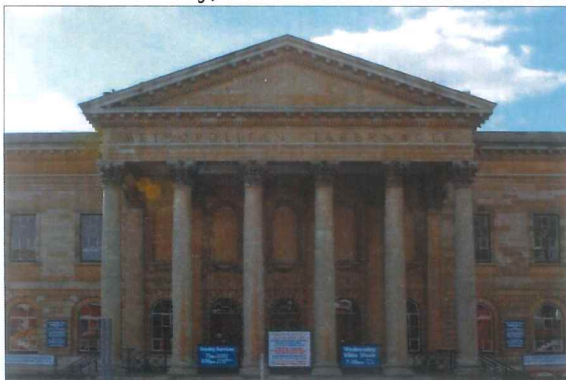
We used to have friends and family just drop in when we lived at the Elephant; there was no need to make an appointment, people would just call in when passing by. Now we miss this contact and we miss most of the social gatherings, simply because it is such a long drive away from our network and for most of our contacts, Slough is a bit of a way out.

Because of moving away from home, we no longer have a cohesive social structure, and are not as close to our families as we used to be. Will things change? I doubt it because there is no way that we will be able to afford to move back to London - not in my life time.

We drive back to London, roughly twice a month, to visit friends and family, so that we can catch up with people and so that the kids can play with their cousins. We also do the shopping at the same time, as there are many foods that we can't buy here in Slough.

This month we have only done the trip once because it has been very busy, and family members have their own schedule too. They don't come and visit us as often as they want to. There are public transport connections, but it costs £12 return to get here.

We miss seeing our family and friends, but one of the most precious things to me was the Metropolitan Tabernacle where we worshiped. Several of my church brothers lived on the estate. One of these is now in Bermondsey, and another went to Lewisham.



We now attend a church in Reading - there are a lot of churches in the UK, but finding a good one is difficult. It is a calling and a way of life that becomes your life.

So the move has not just affected us financially, but emotionally, socially and spiritually: being part of a Christian community means that no matter how bad things get you will always have people there for you. We have lost that at the Elephant. Initially, we used to travel back to London every weekend to worship at the Tabernacle but that became tricky after a long week of driving back and forth to work. We now find ourselves living very far away from what we knew as home - from family, friends and church members with no support.

I don't think the council understands what a community is. They look at things from a purely financial perspective, but the social and cultural consequences of dispersing a community are beyond measure.

If somebody - a decision maker, from the council were to have been living on the estate, then they would have understood the impact on the community. They would have realised that it is not just a financial transaction but one that has affected everyone - both physically and mentally, but above all, as a community. They would have understood that but they didn't - to them it was just a business transaction. That's all they were concerned about, they get some money from Government to do this regeneration and don't care about all the people that they have dispersed.

I remember attending the meetings at the beginning when the regeneration plans were being drawn up. We were told that provision would be made for everyone to remain living at the Elephant & Castle.

They said we would be offered temporary homes nearby until the new homes on the Heygate were built, and then we would be given assistance like shared-equity options in buying one of these.

After a while they then said that this was no longer an option, they said the only option available was for them to buy us out. Their attitude was - **'this is what we are offering, take it or leave it'** - there was no compromise.



Initially I thought we were on an equal footing, we had equal ownership rights and that this was an issue that concerned both parties, but their attitude became more hostile – they wanted us out and were not willing to pay the cost. Negotiating with them felt like hitting my head against a brick wall. It was the same thing over and over - they treated us leaseholders like fools.

I instructed my own independent surveyor who valued our property much higher but the council disagreed - they didn't care. They said **'this is what we are offering, our valuer will value your home and that is what we will pay.'**

***Their attitude was 'This regeneration must go ahead - anybody who disagrees is standing in the way and is an enemy of progress.'***

Conditions on the estate were worsening, and the risk to my family of staying and fighting was just too great. I just thought – I have had enough of this, I need to get us out of here.

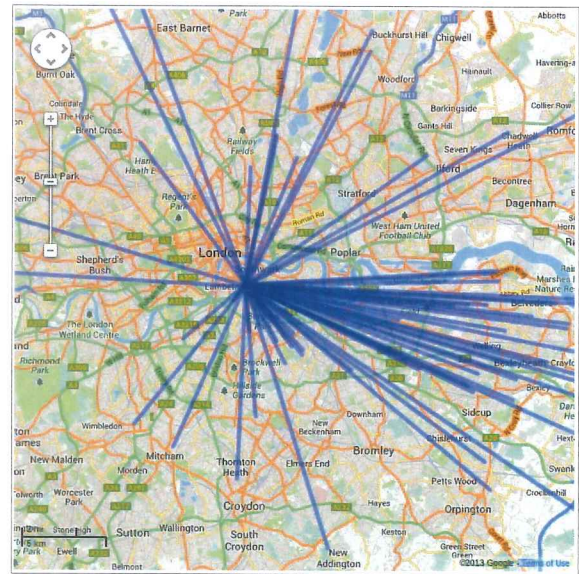
They said the only other option was to re-allocate us to another council property somewhere else, but we would need to be financially assessed. I wasn't a high earner but I wasn't poor either - eventually they told me that my income was too high to qualify.

We may not be unemployed nor amongst the poorest, but that is not a reason for the council to have made us homeless, which is what they did. If we hadn't made the decision to move out of London and find somewhere we could afford, then we would have been forced into private rented accommodation. After a while our money would have run out and we would have been homeless.

Their attitude was more or less **'We don't want the 'new poor' like you here anymore, we want overseas investors'** and this is what London is becoming. As Tavis Smiley and Cornel West have so aptly put it, "the middle class has become the *new poor*" – God knows what the poor has become. We were being forced outside London to make way for the world's wealthy elite.

The legacy of this regeneration is the destruction of a viable community, which had stood for many years. Many of my neighbours had lived on the estate since it was first built, and when I think about

life on the estate – it makes me think that this is something that can never be replaced.



There should be a criminal investigation by the police and those responsible should be brought to book, because they have ruined my life and that of many others.

There should be an inquiry about how it came that we didn't have a vote on whether our homes should be demolished, and why we didn't get the new homes that we had been promised. I would like to know how it came to be and who were those involved. I would like those who are found guilty to be brought to justice, so that no council can ever disperse a community again.

I would never have thought the Government could let this happen in a 21st century civilised country like Britain. It is not civilised at all: we go to other countries lecturing people about human rights, and look what they have done to us here, people should be brought to book.

I want to stop blaming the council because I want to close that chapter, but what they did is not something I can easily forget. It was a nightmare, and is not something I would wish upon my worst enemy. It would be nice if the council were to say **'yes we got it wrong, we are sorry'** - that would go a long way.