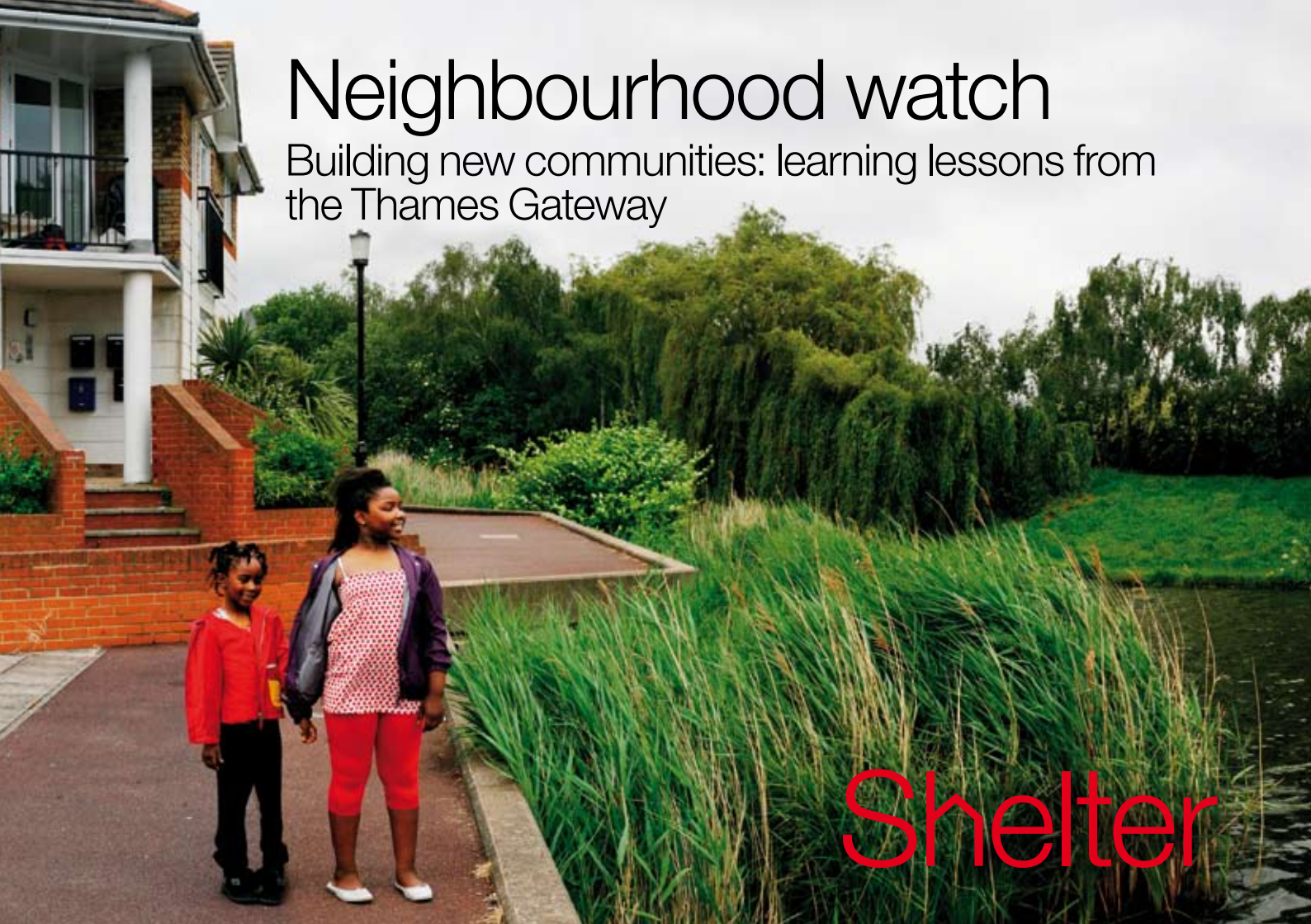# Neighbourhood watch

Building new communities: learning lessons from the Thames Gateway

Shelter

Introduction

Shelter commissioned research in the Thames Gateway area to investigate policy makers' and planners' approaches to delivering and managing developments, and to gain an insight into residents' perspectives of their homes and neighbourhoods. Through participative and photographic research methods in these case study areas, Shelter has made recommendations for other growth areas around the country.

The Government has committed to build three million new homes by 2020[1], which will include significant new developments in growth areas and new eco-towns. Shelter welcomes a planned increase in housebuilding, but there is now a need to ensure that new developments deliver homes and communities where people want to live. It is essential that residents are involved to ensure their success. The current economic and housing market climate will make this an even greater challenge, but no less important to deliver.

At the outset of 2008, the fieldwork was carried out by researchers from University of East London at three sites in the Thames Gateway area – Gallions Reach Urban Village (GRUV), Greenwich Millennium Village (GMV) and Ingress Park.

1. CLG, *Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable*, Cm 7191, 2007.

Developing homes where people want to live

The research looked at why people moved to the new developments; their perspectives on living there, and the effect that housing management has on successful regeneration.

Key findings
The majority of residents were satisfied with their new homes, and these homes usually offered a way of people improving their housing situation. Generally, residents were positive about the amount of public space, the location of the developments and, at GRUV, high building standards with good storage. Residents valued a range of measures that had been undertaken to enhance their neighbourhood, such as lakes, riverside walkways and green spaces.

■ Despite a perception from policy makers that residents would be feeling 'consultation fatigue', most residents did not feel their views on their development had been actively sought. Social tenants in particular perceived a lack of democracy, despite the developments all aiming to involve residents in decision-making.

■ The quality of ongoing housing management is a key factor in successful regeneration. Developments with more complex management structures, to support mixed-tenure schemes, find it harder to deliver a coherent service response to residents.

- Public space must be maintained, and in one study area, residents felt that this was neglected. Large areas of public space are expensive to maintain, and the level of service charges, and their value for money, was a common issue for residents in two of the case study developments.

- Additionally, more attention needs to be given to ensuring that new schemes bring benefits to those living in situations of relative deprivation adjacent to new developments.

Meeting housing and support needs

There is no obligation for planners and developers to factor in the support needs of residents when planning a new development, although registered social landlords would be expected to have procedures to identify and address most support needs once housing is occupied.

Key findings
- None of the case study areas had development-wide systems in place for assessing the support needs of residents, but more advice and guidance was available for those who were socially renting. Although this isn't a requirement, there was a clear need for support services. In two of the case study developments examined, approximately one-third

of residents had serious health problems or disabilities, and many had to travel outside their neighbourhoods for support.

- There was evidence that good design and layout can promote positive relationships between neighbours, which is a crucial system of 'informal' support.

Developing new neighbourhoods

This section of the research examined the role of community development as a vehicle for successful regeneration, residents' perceptions of local infrastucture and services, and why services have been slow to develop or were non-existent.

Key findings
- The local provision of good infrastructure and services is very important to local residents. However, the extent to which they were factored into the three case study developments varied, and there was often a time-lag between people moving into schemes and service provision.

- One study area had very good access to local transport, but on the other two developments, a lack of public transport caused significant problems for residents. Plans to improve access to transport were in place across all three areas, but this was too late for those who had already lived there for some time.

- The establishment of local shops and cafes has also suffered from a time-lag, which is explained by a market model being in operation where a critical mass of residents is necessary for business. On two of the case study developments, this critical mass appeared elusive, despite a clear need, and more needs to be done to facilitate social enterprise as an important source of goods and services, particularly in the early phases of developments.

- Community development clearly has a role to play in helping people to feel less isolated. Residents that Shelter spoke to felt there was a lack of social and community infrastructure, eg local schools and primary health care provision, to meet their needs. It was either not factored into plans or, where it was provided, was generally completed several years after the first residents had moved in.

Planning and delivering affordable housing[2]

The delivery of affordable housing was examined in detail in the case study areas, especially in relation to the original plans, along with the barriers and restraints on building affordable housing.

2. Affordable housing refers to homes that are social rented or acquired under a low-cost home ownership scheme.

Key findings
- There was a gap between the original masterplans and section 106 agreements (legally binding planning obligations), and what was actually implemented. Social and community facilities identified in section 106 agreements were not necessarily delivered, although due to increases in local authority targets, the proportion of affordable housing delivered was higher than stated in original documents in two of the case study areas. Affordable housing tends to be provided later in new developments, and design standards on later stages were not always as high.

- There was an assumption of a bi-tenure system in planning documents, ie owner-occupation and affordable/social rented housing. The private rented sector tends to be ignored in both the planning and governance of new developments, despite private renters being present in all three study areas, significantly so in GRUV.

- Market failure led to an increase in affordable housing on one development, when an RSL bought up unoccupied homes originally intended for private owner-occupation.

- Despite a commitment to mixed tenure developments, more desirable properties were likely to be reserved for owner-occupiers.

Recommendations

- Where possible, a single management system on mixed-tenure developments, with clear lines of contact and services for residents, should be considered to avoid problems identified in the research.

- New developments should provide an adequate infrastructure for residents, including transport, health facilities and schools.

- A more systematic approach to gathering existing and future residents' views needs to be undertaken as an important resource for planning.

- A community development plan should be implemented at the same time as residents moving into a new housing development. This should set out a strategy and implementation plan, identifying effective and representative systems of housing governance, including a role for private renters.

- Social and community enterprise should be factored into plans and communicated to residents where local facilities and services are not yet feasible.

- Enforcement measures should be implemented to ensure that section 106 agreements are adhered to, so that the infrastructure of a new development is adequate for residents.

- The issue of breakdown of service charges and who pays for it needs to be resolved, along with the responsibility for maintenance. A subsidy for the maintenance of public space, as opposed to a cap on service charges, might be a more effective way forward.

- RSLs, local authorities, management companies and developers should work together to develop a more systematic and cross-tenure approach to identifying and addressing the support needs of residents.

'We were encouraging people to become more pro-active... but we were struggling because this is a complicated area'.
Resident, Gallions Reach Urban Village

'it is so well designed, we have so many open areas, river walks, a number of parks within the area, and every block has a play area'.
Resident, Greenwich Millennium Village

'Management is a hugely important aspect of good design, if something isn't managed properly it can be a total failure'.

Developer, Greenwich Millennium Village

Everyone should have a home

Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity

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