Cressingham Gardens Community

Cressingham Gardens is a council estate in Lambeth, South London.\(^1\) Located near Brockwell Park, this low-rise medium-/high-density estate (fig.3.1) was built between 1967 and 1979. It was designed by a team of Lambeth architects led by Edward Hollamby.\(^2\)

The Save Cressingham campaign started in September 2012, when an exhibition on the future of the estate raised suspicions among residents concerning the council’s demolition plans. A group of residents quickly set up a Facebook page and designed leaflets with ‘STOP DEMOLITION’ written on them to make other residents aware of the situation. One of the first proposals that residents made to the council, in early 2013, was to follow a ‘project plan’ where they could have a ‘common understanding of facts’ – especially regarding the structural damage and the high cost of refurbishment alleged by the council without providing any evidence – in order to make informed decisions based on these facts.\(^3\) In 2013 the council hired the company Social Life to run a ‘consultation and co-production process’;\(^4\) the same company ran workshops with residents in late 2014.

The workshops and discussions within the ‘project team’\(^5\) between residents and the council from late 2014 to early 2015 considered five options, ranging from full refurbishment to full demolition, and their financial implications. In March 2015 the council made a cabinet\(^6\) decision to reject the three options that considered refurbishment and to consider only the options that proposed partial or total redevelopment. Later, in July 2015, the council decided to fully redevelop the estate.

Tools used

Cressingham Gardens residents have used a combination of informal strategies and formal tools (see fig.3.3). These include campaigning, demonstrations, leafleting, actions to raise the awareness of other residents, putting together a
Figure 3.1 Residents and visitors walk around Cressingham Gardens during a theatrical performance representing community resistance to demolition. June 2016. Image: Pablo Sendra.

People’s Plan (see chapter 12) with the support of an architect (fig. 3.2), twice bringing the council to Judicial Review (see chapter 11), serving notice for the Right to Transfer and Right to Manage (see chapter 8) (succeeding in both) and registering Assets of Community Value according to the Localism Act 2011 (see chapter 9).

After Lambeth Council decided at cabinet to reject the refurbishment options in March 2015, the residents brought this decision to Judicial Review. They claimed that the consultation had not been lawful as the council’s cabinet had not taken residents’ views into account and had decided not to proceed with the three refurbishment options, deeming them ‘not affordable’.

The verdict was favourable to the residents’ case and, in late 2015, the judge concluded that the decision of March 2015 had been ‘unlawful’ and ‘quashed’ it.

After this first Judicial Review, the residents engaged a local architect and former resident of the estate, together with a local quantity surveyor, to help them put together the ‘People’s Plan’. This represented a community-led regeneration plan recording the demands of the community and providing up to 37 additional new homes, community spaces and workspaces mainly by transforming existing garage spaces (fig. 3.2). They ran a resident-led consultation process in early 2016, at the same time as a further council-organised consultation. The residents submitted the People’s Plan to the council on 4 March 2016. On 11 March officers from the Housing Regeneration Team produced a report which was to be
considered by the council’s cabinet on 21 March. This report concluded that the People’s Plan ‘was not a viable proposition, technically very difficult and costly to achieve’. Consequently the cabinet again decided to redevelop the estate and again residents brought this decision to Judicial Review. This time their claim was dismissed.

In addition to the residents taking the council twice to Judicial Review (2015 and 2016) and producing a People’s Plan, they have also used a wide range of formal and informal strategies and legal actions. They describe this strategy as ‘cumulative’, using almost every planning framework, legal strategy and informal action or process available in order to propose a community-led plan that prevents demolition of the estate. Fig.3.3 shows the diversity of tools and strategies that residents have used. These include the Localism Act 2011 to register the community centre as an Asset of Community Value (see chapter 9) and applying for legal aid (see chapter 11) to bring the cabinet decisions of March 2015 and March 2016 to Judicial Review (see chapter 11). This cumulative strategy has created a strong campaign and increased the chances of success. Indeed, at the time of writing, the residents have succeeded in obtaining approval for both the Right to Manage and the Right to Transfer (see chapter 8) from central government.

The transfer of responsibility for the management of repairs on the estate from the council to a community-owned company, a Resident Management Organisation, has already taken place, and this company is now managing repairs up to a certain cost threshold. Cressingham Gardens residents had suffered for years from the poor repair and maintenance services provided by the council, causing the dilapidation of some of the homes and the frustration of residents who did not receive an appropriate
Figure 3.3  Assemblage of actors, actions, strategies, formal planning framework and policies in the context of Cressingham Gardens. Triangles represent the actors involved. Those with a continuous line are directly involved; those with a dashed line are indirectly involved or supporting actors. Hexagons represent actions, strategies, formal planning tools and policies. A continuous line shows those that engage with formal planning. A dashed line represents actions or strategies outside formal planning, while a dotted line shows strategies developed by public authorities.  

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response or action from the council when repairs were required. After giving notice for the Right to Manage, Cressingham Gardens secured a legal ballot to transfer the management of repairs and maintenance from the council to a community-owned company. The ballot took place in November 2018, with 82.5 per cent of tenants voting in favour (77.9 per cent of secure tenants). As a result of applying for the Right to Manage, the residents have had access both to central government funding and to technical support. They have also had support from the National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations. This organisation recommended to them a lawyer whose professional fees were covered by the local authority. Once the Resident Management Organisation is in place, they receive an allowance drawn from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of Lambeth Council to manage repairs and maintenance.

More than three years after Cressingham Gardens residents gave notice to the London Borough of Lambeth (25 April 2016) for the Right to Transfer, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, on behalf of the Secretary of State, determined ‘that the stock transfer process in relation to the CGC (Cressingham Garden Community) should continue’. On 12 September 2016 Lambeth Council had asked the Secretary of State ‘whether the proposed transfer of houses would have a significant detrimental effect on the regeneration of the area’. However, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government determined that the transfer ‘will not have a significant detrimental effect on the provision of housing services, or the regeneration of the area’.

It is clear from reading the determination that having a People’s Plan that is both viable and well-supported by evidence is crucial. From this we see the importance of combining formal tools, like the Right to Transfer, with strategies that are not necessarily formal planning mechanisms, such as the People’s Plan, which is not a statutory document. The People’s Plan has been highly effective in bringing together the demands from residents and proposing alternative futures in very limited time frames. The residents carried out a consultation process which collected around 100 responses (from a total of 306 households), together with other surveys that had been carried out earlier. The resultant People’s Plan is a highly detailed, 326-page document. It includes 14 appendices containing reports on topics such as heritage conservation, the implementation of renewable energies and financial viability. This document demonstrates residents’ ability to put together a community-led plan, with the support of professionals and backed with evidence and reports from experts. This would not have been achieved so quickly through a Neighbourhood Plan.
One characteristic of this campaign is the expertise that residents have developed during this process. Cressingham Gardens has a resident community with diverse skills; it has been able to react promptly, contest demolition and propose alternatives. The threat of losing their homes prompted many of them to use most of their free time to fight for their cause, providing a vast amount of unpaid labour and mutual support, and also building strong ties between residents. This wholehearted commitment to the campaign and the use of a wide range of formal and informal strategies and legal actions has created great expertise in community-led planning and political activism. The campaign has used both in-house skills and external support and consultancies: voluntary or discounted work from professionals, legal aid lawyers and architects and other consultants paid through fundraising.

Another characteristic of this campaign has been its ability to operate through different kinds of formal and informal organisations, independent from one another, in order to engage with formal planning processes while also carrying out a housing campaign with no legal organisation. The initial discussions with the council were conducted through the Tenants and Residents Association (TRA). A project team was set up by the council and residents were included in it to discuss the regeneration options. The Judicial Reviews were carried out through individual claimants, although speaking on behalf of the whole community. In parallel to this, Save Cressingham acts as a housing campaign, with no legal organisation and no formal membership – a feature that contributes to flexibility and rapid action. For the Right to Manage and the Right to Transfer, the residents have set up a Resident Management Organisation (RMO). That organisation will then ramp up its activities into becoming the organisation that will take control of their homes.

**Current/future challenges**

Cressingham Gardens residents provide a very good example of strong and sustained campaigning. After years of work and effort, they have managed to be successful in both the Right to Manage and the Right to Transfer, which is unprecedented with these two pieces of legislation.

Earlier in 2018, when the Mayor of London launched a consultation on the Resident Ballot Condition for GLA Funding (see chapter 10), Cressingham Gardens residents discovered (from a response to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request) that their estate was one of the exceptions and will not be balloted, since the GLA had already granted...
funding in December 2017 (just two months before the consultation was launched). While this decision has created some uncertainty among the residents, having been successful in the Right to Transfer they will have control to decide on the regeneration on their neighbourhood and their homes will be saved.

However, the transfer of stock has not yet been carried out. The residents now need to vote, by means of a ballot, to confirm the stock transfer and then also to develop a business plan. The case of Cressingham Gardens will be a good example to follow for residents who want to pursue this route.

Key lessons

• Campaigning and using a diverse set of planning tools, legal processes and other informal strategies makes the campaign strong.
• Using a mix of formal organisations and informal campaigning gives flexibility to adopt different strategies.
• Obtaining professional support and building in-house expertise make campaigns stronger.
• Right to Manage is a good tool to gain control of repairs and maintenance when the local authority is delivering a poor service. There is funding available for requesting it and setting up the management organisation. Once it is made effective, the management organisation receives an allowance from the council to manage repairs and maintenance.
• The Right to Transfer is a long process: it took three years to get approval from the Secretary of State, probably because it was one of the first cases under this piece of legislation. However, once it is made effective, residents will have full control over the regeneration of their estate. This is the most effective tool to secure the homes.

Notes

1. This chapter builds on a previous paper (Pablo Sendra. 2018. ‘Assemblages for Community-Led Social Housing Regeneration: Activism, Big Society and Localism’, City 22(5–6): 738–62). The research for the previous article was done in January 2017. Since then, Cressingham Gardens residents have achieved very important successes that will be very useful for other campaigns. They have been successful in both the Right to Manage and the Right to Transfer. This chapter includes these new updates (latest update July 2019).
3. Interview with two residents of Cressingham Gardens, 10 January 2017.

5. A project team was set up by the council for ‘steering and managing regeneration options and co-producing the regeneration options with the residents’ (*R (Bokrosova) v London Borough of Lambeth* [2015] EWHC 3386 (Admin)). Residents were included in this project team.

6. The cabinet is an executive body of elected councillors. These are two or more elected councillors generally from the party that has won the local elections. This exists in the two executive arrangements defined by the Localism Act 2011: ‘mayor and cabinet executive’ and ‘leader and cabinet executive’.


13. Interview with two residents of Cressingham Gardens, 10 January 2017.


16. These details on the Right to Manage were discussed with a Cressingham Gardens resident during the workshop we organised on 11 June 2019.


18. Interview with two residents of Cressingham Gardens, 10 January 2017.

19. Interview with two residents of Cressingham Gardens, 10 January 2017.