

# **Rooms with a view**

**(and good security and maintenance!)**

***The role of High-Rise Housing in developing more sustainable communities.***

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# Tower Block problems...

Many high-rise estates have become concentrated cases of urban decay and social exclusion. They are wound up with:

- poor health & bad housing conditions
- lack of facilities & poor services
- Isolation
- Crime
- A depressing environment

There's usually no point in tackling one of these problems if you can't also tackle the others.

# So why bother?

- Tower blocks matter!
- Tower blocks: a massive if neglected asset
- Homes for around 800,000 people across the UK
- Every demolished block means more pressure on new and existing housing
- Most of the new households will be small - just one or two people. Tower blocks are most suitable for small households of adults. High-rise stock offers an opportunity to respond to the need for more homes.

**So...**

- What might be the positive aspects of living in tower blocks?

# Tower blocks can be good places to live (1)

Tower blocks have advantages:

- As a high density housing they allow housing need to be met while keeping land use to a minimum.
- Tower blocks can be much more energy-efficient
- Shared facilities and services, including food co-ops and community cafes can reduce waste and save residents' money.
- The refurbishment, repair, and maintenance needs of a high-rise block present opportunities for employment and training.

## Tower blocks can be good places to live (2)

- Tower blocks are small enough for people to know each other, & big enough to give residents clout if they act together.
- Can combine living, working, recreational, private, and public space all within one building.
- Tower blocks can provide security from crime, so long as the problem stems from outside rather than inside the block
- And, of course, there is the view!

***That's the ideal!***

# The Sustainable Tower Blocks Initiative

- Inspired by Apple Tree Court in Salford
- Recognise the positive aspects
- Tackle the image issue
- There are now more and more positive examples
- If you can deliver sustainable development in a tower block....

# Making towers better places to live

- Address the social, environmental and economic context. Policies and projects aimed at tower blocks must link in with local regeneration programmes.
- Some blocks have fundamental problems: they may be structurally unsound or the way that the block and the surroundings were planned has failed to work. These blocks are beyond salvaging.
- The majority of tower blocks can be made to work. Many may have serious problems but they can be turned around and made decent places to live.

# Making a start

Any changes to blocks need basic improvements first.  
These include:

- Effective security systems
- Delivering basic services

*Two further key issues*

- Resident involvement
- Stability

If these improvements can be made then there is the possibility of more substantial change.

# So...

- **What are the main problems likely to be?**  
for
  - Security
  - Service delivery
  - Stability
- **Three key issues or problems**

# Security

- Always the top priority where it inadequate. Without good security then other improvement programmes are likely to fail and money will be wasted.
- Tower blocks have one very specific issue: one common door controls access to semi-private space inside.
- Keeping people out who have no right to be in these spaces is the first priority. Most blocks do not have a concierge and rely on cameras and door entry systems.

# Basic security needs (the concierge viewpoint)

- The access intercom systems to be fully functional
- Other entries such as fire escape doors cannot be opened from outside and should close automatically.
- Signage should make it clear that this is not public space
- Vandal resistant doors
- Front doors have effective locks that cannot be opened without a key
- The doors close automatically and this is maintained
- Access for the disabled

# Good practice (1)

- Ground floor windows protected / hardened.
- Redesign work to eliminate recesses and blind corners
- Anyone using community rooms etc. should be aware of a number to ring to report crime or anti-social behaviour
- Security guards can help reduce anti-social behaviour: such patrols should also report maintenance problems

## Good practice (2)

- A camera built in to the access intercom and linked to the blocks TV system
- CCTV can help reduce anti-social behaviour and crime (to be effective this requires a rapid response mechanism)
- A residents association will encourage reporting of incidents
- Secure external storage for cycles etc.
- Planting of thorn bushes around ground floor windows has been shown to reduce burglary

# Security in summary:

- Tower blocks are people's homes: access needs to be controlled. Blocks should not be seen as public spaces
- Concierge systems have been shown to work and to be popular. More expensive than other systems, they can pay benefits in terms of reduced crime and vandalism. *"the longer you've been running one the less you need one"* (Paul, Camden).
- Some blocks employ their own security guards or concierge: CCTV can help if used properly
- Good security brings other benefits

# Good basic services

- These include
  - Day-to-day repairs,
  - Cleaning and upkeep of the block and grounds
  - waste removal,
  - Heat and power
  - Water supply and waste water
- This is the key responsibility of landlords, but tenant management can work well.

# Resident involvement

Very variable relations between landlords and tenants in towers.

- High resident turnover and a bad reputation may mean little in the way of a residents' association;
- A stable population may be very well-organised;
- But the opposite may also be true!

# Building resident involvement

This takes time and effort but will usually pay off well.

- A resident engagement strategy should be part of any overall refurbishments plan, with time and resources allowed to build up good relations.
- Residents should be consulted on issues such as design and paint as well as security and maintenance: their approval is important.
- Good involvement in a project can lead to long-term involvement in management.

# Stability

- Improving life in a tower block requires work to try and build a stable population.
- Residents are literally living on top of one another, so are very sensitive to inappropriate placing of new tenants.
- Tower blocks should not be used as transitory housing or ('dumping grounds')
- More and more blocks have lettings policies, e.g. no children, or 'over 50s'.

# Turning a tower block around

A long hard process, but it can and is being done with:

- Suitable funding systems
- Effective security systems
- Good quality social space inside and outside the block
- An appropriate lettings policy and a stable population.
- Effective community involvement and democracy
- Services at least adequate in the eyes of residents
- Changing the image

# The broader picture

This also needs commitment from the policy-makers. Policies and programmes must be designed around four key objectives:

- long-term community development,
- funding for the provision of good quality services,
- physical improvements to the stock, and
- attention to the underlying structural problems of the wider neighbourhood.

# Looking to the future

- High-rise has a role to play
- New technologies coming into play
- What might the key points for a new tower block be?

More information: [www.sustainingtowers.org.uk](http://www.sustainingtowers.org.uk)