This report outlines some research findings following a study of the housing regeneration of Bensham and Saltwell in Gateshead. The research was carried out between 2014 & 2017.

It focuses on the use of experts and evidence in planning and regeneration in Gateshead. Through analysing the evidence produced by consultants under Housing Market Renewal (HMR), two key findings are presented in this report:

- Evidence was selected in order to present a failing housing market.
- Community consultation was shaped to exaggerate residents support for the regeneration.

It is therefore recommended that heightened scrutiny of ‘experts’ and ‘evidence’ takes place in the future use of consultants and evidence collection.

Dr Emma Ormerod
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University
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Housing Market Failure

HMR was a central government regeneration programme that targeted neighbourhoods across the north and west midlands of England suffering from housing market failure. With an investment of £2.2billion nationally between 2002 and 2011, selected neighbourhoods were designated for intervention via housing refurbishment, demolition and new house building. Bensham and Saltwell was one such neighbourhood in Gateshead. But how was ‘housing market failure’ evidenced?

Strategically, this was assessed though a comparison of socio-economic data and housing profile information across different areas. Low housing demand was identified through certain indicators such as the predominance of low quality owner occupied stock and high levels of renting. Following the strategic identification of neighbourhoods, more detailed market assessments were drawn up for each neighbourhood.

In Bensham and Saltwell, this evidence base was made up of a series of reports, produced by a range of consultants for Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (GMBC). These reports fed into the production of a Neighbourhood Action Plan, which consisted of a proposal map and an Executive Summary by GVA Grimley. This evidence base selected and justified the demolition of 440 homes in this neighbourhood. The following reports were central to this justification and have been analysed as part of this research:

- Gateshead Council Bensham and Saltwell Executive Summary (GVA Grimley, 2006a)
- Bensham and Saltwell Neighbourhood Housing Analysis (Nathaniel, Litchfield and Partners, undated)

A Marketized Approach to Housing

The housing market indicators selected by consultants reflect specific marketized and middle-class views of housing that do not include other local understandings or needs. For example:

- **Housing supply.** This neighbourhood has a predominance of older (pre 1919) terraced houses and Tyneside flats. Tyneside flats were recognised as being ‘an enduring and sustainable product’ (GVA Grimley, 2006b, p.35) that ‘enable[s] those people who cannot afford to buy elsewhere to get on the property ladder’ (NLP, undated, p. 1.48). However, the presence in such quantity was said to be a driver of decline because of their influence on the demographic and socio-economic composition of the neighbourhood. Put another way, Tyneside flats were understood to house poorer and/or older people. They were therefore positioned as a risk of becoming a ‘down market product’ (GVA Grimley, 2006b, p.35), described by many interview respondents as ‘not aspirational’ or ‘old fashioned’. The supply of locally affordable housing was therefore positioned as a problem, and the solution was to attract new residents of a higher socio-economic status.

- **Housing demand** was primarily understood to be a problem of low house prices. Even though the evidence shows that house prices were rising steadily in this neighbourhood before HMR was announced, house prices were framed as a problem because they were not rising sufficiently in comparison with other more affluent areas of the borough, or nationally.

Interventions in the housing market aimed at achieving social mix were driven by the desire (and selective measurement) of higher house prices and perceived aspirational housing. These assessments are underpinned by middle class and market-led values, and not necessarily the views of residents living in the neighbourhood.
Shared accounts of the rationale and need for HMR were found to exist locally, and often established across GMBC officers and management, local politicians and local residents. Whilst such narratives were understood to have come from ‘evidence’, they were often not substantiated within the evidence. An example of this is:

The demolished housing was ‘structurally unsound’, ‘poor quality’, ‘below standard’.

The above claim was firmly established in many people’s accounts of HMR, and had roots in The Urban Design, Heritage and Character Report (GVA Grimley, 2006b). This report evaluated the physical strengths and weaknesses of the neighbourhood and categorised housing as good, fair, poor or very poor, averaged at a block level. A plan was produced that mapped the spatial concentration of blocks in visually poor condition. This plan was instrumental in the identification of blocks of ‘very poor’ housing to be demolished, it shaped understandings that such housing was indeed poor quality and structurally unsound.

However, there was no structural assessment or internal inspection of houses undertaken as part of the evidence base. GVA Grimley’s categorisation of housing was carried out through a ‘rapid assessment’ of the visual condition of housing. Looking at house frontages only, this assessment considered the state of repair, boundary treatment, window frames, doors, walls, guttering, evidence of personalisation and general impression of pointing, paintwork etc. Only the overall impression of housing was assessed, and rapidly.

‘The visual assessment at the very least shows that a large section of the neighbourhood’s population live in streets that create a poor impression to visitors, stigmatising them and their homes, and acting as a deterrent to market led investment.’
(GVA Grimley, 2006b, p19-20)

The rapid assessment of housing aesthetics is directly linked to market perceptions in the above quote. The point of view of potential new resident, or estate agent is prioritised here.

The labelling of ‘very poor’ housing built up a case for demolition through socially and territorially stigmatising existing housing and residents. It created a discourse of poor housing that still exists today locally, and beyond. For example, the Local Authority Building and Maintenance Magazine recently (15th October, 2018) reported that replacement housing developed by the public–private Gateshead Regeneration Partnership had been nominated for an award from the Royal Town Planning Institute. It described the demolished terraced housing as having been ‘semi-derelict’.

The housing market in Bensham and Saltwell was not failing prior to HMR intervention. The evidence shows houses were largely occupied, and house prices were rising. As we have seen, it was socio-economic factors, and the superficial assessment houses exteriors that led to the market being deemed to be weak, and at risk of market failure.

The housing market was only once termed a ‘failing market’ in the evidence base. This was in the summarising Neighbourhood Action Plan Executive Summary (GVA Grimley 2006a).

1 The research was carried out by the author of this report as part of a PhD in the Department of Geography at Durham University. The research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council studentship. The scope of the research covered the historical development and re-development of the neighbourhood through various different policy interventions in housing. There was a particular focus on housing market renewal and the current Gateshead Regeneration Partnership. Methods included 38 formal interviews, 40 informal interviews, focus groups, archival research and document analysis. Participants included local government and GRP representatives, local residents, business, community organisations, and politicians.
5 https://labmonline.co.uk/news/gateshead-regeneration-partnership-makes-rtpi-award-shortlist/
Shaping Community Support Through Consultation

Community consultation for HMR in Bensham and Saltwell was carried out between February and October 2005 by Social Regeneration consultants (SRC) on behalf of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (GMBC). A report was produced by SRC in November 2005. The consultation was extensive and included stakeholder interviews, neighbourhood workshops, surveys, outreach sessions and drop-ins.

SRC concluded that there were significantly high levels of resident satisfaction throughout Bensham and Saltwell, and broad support for the regeneration plans. However, analysis of the consultation documents has highlighted how this conclusion is misleading.

For example, drop-in surveys held to gauge the views of residents on the proposed regeneration plan reported:

- 20% of residents strongly opposed the plan,
- 25% strongly supported it,
- 49% supported it to some extent (importantly supporting refurbishment, but not necessarily demolition), and
- 6% were unsure.

SRC went on to combine the 25% of people who strongly supported the plan, with the 49% who supported the plan to some extent to conclude that

‘There were high levels of support for the plan from right across the area (74%..)’
(SRC, 2005, p 58).

SRC acknowledged that ‘most respondents wanted to see changes made to the draft plan’ and that such changes were ‘around reducing the amount of demolition and focusing more on modernisation/ refurnishment’ (SRC, 2005, p.59), but the conclusion was drawn that ‘the consultation process gave broad endorsement to the draft [plan]’ (SRC, 2005, p76).

There was therefore a leap made from the actual resident responses to the conclusions drawn. However, it was the conclusion that became embedded in local understandings and justifications for the demolition, particularly amongst officers and managers within GMBC, some of whom made further leaps in their interpretation of the community consultation:

‘residents were saying you need to do something radical here, and demolition was what was proposed by the community...it was led by the community, so they very much influenced the plan and had the opportunity to influence it.’
(Anonymous GMBC respondent, 2014)

Learning From the Use of ‘Experts’ and ‘Evidence’

It is not known what GMBC’s instruction to consultants was under HMR. If the collection of evidence and community consultation was not steered towards particular outcomes, lessons can be learned from the reliance on consultants in planning and regeneration here. There are three key points that can be taken:

- **Heightened scrutiny of such ‘evidence’** is required, beyond accepting and expediating headline findings. Not doing so is dangerous in undermining the general public’s inclusion and local authority role and responsibility in delivering regeneration programmes.

- **Don’t underestimate the power of local narratives** taking hold and going on to shape and justify local authority intervention.

- **What is valued as local knowledge and expertise?** Is an important question to reflect on in the use of experts and evidence in local government.

With great thanks to all participants in this research, who have talked openly and honestly about their experiences. Doing so enables research to inform, and be informed by local government practice.

Any comments or questions should be sent to emma.ormerod@newcastle.ac.uk