

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR COMMUNITY?

... it's a question raised here by Jeff Hayward

TO some Camden people today the idea of a community spirit seems to be slipping away as a thing of the past . . . and some of the blame must rest on the housing policies of successive councils. Many of the old terraced houses which once gave the area its character have now disappeared under acres of concrete and glass.

Rows of old houses bought up by the council have been left to go to ruin as the council struggles to find money for redevelopment.

And stark tower blocks and crowded estates have taken the place of many of the friendly neighbourhood streets.

Some council estates have become a run-down reminder, daubed with graffiti, that there are people who just don't care for things that they are not responsible for.

In fact, the estates have bred loneliness and vandalism to an extent seldom seen in the old neighbourhoods of Camden.

LOST HEART

The loss of the owner-occupied house seems to have cost inner city areas like Camden their heart and soul . . . although the idea of cheap council rents and high density housing was begun with the best humanitarian motives.

But from the evidence of the social and physical problems which plague the estates something seems to have gone wrong with the whole concept.

Already there is a growing number of people in areas like Camden who are actively resisting the growing monolith of council estates.

In isolated parts of the borough groups of local people are regaining their respect for the remaining old houses and neighbourhoods.

Many young people want to restore the old buildings and houses rather than let them be replaced by complexes of modern flats.

From Tolmer Square in the south to Winchester Mews in the west and Dartmouth Park in the east a battle is being waged against council plans to demolish old houses and shops for development schemes.

Most of those who oppose council plans for the area want the old houses and shops to be left and upgraded by those living in them.

They want to preserve the

character and layout of the old streets and to protect the communities that have sprung up over the years.

They fear that the council's policies will only mean a greater influx of transient residents with all the social problems that are an everyday fact of life on some council estates.

A recent report from the council's Director of Housing admitted that Camden was blighted with a poor state of buildings and houses and that the council was having to provide for an increasing number of dependent disadvantaged people.

At the same time there is an exodus of people out of the borough as with most inner city areas.

All this is putting a severe strain on the continued existence of the local community in some parts of the borough.

The pride and responsibility that local residents both young and old once showed in the area has been more and more replaced by a sense of cynicism and lack of caring.

Talk to residents on many of the borough's 28 odd council estates and one gets a picture of fear and loneliness for the old and boredom and frustration for the young.

DEPRESSING

The concrete corridors don't make good playgrounds, while many of the flats themselves can be made very comfortable the environment outside can be very depressing.

Too often neighbours don't know or ever see each other in many of the blocks of flats and often there is no common meeting place and little communication between tenants.

The council recently admitted that its housing policy was caught in the jaws of a vice . . . on the one hand there was a growing dependence on council housing at the expense of the old houses and on the other

hand a shortage of finance because of the economic situation.

But there is an alternative open to the council and it's being put forward by people like the Swiss Cottage Urban Arts and Recreation Experiment.

There is nothing radically new about what they want . . . they merely want to be given the chance to preserve the community they have formed and be left to rebuild the old houses they live in.

They want to preserve the open space in the area and be given the chance to buy the old houses when the

community's existence is guaranteed.

The idea of helping people to do up old houses themselves is being tried by the GLC on a big scale. It's a very obvious answer to the high cost to the ratepayer of building new housing estates.

The vast housing estates will only continue to absorb huge amounts of money while the by-products of loneliness, vandalism and decay continue to grow.

The small communities which are resisting council redevelopment plans are appealing for a chance to show what can be done.

WE PUT THE QUESTION TO COUNCILLORS

THE "Chronicle" this week put the problem of council redevelopment running into conflict with local communities to housing spokesmen from both sides of the council chamber.

John Crouch, chairman of the housing committee, said the council had no option but to provide for those on its housing list.

He said: "The demand for accommodation has tied our hands." He agreed that there had been "a subtle change in council housing policy towards catering for present tenants rather than providing for new ones."

John Crouch said that the present shortage of capital was making the council look more to housing associations for help and rehabilitating old property.

In some cases, he said, the housing associations had done a fantastic job, exemplifying the work carried out in West Hampstead.

Added John Crouch: "We do realise that a community needs people of similar type and interest to develop. And we sympathise with people wanting to keep together in one area, but we have to provide for a need . . . although I think there is some shying away from big

capital redevelopment projects."

Julian Tobin, the Conservative council spokesman on housing, claimed that the council should be encouraging private development of property and not assuming total responsibility for housing people.

Councillor Julian Tobin said it was a great pity that old type of neighbourhoods had slipped away in many places of the borough.

He maintained that more responsibility for housing should be given to the local housing authorities so that people could be given more opportunity to rehabilitate old properties.

"We have always argued against wholesale redevelopment because it has destroyed too much of the old and created too many new social problems," he said.

"We should be encouraging private people to do up old properties not only for the money it saves, but for the social value of keeping the old neighbourhoods," he added.