

In spring 2017, the South London Gallery (SLG) invited artist Jessie Brennan to collaborate with residents of Pelican Estate on a project titled YOUR WORDS. Jessie spent time listening to residents' experiences which, in different ways, celebrate the value of public housing and speak to the broader challenges often faced by those on council estates.

A broader context of the project, including Jessie's introductory text and examples of further conversations between Jessie Brennan (JB) and Pelican residents, can be found on the South London Gallery website:

<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/jessie-brennan-words/>.

JENNY (b. 1967, UK), Pelican Estate resident

JB How did you come to live on Pelican Estate?

J I have bipolar disorder, which is fine – you can say that now – but it was a little bit different 25 years ago. People were not accepting of it at all. You were a second-class citizen, basically. But I got the flat because I was very ill. [...] I don't think even then it was that easy to get a council flat, unless you had some sort of disability or if you had a baby, but now that doesn't mean anything. Today, [were I to apply] I wouldn't get a council flat.

JB What's the value of council housing?

J I think there's this terrible image of people who live in council accommodation: that they are 'feckless', 'undeserving', 'stupid', 'don't want to work'; council housed and violent, a chav. And I just don't get the joke. I think council housing is a really special thing. It's social housing and it's a nice way of communities coming together. But I think even the teenagers, they've fallen for it. They feel bad about themselves.

JB Do you mean because of the image of council housing?

J I think they've fallen for this lie that if you live in council estates you're sort of scum of the earth. [...] and I think it's bollocks. When council housing was first introduced it was supposed to be where everybody lived, from the policeman to the lawyer. It wasn't just for desperate cases, which was what [George] Osborne and [David] Cameron tried to turn it into. [...] I think [Margaret] Thatcher's property owning democracy – this is only my opinion – has been an absolute disaster. Owning your own home is not for everyone. [...] And David Cameron [was] so obsessed with her, and George Osborne. They just carried on her policies and even included housing associations to try and sell [social housing] off. [...] I really like the Pelican Estate. I do stuff now – help out on the committee [Tenants and Residents Association], have

done for a couple of years – but I wasn't always so well before. I've got better as time has gone on. In fact I feel the most well I've ever felt now. [...] Another amazing thing about council housing is that it brings different communities together. We do really nice things, like we did the older people's hampers for Christmas and the Summer Splash for the kids, which they love. [...] When we have things like the Summer Splash, all the communities come together so it takes this fear away, [...] so you don't get this terrible 'don't understand them', 'they don't understand us' bullshit. You see that actually people are people. And that's really important. And you can particularly get that in council housing in a way you can't do in private [owned] housing. [...] I feel incredibly lucky to have a council flat.

JB Across London, Southwark included, we're seeing council estates 'regenerated', like the demolition and redevelopment of the Heygate Estate which has become a notorious example of the displacement of existing communities. I don't know of any plans to redevelop Pelican Estate [the council are regenerating part of the estate by building two homes which replace the former community hall].

J What, to knock it down and build something we can't afford? That's regeneration.

JB Is that what regeneration means to you?

J It would mean that they [developers] were going to knock it down and rebuild with a percentage of social housing, probably about 20%. And that the rest of us would be shipped out of London quietly, to somewhere like Milton Keynes. [...] I think you have to be smarter now to survive. The thing about all these policies of cutting back, Personal Independent Payments, these type of things, it's the weakest people who will go under, which is what always happens [...] The people who are going to get hurt are the people who aren't able to fill in 100 forms and fight through tribunal after tribunal [...] The only people you'll get is the most vulnerable. [...] I have been very poor at certain times in my life, which I'm not now (in comparison to some times in my past). When you are so poor you literally can't think. You can't do anything. You certainly can't be creative. Because all you can think about is that you haven't got enough money to get through the next day or the next week, so I think this is what people with money don't realise, because they've already got it. [...] But there's a terrible amount of snobbery that still goes on around council flats. [...]

JB How do you think a counter-narrative should be formed?

J Well, (the things you're doing, and the artists getting involved on the estate) standing up for council housing. Because you're right, I don't know whose pockets got lined with Lendlease [in relation to the

demolition and redevelopment of the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, London borough of Southwark].

JB So part of a counter-narrative might be around valuing council housing and showing that it's not a hotbed of crime...

J Crime happens with a lot of people who've got money. They say the banking crisis was fuelled on the back of cocaine. And it's all the poor people who get undone.

JB Are there any phrases that come to mind that you'd like to see on the estate?

J Chav. Chav comes to mind, yeah. [...] I am a chav and proud of it.

JB What does 'chav' mean to you?

J 'Council housed and violent' is what it's come to represent. But it's about the demonization of the working-class, which is what Owen Jones said [in his book Chavs].

JB So 'I'm a chav and proud' reclaims that word from pejorative use.

J And if you're so dumb that you've fallen for it that says a lot about you and absolutely nothing about me.