

*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/>.

### **Arnold (b. 1961, The Gambia), Pelican Estate resident**

A That building that I live in over there, I would prefer for them [Southwark Council] to demolish it and then build it in places like this one [low-rise maisonettes, where we are sitting].

JB Tell me why?

A Because sometimes you can't even use the lifts, because [people] pee in there. [...] You never know who is doing it. [...] If you live in this high block of flats, always there is those types of problems there. I'm lucky I live on the first floor; immediately I open the lift and I see it [pee], I just take the stairs. [...] So that's why I think that these high buildings, [...] they can demolish them and give decent places to people.

JB Do you think it's about the height/design of the building? I was just thinking about luxury high-rise buildings – you can bet there's no pissing in the lifts there.

A Believe you me, if you have a one bedroom flat there you'll have a heart attack because of the money it costs. Those places, they have concierge and everything, so the place is taken care of. But here [Pelican Estate], no-one.

JB Is it more, then, that you'd want the building maintained, money to invest in what already exists, rather than the building demolished because the design is bad?

A Yeah, yeah, yeah, maintenance! Before, everything was included in the rents. But from April [2017] the water and the taking of the rubbish, we have to pay for them separately. [...]

JB And if your wages are not increasing?

A What can you do? What can you do? That is the thing. The funniest part of it is – what I cannot understand in the system here in the UK – if

I claim benefit now, my wife is working and they don't check how much she's earned, they just give me benefit for 6 months and then they will stop it [...] Me, I was paying my taxes and they try to support me by sending me to these foolish, foolish courses. After the 6 months has finished they will tell you that your benefit is going to be stopped. How are you going to live? So that's why most people, if you don't hold your mind [nerve], you may go and involve yourself in criminality. Because there is no money coming in and you have to survive. [...]

JB Are you talking more generally or from personal experience?

A No, generally. You see it in the street. [...] The first time I came [to London from The Gambia, via Sierra Leone and Sweden], I see people sleeping the street; I could not believe [it]. Because when you are in Africa you hear about Europe, you can't believe that London allows people to sleep in the streets.

JB It seems a lot of blame tends to be put on the individual for issues like homelessness, which are societal, structural problems that could be solved politically. Perhaps we are made to believe we can't do anything about it?

A Well, the only thing we can do is public protest, make demonstrations, hold meetings, try to convince people to get things to change, you know. That's the only thing we can do now. [...] And we that are not rich will always be where we are, so it will be very difficult. Unless there's revolution...