

TOWARDS A MAINTENANCE AND CONSERVATION PLAN

for the Whittington Estate

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Version D5: 20th November 2025

This draft report is issued to invite comments and feedback from those with more understanding of the estate, its buildings and the experience of living on the estate.

AAB architects have prepared this document to help make the case for improved care of the estate. Our findings are based on walks around the estate, on-line research and some discussions with residents. We recognise that it is likely to be incomplete and requiring of more detailed surveys and conversations.

WHITTINGTON ESTATE Maintenance and Conservation (DRAFT)

Introduction

This document is a brief summary and observations of the buildings at the Whittington Estate, focusing on the external building envelope and external spaces. It is intended to help make the case for a holistic plan for the maintenance and conservation of the estate in order to ensure that:

- residents' needs are met

- the architectural importance of the estate is protected

- the estate continues to provide high quality social housing in the future

The buildings are approaching 50 years old, and we believe it is time to review the needs of the buildings and residents.

Currently repairs appear to be carried out on a reactive basis, with no planned maintenance or agreed conservation plan.

The heating upgrade works that have been on-going for several years continue to be a source of concern for residents.

Meanwhile on-going maintenance to external metalwork and joinery in not carried out, risking worse deterioration in the future.

1 Design and construction

The Whittington is a unique estate in the north of the Borough of Camden, built when the development of council housing was at a high point.

After the creation of London Borough of Camden in 1965, the borough architect Sydney Cook brought together a team of architects who were to design several estates of which were important in terms of their architectural design. These include:

Architect: Neave Brown
Fleet Road (Dunboyne Road)
1966-79, LISTED Grade 2
Alexandra Road
1967-79, LISTED Grade 2*

Architects: Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth
Branch Hill
1971-78, LISTED Grade 2
Maiden Lane
1972-82
Mansfield Road and Lamble Street
1972-80

Architects: Peter Tábori with others
Polygon Road Estate
1969-76
Whittington Estate (Highgate New Town Stage One)
1968-79, with Ken Adie

The story of the design and construction of these estates is told by Mark Swenarton in his book 'Cook's Camden'.

An application for the listing of the Whittington Estate, made to Historic England in 2006, was refused. A further application was made around 2020, which we understand is under consideration. This would ensure better protection for the estate.

Both applications were supported by the Twentieth Century Society, which said:

"HNT makes an outstanding contribution, to the Low Rise High Density housing built under Camden's head architect Sydney Cook, between 1965-73, as well as to London, the UK and beyond. Its design embodies an urban renewal approach achieved through continuity, connectivity and permeability with the surrounding streets, which capitalises on its former layout as part of Victorian Highgate."

Whatever the outcome of the listing application, the estate should be treated as if it were a listed building, as it is a heritage asset in any normal understanding of the concept.

It is understood that the justification given by Department for Culture, Media and Sport for refusing to grant listed status was that the estate is already protected by virtue of being in a conservation area.

However, a review of the management of repairs and maintenance of the estate carried out over a period of years shows that this does not provide the degree of protection that is needed.

In our view a conservation management plan is required.

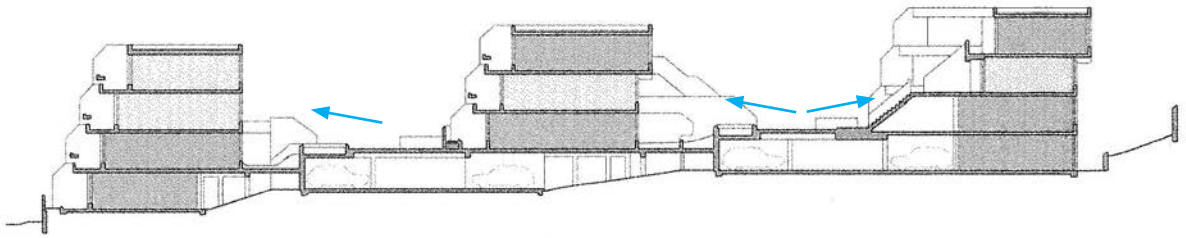
The recent film 'The White Flats' celebrates the success of the Whittington Estate as social housing © Anna Price, Marc Silver, Jo McCafferty, Rachel Stevenson



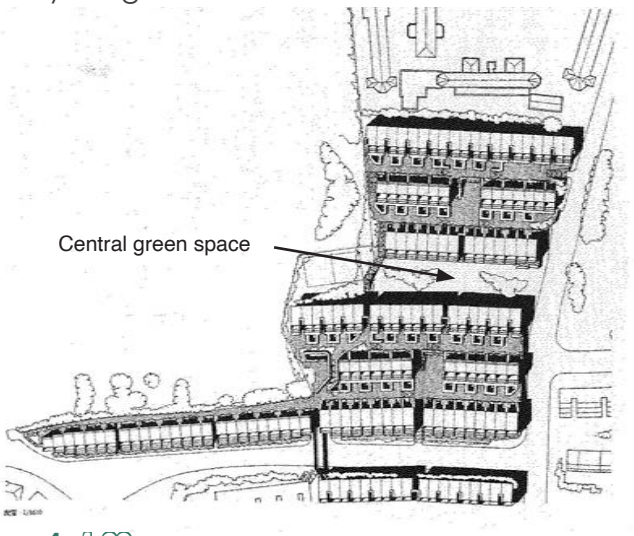
Peter Tábori's design of the Whittington Estate (originally known as Highgate New Town Stage One), followed soon after the Alexandra Road Estate in West Camden was designed by Neave Brown. There are obvious similarities in the way the buildings step back and create pedestrian streets, with parking for cars underneath, and in the use of exposed concrete.

The Whittington Estate, however, was built on a more constrained site on Dartmouth Park Hill, butting up against Highgate Cemetery on the west side, resulting in a number of shorter streets. The estate is configured as two sets of three terraces, each with two streets, connected by north-south pedestrian routes through the middle and at each end. Each flat has its own south facing balcony or courtyard garden.





Above: section through two streets (looking west) from the book 'Cook's Camden' © Mark Swenarton
arrows added to show entrances to flats



Left: Site plan, © Peter Tábori
(from Mark Swenarton, Cook's Camden)

2 Materials and weathering

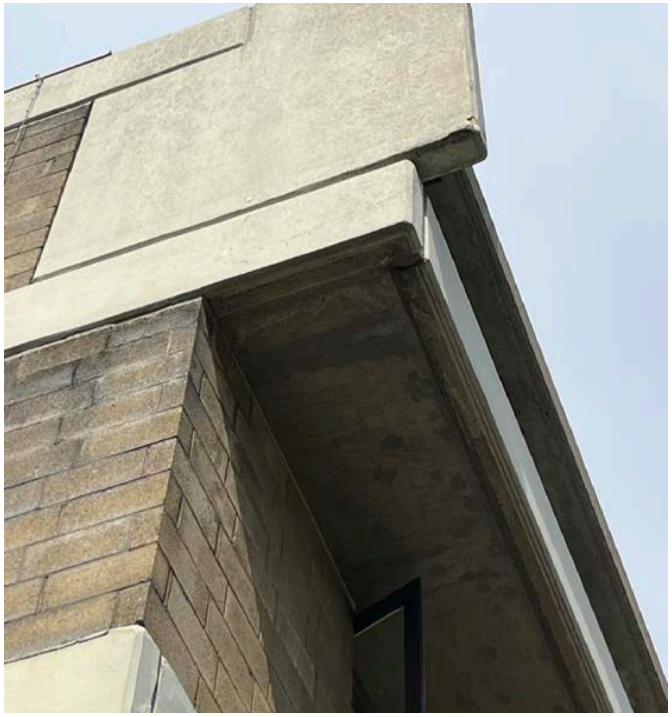
The estate is built in a combination of insitu concrete for the undercroft and ground level deck, with load- bearing concrete blockwork and pre-cast concrete fin walls and balcony elements. Tábori and Adie intended for the aggregate for all three concrete elements to be the same, to give a uniform sandstone appearance.

It was realised during construction that the pre-cast elements needed a coating to protect against moisture reaching the reinforcement due to a manufacturing error resulting in insufficient concrete cover. The appearance does not therefore have the uniformity intended, and this has become more exaggerated over time as the blockwork and insitu concrete have weathered to a darker tone.

The coating on pre-cast concrete elements was last repainted around 1995 (?). It is showing signs of failure which should be reviewed, given its protective function.

The paint colour could be changed to harmonise better with the weathered concrete. An alternative approach would be to clean the existing masonry. This would result in a significant difference in appearance and would be expensive. The weathered surfaces do not generally seem to be a problem.





Above: photo by Martin Charles © RIBA Collections





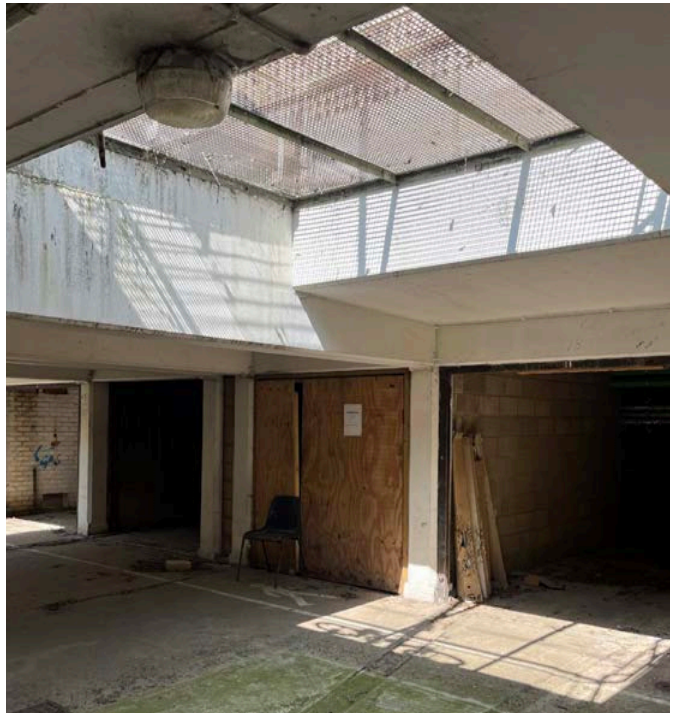
3 Structure

The structure of the estate seems sound. However there are reports of localised subsidence on the east side where there is change of level between the estate and the public highway. This seems to have been caused by progressive failure of one or more of the retaining walls (see right). This should be inspected by a structural engineer who can advise on the best way of dealing with this (ground anchors or localised rebuilding).

The undercroft of the estate was designed for car parking. These spaces are now mostly used for other uses, including storage, and the Council is 'soft market testing' for operators to use this space. This is difficult due to the fact that rainwater is designed to fall through openings to the basement slab, which is sloping and is crossed by open drainage channels. The insitu concrete beams, slabs and columns seem in good condition, but this should be reviewed.

The undercoft spaces could be used by residents and others for a number of uses, but require investment.





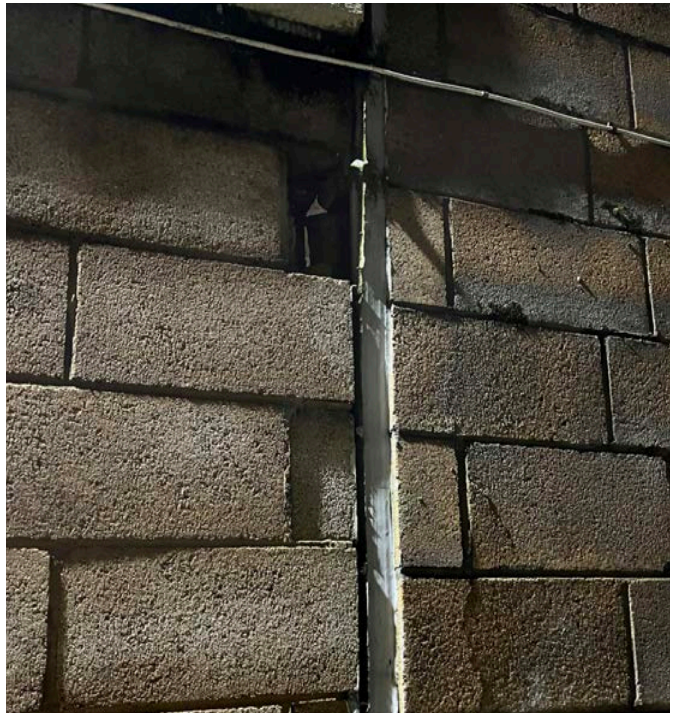




Movement joints are not being refilled where gaps open up due to movement (apparently this is deemed too expensive).

This is not generally an issue but does in some cases allow rainwater into the building. One example is the gutter above the community room, which routinely leaks causing the electrics to be





Above: failing movement joint sealant



Left: open movement joints in freestanding wall opening up

4 Public realm

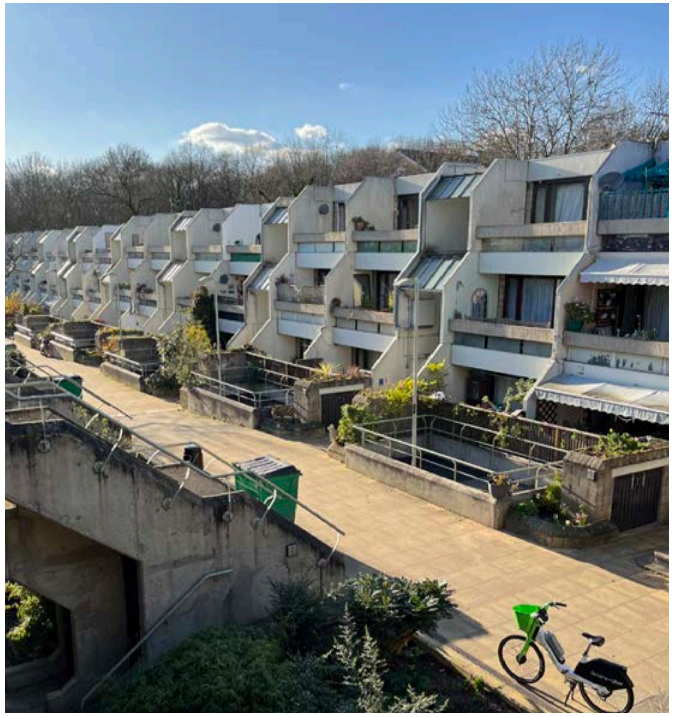
The ‘street’ spaces were intended to read as public space, rather than ‘communal areas’. This is the reason for the open nature of the staircases, with views across the estate and to the city beyond.

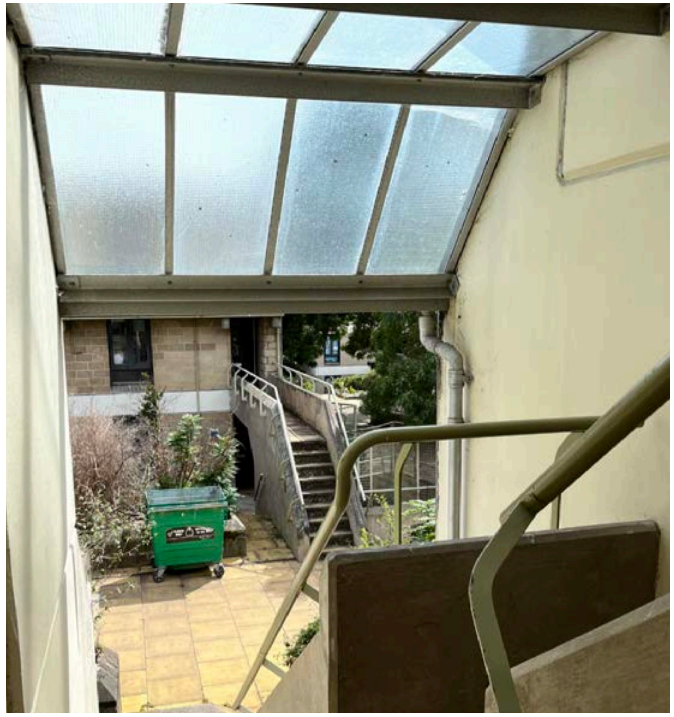
The degree of overlooking of the street space from individual flats is exceptional, and enables the space to used for children’s play, safe from the traffic of the adjoining streets.

The safety of the space is currently affected by the increase in deliveries made to homes by mopeds and motorised bikes which regularly access the estate.

Refuse bins are neatly arranged in the ‘streets’ but there is no easy access to recycling and food waste bins, which may deter people from recycling.

Yellow grit bins also distributed around the estate.







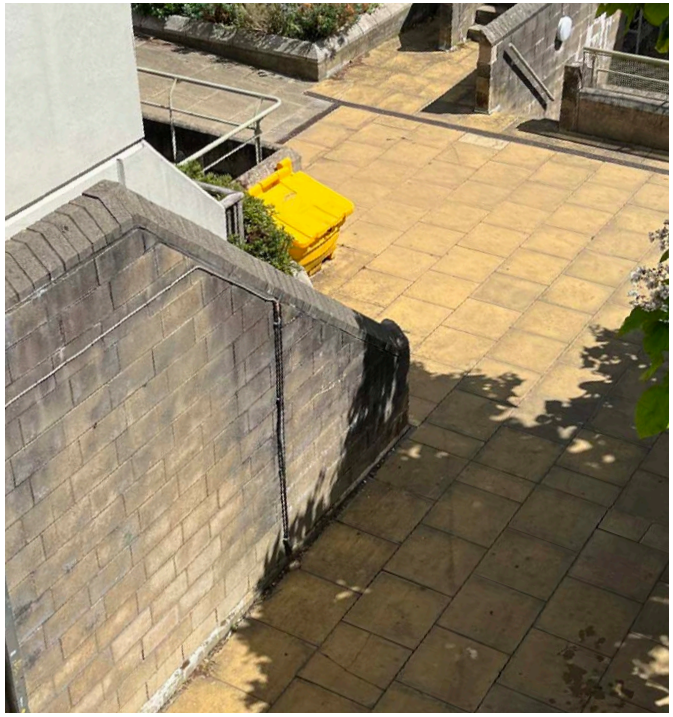


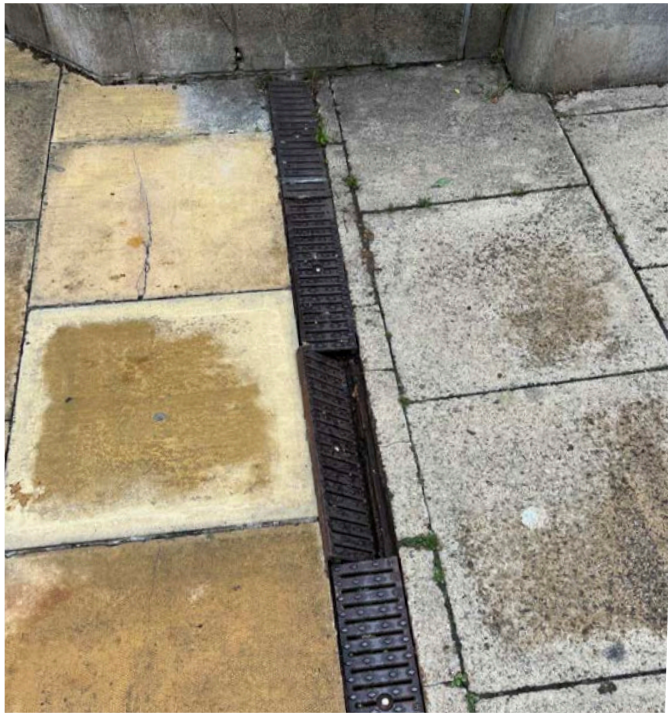
The sand-coloured paving slabs give a uniformity and warmth to the entire external area. The same slabs are used as step treads.

The original paving slabs are being replaced over time with standard grey paving slabs, which detracts from the appearance and the original design intent.

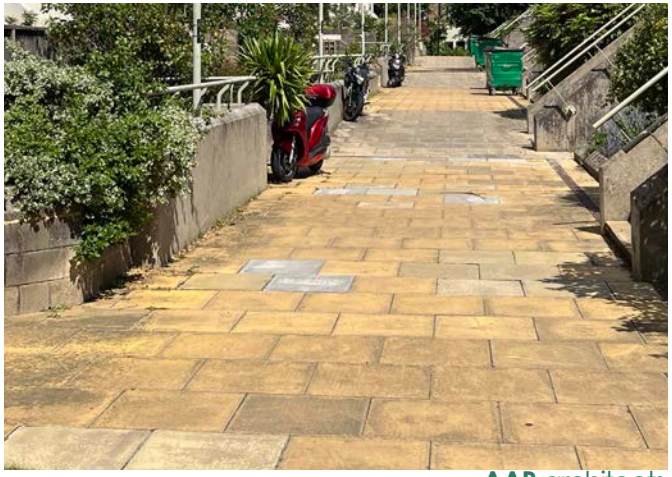
A specification for replacement paving slabs should be agreed to ensure use of the correct slabs when repairs are needed in future.

Some metal gulley grilles are causing a trip hazard and need to be repaired or replaced.









5 External steps

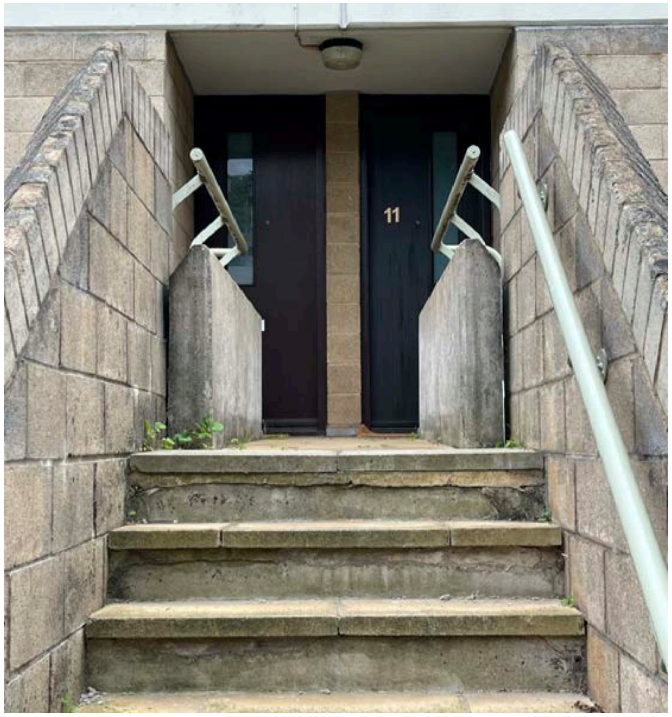
As the estate is on a hill, the are many sets of steps and ramps across the site.

Each flat entrance above ground level is accessed by a set of steps, each serving 2-4 flats.

The high number of external steps is an important feature of the architectural design, but presents challenges for maintenance as they need to be kept clean of dirt, debris and weeds.

The estate does not therefore provide good accessibility for people with restricted mobility, leading to residents becoming stuck in their homes if they loose the ability to climb external stairs.



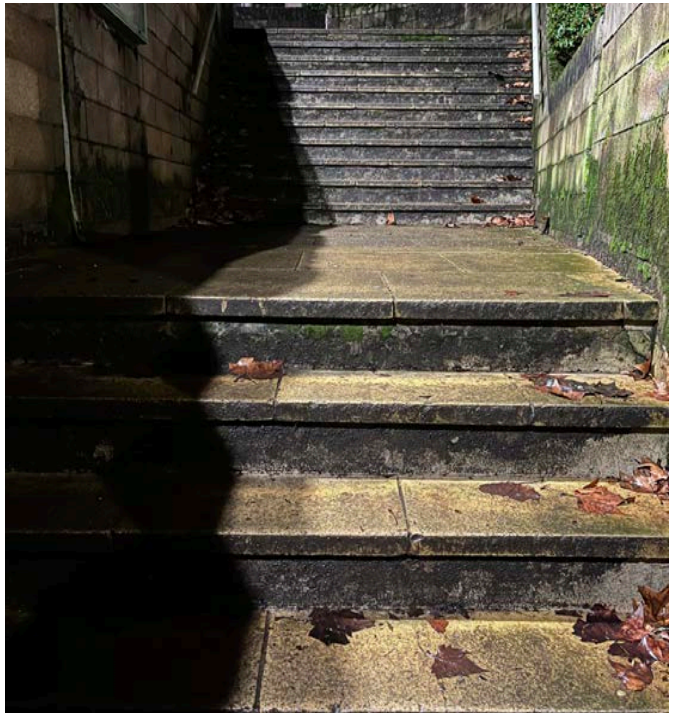


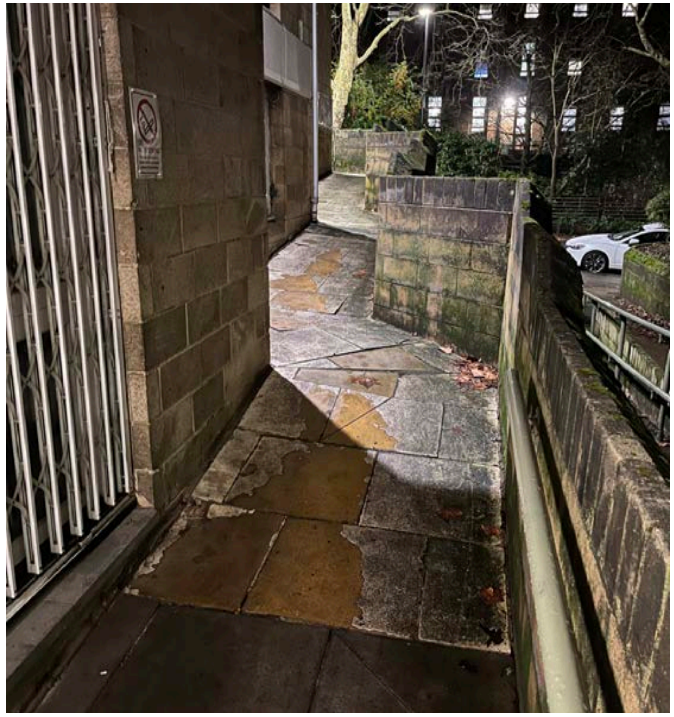




In the autumn clearing external steps from leaves is a challenge for care-taking.

There are some ramps, for example that leading down to the community room (see right). The slip resistant finis is wearing off, resulting in a slip hazard.





6 Nature on the estate

Over the years trees have matured to create a verdant setting for the estate. Some residents are concerned about root damage where trees are close to the buildings.

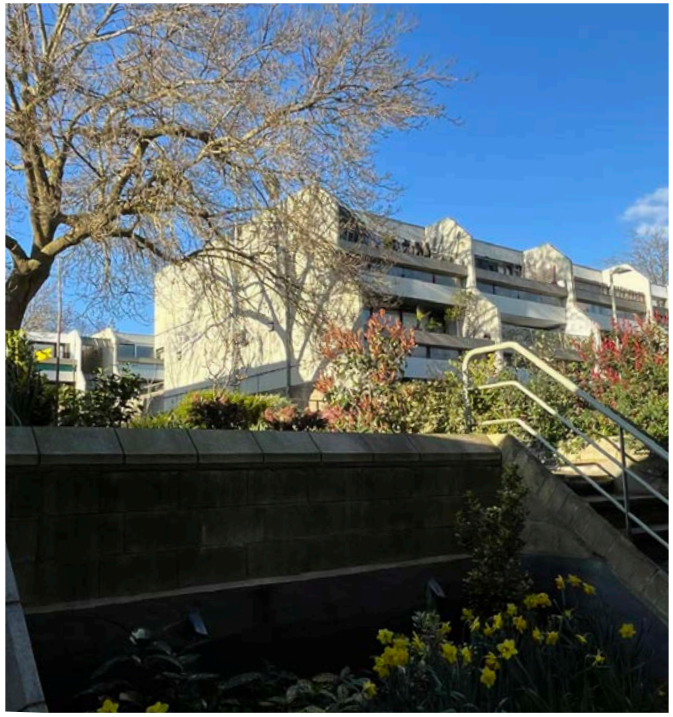
The planting borders along the 'streets' complement the buildings and encourage people to spend time in these spaces. Planting is maintained partly by residents, who have asked for water points to be reinstated for this purpose. At present the only way in which residents can water plants is via a hosepipe connected to a kitchen tap.

Camden Council have been asked to provide new taps, but are reluctant to do so due concerns about potential "mis-use". This could be addressed if necessary by installing the taps in a lockable enclosure.

Another option is for rainwater to be drained to water storage tanks in the undercroft, and pumped up for watering.

Many private balconies have established planting in window boxes and pots, some placed on the concrete shelf along the top of the balustrades.

There is a grassed garden space with trees between the two groups of flats, with a fenced off sports area.

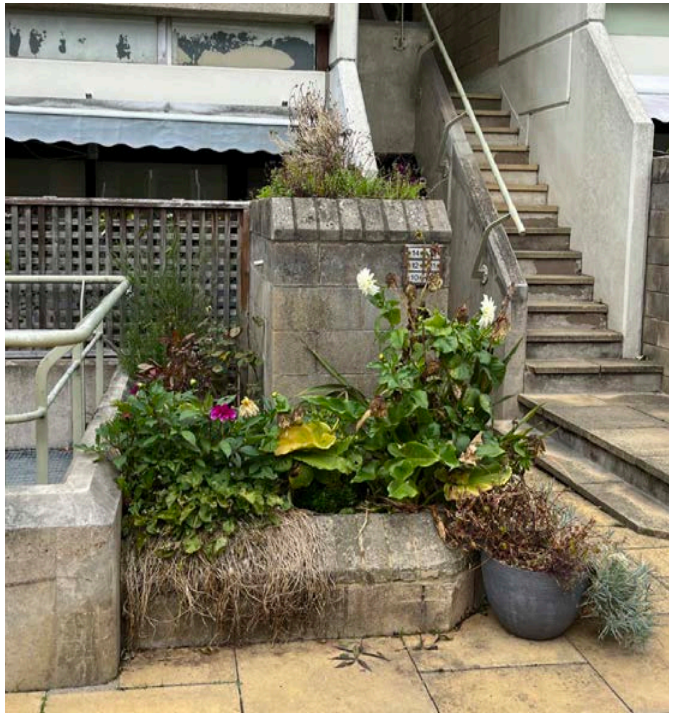


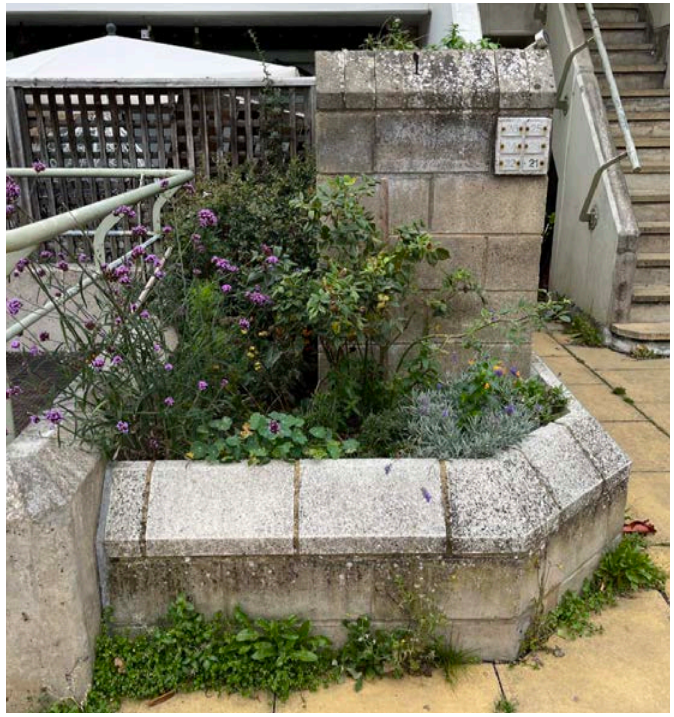


















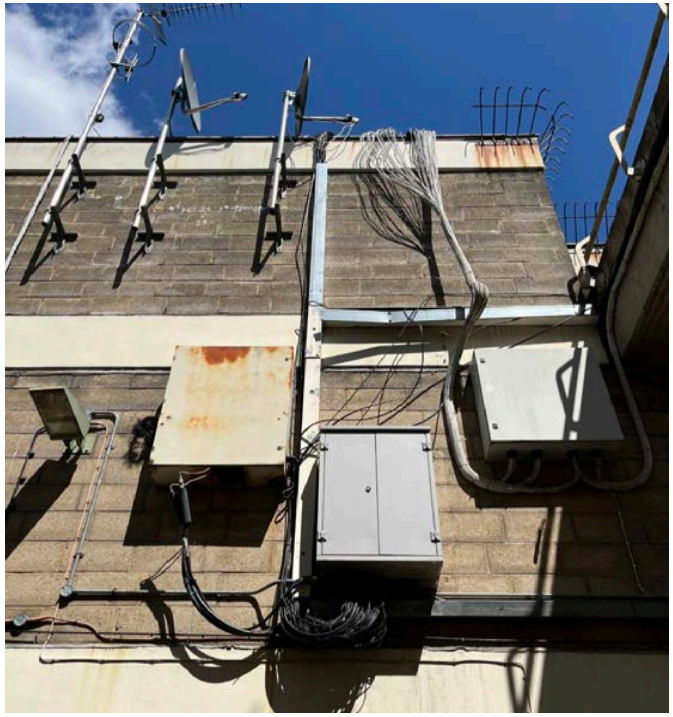
7 Services

Externally mounted services detract from the building, particularly loose and unfixed cabling.

External pipework mounted on the concrete fins (see right) should be avoided, and the use of internal riser ducts employed where possible. This may require removal of asbestos containing materials from existing riser ducts.

Some distribution pipework has been installed to individual homes, presumably where leaseholders wanted to install their own individual supply.

Ideally a survey of all externally mounted services should be carried out and record drawings prepared, showing strategies for future installations. At present each service installation appears to be considered separately on the basis of contractors' design (see page 17), without future planning.







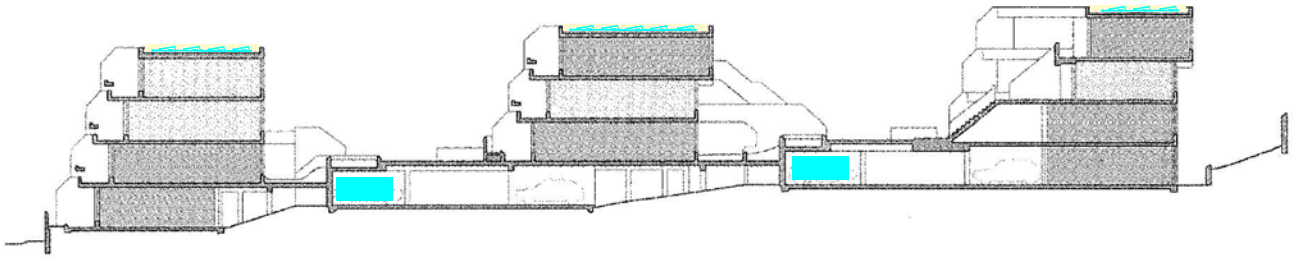


8 Roofs

An aerial view of the estate indicates that roofs have been upgraded in a piecemeal way. The age of the upgrades should be established along with the life expectancy of the roof coverings and whether insulation has been included.

A key part of a maintenance plan should be the insulation of the roofs to current standards and provision of a high quality roofing membrane. The roofs can then receive a substantial number of solar PV panels. It would be good to know to what extent this has already been researched by Camden Council as part of its study for the decarbonisation of the heating system (assuming this was included as part of the recent heating upgrade works).





Right: section showing possible PV solar panels and water storage tanks

9 Windows and ventilation

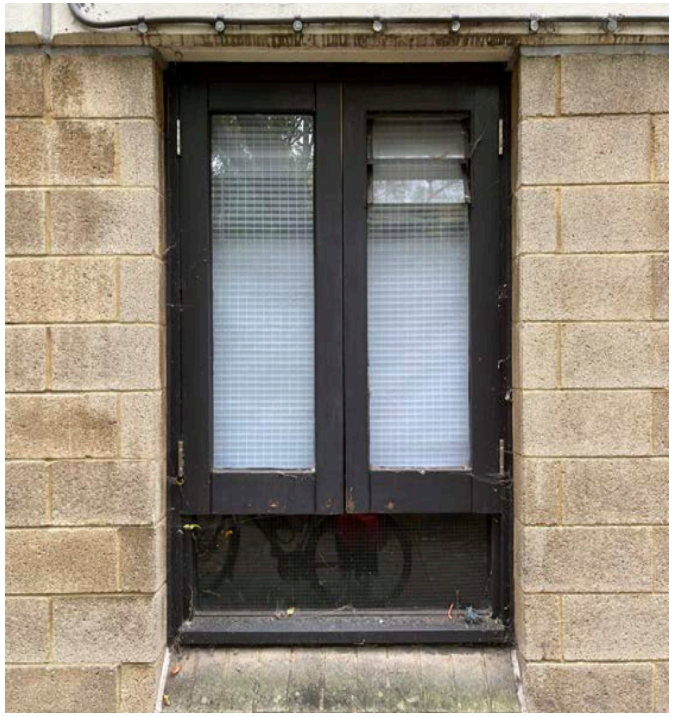
The original timber windows are good quality, but single glazed. A plan could include upgrading the windows to include heritage vacuum glazing, which would greatly increase the thermal efficiency of the glazing units with minimum change in appearance.

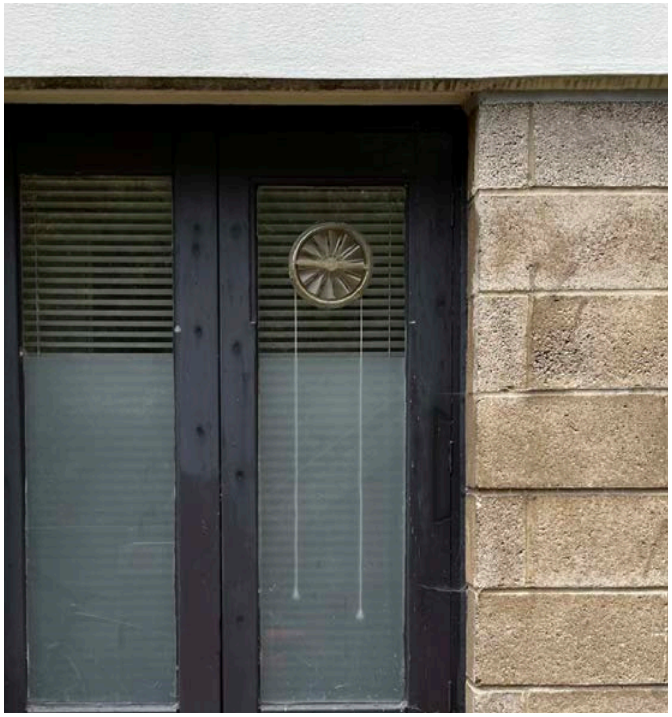
The timber windows need cyclical redecoration to keep them in good condition, and re-glazing should ideally be carried out at when this is done.

Some of the casements have louvred glazing at high level, to provide natural ventilation. This is not an effective or controlled form of ventilation. Some flats therefore have re-glazed casements, with either mechanical extract vents or ventilation louvres installed.

Neither of these options are ideal and options for improved mechanical ventilation to wet rooms should therefore be considered, looking at the specific configuration of each flat type. Specialist analysis and design should aim to design a ventilation system to optimise occupant comfort and minimise the risk of condensation and visual impact.

The blockwork window cills are prone to staining, and potential damp. The staining could be cleaned off, depending on the overall approach to dealing with weathering.







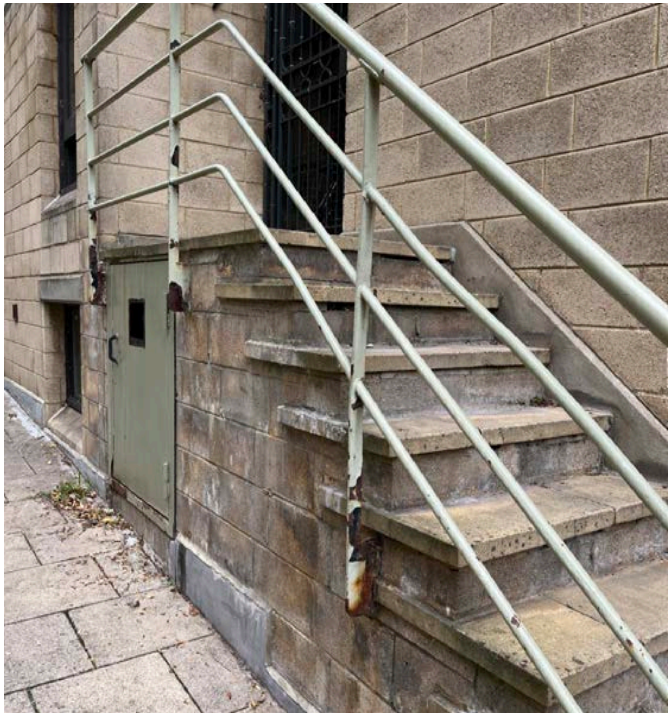


10 Metalwork

The original metalwork is an important element of the architectural design, unfortunately under threat from inadequate protection from rust. This should be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Rust should be removed and if necessary badly corroded parts replaced or repaired, and a protective coating applied prior to redecoration.









11 Signage

The estate is covered in fire safety signs, some recently added. The number of 'No smoking' and 'Action in case of fire' signs that have been fixed to external wall services appears excessive.

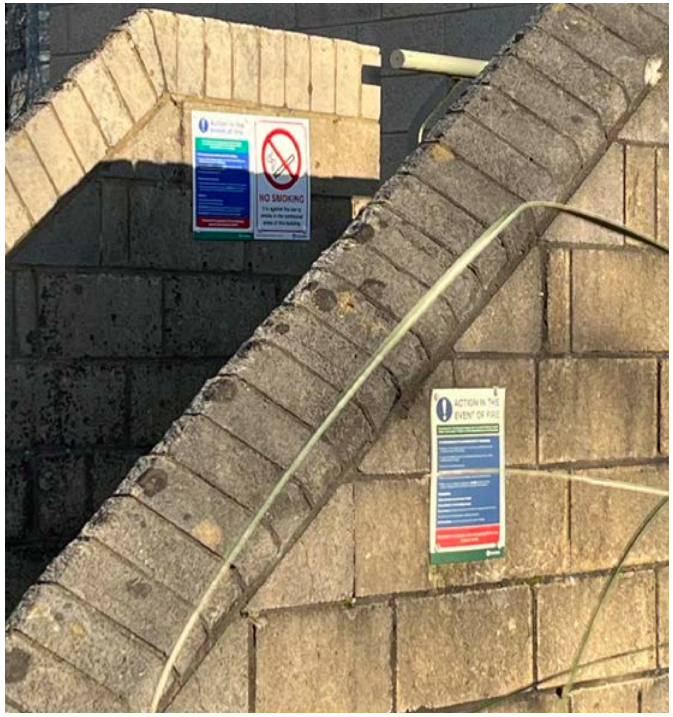
This is harmful to the appearance of the building, and the unspoiled fabric of the building.

The Fire Brigade should be asked to review the signage. High levels of duplication of signage may not help to get the message across and may be counter-productive.

The method of fixing and placement of the signs indicates a lack understanding of the importance of the building.

Where possible, duplicated signs should be taken down and the holes in the blockwork and concrete repaired.

Old, out-of-date signage could be removed to avoid confusion.









12 Previous refurbishment and services contracts

2006-8
In 2006 Camden Council contracted Makers, an arm of Kellers, to carry out major refurbishment work at the Whittington Estate (contract sum: £4.3m).

The work included waterproofing the paved decking and the balconies, replacing glazed timber screens and general repairs done, including decoration of the estate. The management of the works proved difficult and the Council terminated the contract.

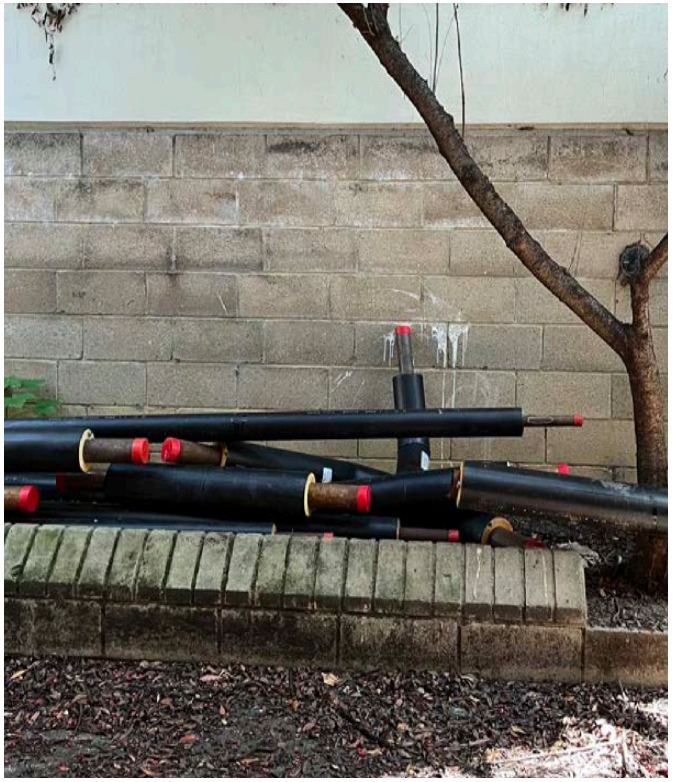
The works were completed at a cost of £6.8m.

2012
Installation of communal satellites and antennae, with associated equipment and external cable runs (planning application ref. 2011/2143/P), see below right.

2016-17
Up-grades to heating and hot water, including installation of heat interface units, were carried out on a 'design and build' basis by Keepmoat (subsequently renamed).

Unfortunately the contract was not delivered to a good standard, and residents have suffered for years as a result of a poorly functioning heating and hot water system. (nb. design and build contracts depend on the Employer having suitably qualified consultants to check the contractor's design before it is implemented, and for the works to checked during construction).

Remedial works are now planned to be carried out, as identified by consultants Max Fordham.





13 Outline recommendations

Future maintenance, refurbishment and upgrading work should be carried out with the oversight of a conservation architect, or similarly qualified specialist, with access to a data-base of information about the original construction and previous refurbishment works.

The original construction drawings may be available for reference, including structural and services drawings.

A Maintenance and Conservation Plan would outline the considerations that are important for the preservation and care of the buildings, including:

- input from residents about the issues that are important to them

- scope of surveys and information that may be required

- approach towards conservation of the building fabric

- servicing strategies, including:
    - identified service routes
    - approved methods for fixings and penetrations

- approved specifications, eg for external light fittings and paving slabs

- development of long term objectives, including:
    - improved thermal performance
    - sustainability
    - adaptation to climate change
    - use of the undercroft



