Exercise 2

The Park Hill housing development

A The huge Park Hill housing development in Sheffield is a Brutalist masterpiece, widely praised by architects, and it has been admired by many in the media, too, since its recent redevelopment. But it has had a controversial past. Jack Lynn, one of a pair of idealistic young architects leading the project, designed Park Hill when there was a major post-war shortage of housing in the city. In December 1940, two nights of bombing had brought devastation to the area, destroying many of the Victorian terraced streets. The city was left with a major homelessness problem, which became even worse when the remaining Victorian housing was judged unsuitable for living in. Land was also in short supply as much of it was 'green belt'.

B In a desperate effort to solve the problem, Sheffield City Council sent a group of experts to look at housing projects in Europe. They returned full of enthusiasm for the modernist developments they had seen. The inspiration for Jack Lynn, his colleague Ivor Smith, and the city architect Lewis Womersley, was the work of Le Corbusier, whose concrete 'streets in the sky' were very popular in France. The idea was to replace Sheffield's slums with ultra-modern flats and facilities, recreating the communities that had flourished in the pre-war housing developments. The new development was also designed as a response to what were considered, even in the 1950s, to be modern architecture's failures: empty spaces, isolation, a lack of street life, and a middle-class 'we know what's good for you' ethos.

C When the estate was formally opened in 1961, Park Hill was intended to be a perfect vision of social housing. Conceived as a town within a town, it consisted of 996 flats that would house almost 3,000 people and was equipped with every sort of public facility – shops, a doctors' surgery, dentist, clinic, nursery, school, four pubs, and a police station. While most tower blocks of the era had flats built around narrow, dark corridors, Park Hill's flats had interlinked 'street-decks' – communal areas running along each storey where children could play and families socialise. The decks were as broad as real streets and wide enough for a milk float to pass along. The blocks of flats themselves were connected by walkways, and their height varied, from four storeys to thirteen, in order to maintain a roof line that remained level across the development.

D Motivated by a deep social commitment, Jack Lynn and his colleagues did everything they could to ensure that the new residents felt at home in their new environment. Cobblestones from the old terraced streets surrounded the flats and paved the pathways down the hill to Sheffield station; brick infill panels were made of the same material as the houses they replaced, and the flats all had traditional front doorsteps. Each floor was given an old street name and neighbours were rehoused together.

E A survey of residents conducted by the housing department a year after the flats had been officially opened was overwhelmingly positive, and awards were heaped on the designers. 'When one looks out from some part of it and sees another of its limbs swinging across the view,' enthused the architectural critic Reyner Banham, 'the effect is like that of suddenly realising that the railway lines on the other side of some valley in Switzerland are the same that one's own train has just traversed a few moments before.' The vision of Park Hill as a living community also seemed justified. Of the walkways, Banham wrote: 'Toddlers play on them, teens mend bikes and swap gossip, and grannies stand at their doors ...'

F But Park Hill did not age as well as its admirers hoped. The concrete in which it was built proved less suited to the damp climate of Sheffield than the dry heat of the south of France, and as the years passed it became damaged. By the 1970s problems were accumulating. Cockroaches invaded the estate and a series of violent attacks led to headlines in the papers. In the 1980s, as unemployment soared, social problems multiplied. There were burnt-out cars, boarded-up shops, rubbish, and graffiti. The council was accused of dumping problem families there, while the 'streets in the sky' proved an ideal place for gangs to hide from police. Deliverymen found that they often had to dodge milk bottles and other missiles, while older inhabitants who had once chatted and gossiped with their neighbours began locking their doors. The cost of refurbishing the flats and of maintenance was also getting too high as councils struggled to deal with the many problems. By the 1980s, Park Hill had come to be regarded as a dangerous no-go area, an embarrassing blot on the face of the city.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Questions 23–26

Answer the questions below.

Choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer.

Write your answers in boxes 23–26 on your answer sheet. (page 163)

23 What showed that residents liked the development at first?

24 What was badly affected by the weather in Sheffield?

25 According to some, what kind of people did councils put in Park Hill in the 1980s?

26 Which visitors were attacked when visiting Park Hill?

LIVEWORKSHEETS