

THE  TIMES

Pathfinder demolitions are 'monstrous'



These houses adjoining Liverpool's football ground in Anfield face demolition under the Government's Pathfinder scheme, which has "left streets like war zones"

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A government programme of compulsory demolitions is creating modern-day bomb sites all over northern

England

There are few greater public sector scandals than that of the £2.2 billion government programme that is creating modern-day bomb sites all over northern England. For this sum government “Pathfinder” agencies have managed to secure the construction of just 4,000 new houses — a cost of more than £500,000 per house. Most of the money has gone on compulsory purchase, demolition and, of course, consultants. One wonders if the people who dreamt up the Pathfinder programme were aware of the irony that they had adopted the name of the RAF squadrons that marked bomb targets with flares in the Second World War.

In Edge Lane, Liverpool, there is an area half the size of Wandsworth in London — with similar dignified three-storey houses — where every house, more than 300 of them, is now in the final stages of demolition. Unable to demolish them in time for Liverpool’s year as European City of Culture, owing to heroic resistance from residents, the city council filled every tinned-up window with bright colours, green in one street, blue in the next, then orange. Finally, in April, Liverpool’s council leader, Warren Bradley, admitted that “we left streets like war zones”. He conceded that the council’s housing policy, and that of its government-backed partners, had “ripped the heart” out of communities.

Although the Conservatives condemned Pathfinder as “baffling” and “wasteful” in opposition, and endorsed the strong criticisms of the National Audit Office, in office they appear softer on Pathfinder than on other quangos.

Another heartrending battle is being played out in Gateshead where the council is seizing terraced houses one by one and then seeking to demolish them — even when there are families living on the other side of the party wall. As soon as the council gains control of a street it rips out the water, drains and electricity — so that no one can reoccupy the houses. There are no plans to rebuild on these sites — residents face the further agony of seeing their homes turned into a wasteland.

You might think that these houses were beyond rescue but just two streets away identical houses are being repaired — roofs relaid, the brickwork cleaned and new walls with stone copings added to front areas where railings were ripped out during the war.

The Pathfinder programme was invented ten years ago to cure what a group of academics called “housing market failure” in northern towns. They believed that there were so many empty and unneeded houses in northern towns and cities that there would never be the demand for them again.

The academics calculated that these “unwanted” houses could be bought for £25,000 or less and the sites handed to developers. Yet by the time the Pathfinder programme began the housing boom was starting with many such houses being snapped up precisely because they were cheap — and councils were forced to spend three times or more per house on compulsory purchase.

David Ireland, head of the Empty Homes Agency, says that the usual model is that local councils buy the houses using Pathfinder money. “That’s the biggest cost. Demolition is funded too. Then the land is ‘sold’ for private developers for housebuilding. Depending on the land value, that can be an actual sale, a gift, or even a gift with a subsidy — paying the developer to take the land off their hands.”

If the objective is really to assemble land for developers, why do councils not use the vast tracts of land already lying vacant in these cities. The National Land Use Database shows thousands of acres available, much of it in public ownership.

Some Pathfinders bodies act in a manner almost akin to secret police. Demolition areas are decided before residents are made aware. Houses are condemned on the basis of the briefest external inspection, with no attempt to see what conditions are inside the house. “Consultations” are held in the middle of the day when residents are at work.

Nancy Bone, of the Bensham and Saltwell Residents’ Association, which is trying to save 440 homes in Gateshead, says: “They never come and talk to us. Their office is a postal box number. We can never speak to the chief executive.”

Faced with delays over public inquiries and bitterly contested compulsory purchase orders, some councils have taken to Rachman-style tactics of winking residents out. People are faced with a stark choice: leave on our terms or face years under siege in boarded-up streets. True, tenants in council-owned social rented properties were often more than happy to take the money — not only had social landlords neglected repairs but money, sums of £5,000 and more, were being offered to evacuate tenanted houses. But private tenants and owner-occupiers have been poorly treated. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicates a shortfall in equity averaging £35,000 for people trying to rehouse themselves in similar property.

Jonathan Brown, of the Merseyside Civic Society, says: “The rules over compulsory purchase have been changed. Previously councils and development agencies had to prove the land was derelict or underused, or that housing was ‘unfit’. Now they merely have to state that it is needed for ‘regeneration’, making it hard, even impossible, for residents to mount a successful challenge.” In Liverpool, he says, there are 20,000 people on the waiting list and 15,000 empty homes: “The waiting list has doubled since Pathfinder began.”

The quickest way to provide more homes is to start renovating the thousands of solidly built terrace houses now standing empty. These are two-bedroom houses suitable as starter homes and four-bedroom houses for families. This can be done by readopting the “Homesteading” programme that was going strong before Pathfinder began. This allows empty houses to be sold to individual owners, small private builders and community groups willing to repair them, using their own “sweat equity” and local traders networks.

Meanwhile, there needs to be a parliamentary inquiry into why publicly subsidised housing associations are allowing so many houses to stand empty and decaying when they are governed by a code which states that they must keep houses in a lettable condition.

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