

EASEL'S blank canvas

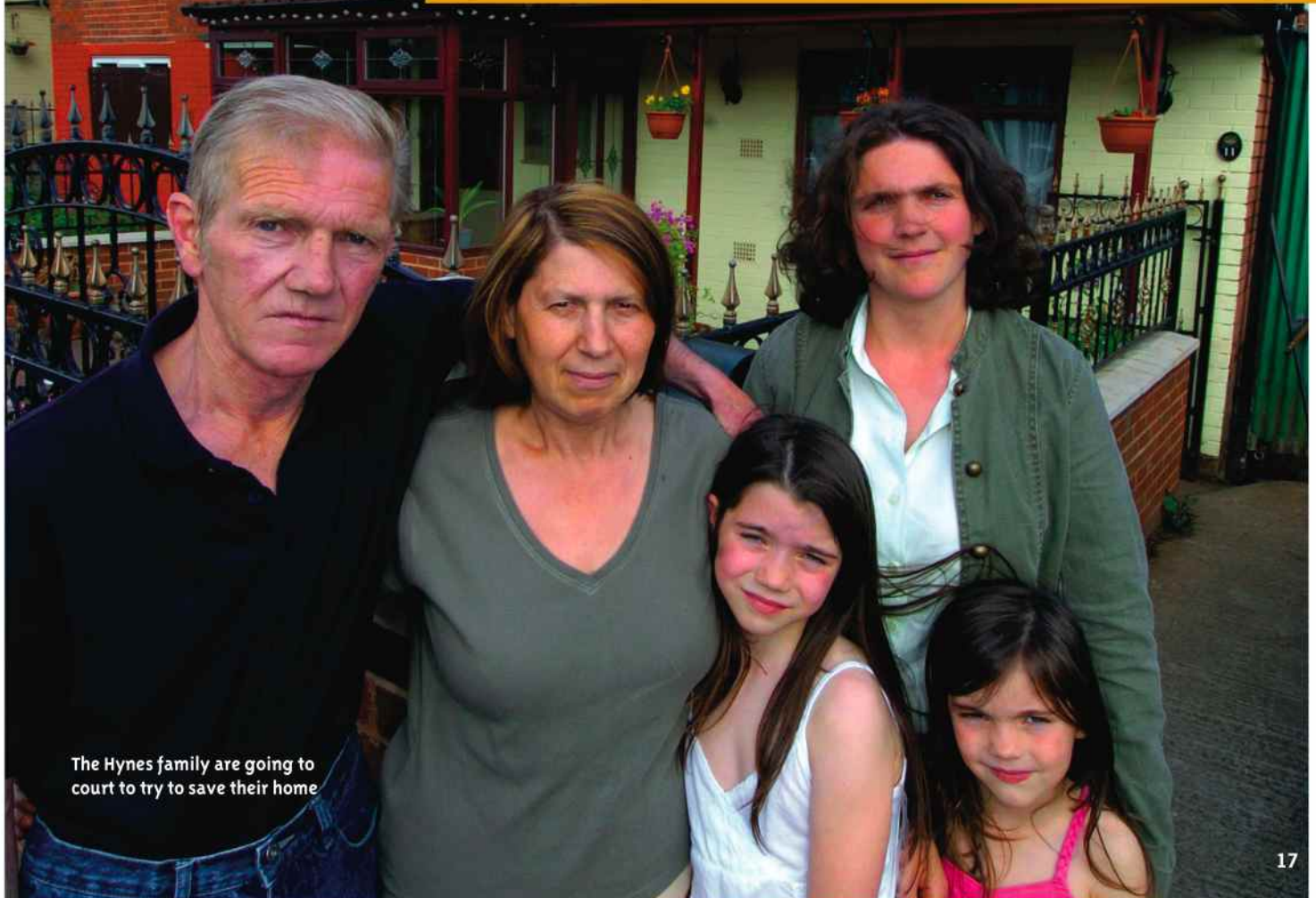
The huge EASEL regeneration scheme in Leeds can only go ahead if the site is fully cleared but one couple insist there is no reason their perfectly sound house should be demolished to make way for it. By Giara Leeming

Where homes once lined Oak Tree Mount there's now grassy wasteland, waiting patiently for the developers. Dave and Elisa Hynes watched all but four properties on their East Leeds street being demolished, reassured by a promise that theirs would be staying up. Then came the u-turn. The couple learned their home of 35 years would now be torn down to make way for the £1.2 billion East and South East Leeds (EASEL) regeneration scheme – dubbed a gentrification plan by critics.

A compulsory purchase order (CPO) is on the cards if they refuse to sell the house in Gipton back to the council from which they bought it a decade ago. But the family hope to challenge the process through the courts.

The parts of Leeds meant to benefit from the 20-year EASEL scheme are among the poorest areas in Britain. The council, working with the developer Bellway, has promised “transformational” regeneration through the building of 5,000 new homes, shops and schools. The first new homes on the market are expected to start from £118,000, up to £155,000.

Phase one will see about 740 properties built on eight sites in Gipton – where three-quarters of homes are owned by social landlords – and neighbouring Seacroft, where the proportion is even higher at 88 per cent. Burmantofts, Richmond Hill, Harehills, Osmondthorpe and Halton Moor fall into EASEL's later stages.



The Hynes family are going to court to try to save their home

All have been identified as displaying symptoms of market failure, with low housing demand and prices far below the city average. In keeping with government thinking on regeneration, housing supply is blamed for holding back development in East Leeds.

If only stock could be improved to suit what modern families want, the argument goes, more people would move in and social circumstances improve. But the clearance of large numbers of social houses and plans to use CPOs to buy up homes are causing controversy, with residents' groups and politicians lining up to voice concerns.

A fifth of people in Gipton and a sixth in Seacroft are unemployed. Those who work tend to be low earners. Yet according to

“We feel that the council is trying to intimidate us into leaving our home but I refuse to give in.”

council reports, just 25-30 per cent of the new housing built under EASEL will be “affordable”. And the new stock will be out of reach to all but a few local residents – even with a 50 per cent shared equity scheme.

Gipton was a different place when the Hynes, now grandparents in their late fifties, moved in. Previously home to a close-knit community, in the early 1990s the area began to slide. Poverty and unemployment became widespread and the neighbourhood gained a reputation for problem families, anti-social behaviour and drug dealing.

In 2002, plans were revealed to demolish some nearby blocks of flats. But it was not until late 2003 that the Hynes learned, in a letter from the local arms-length management organisation, Leeds East Homes, that all the housing in their area would be coming down, for the purpose of “redevelopment”. Around 60 council houses would be demolished and his property was “regrettably” included.

“I told them they’d knock my house down over my dead body,” Dave Hynes tells *The Big Issue in the North*. “They responded by giving us some options – three of which involved relocating to another property through sale or swap.

“The fourth, though, was that our house could stay up and they would demolish around us. We chose that one.”

However, in January 2004, the plan took a new twist when the council decided to include Gipton within a much larger regeneration scheme for East Leeds – EASEL. Almost two years after the original letter, in July 2005, Leeds East Homes informed Hynes there had been a change of plan. His four-bedroom house was now coming down – despite being structurally sound and fully paid for. Surveyors would be sent round to value the property and make an offer. The letter menacingly mentioned CPO.

It’s since been revealed that as far back as January 2004 – 17 months before the change of mind letter and without any consultation

with residents – the land on which the Hynes’ home stands was listed as one of the sites to kick-start EASEL. And Bellway was told to produce plans and designs as though “vacant possession” of the sites had already been achieved. In other words, the entire scheme rested on getting the Hynes’ home bulldozed.

Dave Hynes – who is fighting prostate cancer and unable to get another mortgage – has refused the council’s offer to buy his home, stating that their valuation would leave them in rented accommodation and that his home is not on the market. In April, council officials agreed to proceed with the CPO.

The Hynes have now had enough and have instructed their solicitor to challenge the council’s behaviour in the High Court. Hynes says: “Every letter I’m now sent mentions CPOs. We feel that the council is trying to intimidate us into leaving our home but I refuse to give in.

“They don’t want our house to stay up simply because they think it would look wrong in the middle of their new housing development. We are so angry about the way we’re being treated.”

Leeds East MP George Mudie is supporting the family in their fight. A former leader of the city council, and the driving force behind the original EASEL scheme, he believes its focus has shifted from people-centred regeneration to out-and-out gentrification. “The plan was to bring in every sector – housing, education, industry. We would train people and find employers to take them on,” he says.

“The new housing would replace the worst council housing, releasing land to build on. We’d leave those who were a bit older, or more settled in their existing homes, and we’d build bungalows and social housing for the elderly to go into.

“Let’s be clear – our plan was to knock down the worst housing, not good quality housing that happened to be in the wrong place. The situation now is outrageous. Homeowners who have invested in their houses are being lied to and grandparents are being evicted from their properties because the council wants the land underneath.”

Mudie blames the transfer of Leeds City Council from Labour to a Liberal-Tory coalition for the unravelling of EASEL. “They saw EASEL as an opportunity for building homes for sale and profit,” he says. “It has turned into a house building scheme, placing a bulldozer right through people’s homes in the name of gentrification.”

Indeed, a council report confirms that EASEL’s housing offer is unlikely to help those already living in the area.

“Analysis has found that new build properties at the prices outlined within the phase one development are beyond the purchasing capacity of the majority of EASEL residents,” warned the EASEL Housing Needs and Aspirations Study in June last year.

Mudie would like to see the council applying a more flexible approach to regeneration. “They should be using selective demolition – building around homes that are fit and should be kept. I am urging the council to do a redesign.”

Leeds solicitor Dr Keith Lomax of Davies

Gore Lomax is representing the Hynes in their fight for justice and has issued an application in the administrative court for permission to apply for judicial review.

A spokesman for Leeds City Council said: “The EASEL scheme represents £1.2 billion of investment in east and south east Leeds, creating affordable, attractive and high quality mixed tenure housing along with substantial investment in infrastructure.

“This particular area was one of several identified as having housing that is unpopular and difficult to let, or is uneconomic to repair or refurbish.

“It was explained to Mr and Mrs Hynes in 2003 that clearance of the site was due to happen and at that time a number of options

Mudie believes the focus has moved from regeneration to gentrification

were given to them, ranging from the council acquiring the property, relocating them to another property or for them to remain whilst the site was cleared.

“However, it was made clear that they were in a housing clearance area and that we would need vacant possession of the site to allow the redevelopment of the whole area to take place. We have been in discussions with them since 2005 to agree a negotiated settlement.

“In all such cases, the council does not enter into the CPO process lightly and we are continuing to work with them to resolve the issue. We are hoping that positive discussions can continue and that an amicable settlement can be reached.”

Mudie: council should be more flexible

