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Housing Market winner and loser, New East Manchester New Start, Jan 2009. Part of an investigation into HMR

LOSER

Mention the phrase “housing market renewal” and Bill Booth gives a bitter laugh. Five years after the programme’s launch, his neighbourhood in Clayton, Manchester, has actually declined.

In the desolate Ben Street area, where Booth and his wife Jean have lived for 38 years, residents have waited for regeneration for almost a decade.

Since 2003, the New East Manchester pathfinder has been faced with delivering this change.

Today, around a third of the 290 properties stand vacant on these 11 terraced streets. Litter and anti-social behaviour are among the issues that face residents.

Booth says: “We get vandals stealing lead off the properties, jobs starting fires in the empty properties and lots of fly-tipping.

“The empty houses get infestations of pigeons, and damp seeps through the walls into neighbouring homes.

“What makes us really angry is that of the 80 or so empty properties here, 99 per cent are owned by social landlords. Most have sat empty since about 2001, bringing our area down.”

Still worse is the constant uncertainty. Residents here live in the shadow of a phantom bulldozer, which may or may not arrive.

Ben Street is at the heart of the area that was to be regenerated by New East Manchester. A developer – Countryside Properties – was appointed early on and half-hearted consultations gave way to vague talk of “radical” overhauls, CPOs and possible clearance.

But now the whole scheme looks in danger of collapse after a disappointing government hand-out left the pathfinder with £23m less to spend for next three years.

At a meeting in July, the New East Manchester board was warned that funding for Ben Street was no longer available. Plans for its regeneration are now under review.

For residents this is cold comfort indeed. “We are still living in limbo,” says Booth.

“Children have grown up and left home in this time, and friends have retired and died. The uncertainty has a knock-on effect on the neighbourhood as well.

“I’ve always been very house proud and used to paint my house inside and out every year. Now people like me are neglecting their properties and the streets look shabby. But why spend money maintaining your house when you don’t know if it will be standing in a few years’ time?

“No one here is against regeneration – we know something needs to be done. All we want is to know where we stand, and to have the opportunity to oppose the plans if we don’t like them.”

WINNER

Norman Gurley is looking forward to picking up the keys to his new home.

By the new year, the east Manchester widower should have left his damp terrace and decamped to a brand new property less than 50m away.

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“It’ll be two-bedroomed but with a garden and somewhere to park the car,” he says. “There’s a space on the ground floor where I can install a lift, if I need it later. It’s meant to be energy-efficient and should be more secure.”

Now 73, Gurley moved to Toxteth Street, Openshaw, as a newlywed 44 years ago. Then, the rented two-up, two-down – which he bought from his landlord in the seventies – did not even have a bathroom.

Once home to a close-knit community, the neighbourhood suffered with the collapse of local manufacturing. As residents died or moved on, many houses ended up in the private rental sector – a change that brought problem tenants.

Vacancies created further blight. In 1996, the last tenants moved out of the house next door to Gurley’s. Today his is one of just two houses still lived-in on his terrace.

He says: “We had problems with anti-social behaviour and druggies. Then we had people stealing boilers, pipes and all kinds from the vacant houses.

“The area was a state. There was a tree growing through the roof of the house next door. That being empty caused my home to get damp, and I’ve had three burglaries in the past 12 years.”

Regeneration was discussed for years, but it was New East Manchester that finally drew up plans for the tightly-packed grid of streets around Toxteth Street.

Over 500 terraced properties are to be replaced with 430 new homes, built by the developer Lovell and ranging in size from apartments to four-bedroom town houses.

A Compulsory Purchase Order inquiry took place in September and all await the inspector’s report.

Gurley believes he has done the right thing. “From a personal point of view I was convinced that I wouldn’t end up out of pocket from this. I have no mortgage and no rent – only council tax and bills,” he says.

“Manchester City Council paid the difference between the valuation of my old house and the cost of my new one. It will then come off as a charge on the house when I pop my cloggs and my portion goes to my dependents.”

A further relocation grant of about £4,000 will pay for removal, redecoration and new furniture.

Gurley says: “This is a fresh start for a neighbourhood that has been doing downhill for years. It will take 10 years to get right, but it should be worth it.”

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