



Campaigner Elizabeth Pascoe fought a long battle against the compulsory purchase order for her Liverpool home all the way to the High Court and won, only to see it overturned on compulsory purchase. The former architect explains why she's too angry to stop protesting, even though it's holding back much-needed regeneration in the area.
Photos: Christian Peter

“You have to develop a thick skin when you challenge authority”

The irony's not lost on Elizabeth Pascoe. When the former architect moved to Liverpool 13 years ago, she was set to study for a doctorate on green cities and regeneration. She never started that research, yet has managed to become something of an expert in urban renewal. For in 2006, Pascoe brought a controversial road-widening scheme that involves the demolition of almost 400 mainly Victorian houses – including her own – grinding to an expensive halt.

Those behind the £350 million Edge Lane West project say the clearances are an essential part of transforming the corridor from the M62 to the city centre into an “urban boulevard befitting a major European city”. In return, the run-down Kensington neighbourhood – one of the most deprived in England – is promised 290 new homes, environmental improvements and a state-of-the-art health centre.

While some residents lodged a petition calling for work to proceed, Pascoe and her supporters remain unmoved. They say they want regeneration but question the motives

behind destroying sturdy houses and a community in order to achieve it. Their alternative plan for the area would include some road improvements, including the introduction of cycle lanes, but – crucially – would not require any demolition.

“I don't believe this has to do with a road scheme,” Pascoe says when *The Big Issue in the North* visits her neat terraced home, around the corner from Edge Lane on Adderley Street. “You don't need to take houses going 100 metres back off both sides of Edge Lane to improve the road. As far as I'm concerned this scheme's all about profiteering at the expense of a poor community who can't or won't fight back.”

Edge Lane was meant to be finished in time for Liverpool's year in the spotlight as European Capital of Culture. But while the first three phases were completed before Christmas, part four, Edge Lane West, has gone horribly wrong.

When opponents lost a public inquiry into the plan in 2005, Pascoe – who is registered disabled and not working – won legal aid and appealed against the decision. A High Court

judge ruled that errors had been made during the confirmation process, quashing the compulsory purchase order (CPO) – a legal measure needed to transfer private property to public ownership – and bringing the whole scheme to a temporary standstill.

The detail of that ruling, however, left the way open for another attempt. So Liverpool Land Development Company (LLDC) and the national regeneration agency English Partnerships – which are leading the project – made an almost identical order last year.

By the time the second inquiry came around in January, more than 300 of the properties were owned by Liverpool City Council. The community is now waiting for the planning inspector to send his report to the secretary of state for communities and local government, Hazel Blears, who has 12 months in which to confirm or reject the order. Should the decision go against them, Pascoe and her campaign group, Bevel (Better Environmental Vision for Edge Lane), intend to appeal through the courts.

On first impressions, Pascoe is not what you

Elizabeth Pascoe took the demolition of her home all the way to the High Court, only to face a second purchase order soon after. The architect tells Ciara Leeming why she's angry to give up her home, even though critics say she's doing much needed work for the city.

Petersen

Thick skin and authority."

might call an obvious campaigner. After training as an architect as a young woman, she worked for a time in the civil service and spent most of her adult life raising her three grown-up children and tending a smallholding in rural Devon.

A car accident 20 years ago left her with lasting problems with her hands and leg. She is a doting grandparent – travelling across the country to help look after her seven grandchildren whenever she is needed. Her manner is hesitant and thoughtful but her kindly eyes flash with anger when she describes what has happened to her adopted community.

"I didn't use to be like this," she admits. "My generation of women are predisposed towards being passive. I'm not passive now. My default setting is polite but I can be very assertive these days. Going through these last four years has changed me enormously."

When she moved to Liverpool, shortly after escaping an unhappy marriage, Pascoe planned to return to university to resume her architectural studies, before studying

environmental science and going on to do a PhD. She bought a four-bedroom terrace in Kensington because the area was affordable and its proximity to the city's universities would enable her to take in student lodgers.

Back then, all the homes on Adderley and the surrounding streets were occupied, with many residents having lived in their properties for decades. When, during the late 1990s, Pascoe heard about Kensington Regeneration, a New Deal for Communities renewal scheme for her area, she jumped at the chance to get involved – helping with consultations that looked at areas including housing, jobs and young people. After five years, however, she began to become cynical.

"I thought it was wonderful at the beginning," she says with a wry smile. "The idea was that they would ask people what they wanted, and bring about change from the grassroots. I really went for it and became quite an active volunteer.

"People were asking for things like park keepers and more community-based schemes. We all agreed we wanted to be regenerated but we didn't agree that we should lose our homes.

"After five years of going to up to seven meetings a week, I realised this kind of regeneration wasn't about the grassroots. Money that was meant to be spent helping the community was being used to pay consultants who then claimed we all wanted our homes demolished."

The regeneration of Merseyside is a complex process. Demolition, refurbishment and new build schemes are going on across the area – from Anfield and Toxteth in Liverpool to Bootle, in the Sefton borough. But while much of the work is being funded by the taxpayer, the money is being filtered through different agencies depending on the project.

Along with LLDC and English Partnerships, the organisations charged with delivering Edge Lane are the North West Regional Development Agency and Liverpool City Council. Others with links to the project include Kensington Regeneration, the Merseyside Housing Market Renewal pathfinder Newheartlands, Community Seven housing association and the building firm Bellway Homes.

It was in summer 2004 that Pascoe's community were told that CPOs were on the horizon, but official notification did not follow until January 2005. Like other owner-occupiers, Pascoe was offered money to move but the figure did not take into account her lost rental income.

"I was offered nothing for the loss of income. At the time I wasn't retired and my three lodgers accounted for almost my entire income. In any case, this was my home, I'd put down roots. I hadn't any idea about the value of the house at that point, because to me that was irrelevant," she says.

Pascoe's front door is painted a cheerful shade of purple and there are colourful hanging baskets on either side. Inside, her homely living room is stuffed with books on every subject, from architecture to the environment and gardening.

Yet no amount of care and attention can hide the fact that hers is one of just three homes still occupied on her road – all around are tinned-up, sad looking terraces crumbling away while they await the wrecking ball. The scene is repeated on many nearby streets.

Pascoe claims that it was not until the first CPO was made that vacant properties began appearing on her side of Edge Lane. The first ones to go were properties let by housing associations, which stopped re-letting them as residents moved on.

A hundred individual objections to the order triggered the first public inquiry – not a bad result when 130 of the properties were standing vacant at the time. Twenty-three people went on to be witnesses at the subsequent hearing.

This time around the strength of feeling has been even greater – with 70 people coming forward to give evidence. Twenty CDs full of written evidence were handed into the inspector for consideration, with more lodged as post-inquiry evidence.

Among the late submissions was a design review of the plans by the government watchdog the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. The report notes that the existing housing is of "reasonable architectural merit" and that the commission believes "there are fundamental problems with the proposed scheme at an urban design level, and that the material submitted (in support of the project) is of sub-standard quality for a major scheme".

"This scheme's all about profiteering at the expense of a poor community who can't or won't fight back."

Edge Lane is in many ways distinct from other housing battles raging in Merseyside and elsewhere in the north. In this area of Kensington, the authorities are trying to use untested powers originally aimed at bringing brownfield land back into use.

The 1993 Housing and Urban Development Act, which created English Partnerships, permits the agency to secure and regenerate urban land which is "vacant or unused... derelict, neglected or unsightly". For Pascoe, this is wholly unacceptable. She argues that the dereliction in her area was brought about by the authorities – in the guise of local housing associations.

It was only when Bevel analysed the original statement of reasons for the CPO that they realised that most of the empty properties deemed "under-used and unsightly" were actually owned by registered social landlords. She is convinced that if the plan gets approved, the tactic will be repeated across the country to engineer situations where "intervention" is then required.

"I see the implications of what they're trying to do here and know very well what could happen," she says. "This area was in need of regeneration before this started but it was certainly not vacant or unused.

"These powers are intended for brownfield sites but they're using them instead on a poor community. If they set the precedent now they'll use them again and again on communities who can't fight back. It's very easy when you have a lot of social housing to bring about a situation where some of the properties are underused and unsightly."



Pascoe's household is one of only three left on the street that has long been her home

In any case, for Pascoe, there is a fundamental flaw in the claim that neighbourhoods need intervention in response to market problems. She sees regeneration as an organic process that happens naturally as new people move in when properties are affordable and invest in their homes, bringing a net benefit to the whole community.

She says: "The people who are coming up with these ideas aren't building surveyors or town planners or economists. They are

She alludes to "whispering campaigns" against her that she may have cost the Liverpool taxpayer £6 million

marketing people who either can't see or won't see how things really are.

"You only need to watch the news at the moment to see how meaningless the whole idea of values, investments and markets really is when you are talking about homes. With the economy how it is at the moment, one week your house could be worth X-amount, but the following week it's dropped 15 per cent.

"I would argue that you can't create a built environment to fit in with markets because a home has an intrinsic value that has nothing to do with it being an investment opportunity. It's just your home, a place that you choose to live and invest in that community.

"Anyway, if you've got so-called housing

market failure in an area, it makes no sense to take down good houses – because market failure isn't about homes. It's about much more than that – wider problems like there being no jobs and poor schools and transport."

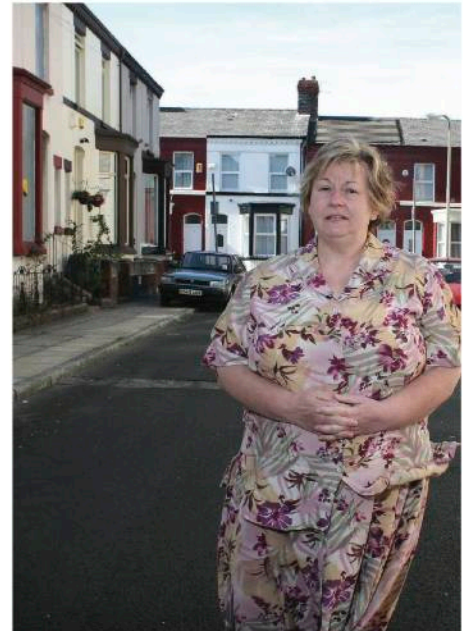
Pascoe won't allow herself to consider the possibility that she might lose this battle – preferring to focus instead on the immediate future. She knows that most of the original population of her corner of Kensington are unlikely to return, but believes she has a moral duty to fight on to the bitter end.

A number of friends and fellow campaigners have passed away since this battle started, and Pascoe herself believes the stress is affecting her physical health. Then there is the financial impact. To date, she has spent about £40,000 – which she can ill afford – on the campaign, a chunk of which paid for three expert witnesses for the first public inquiry.

She alludes to "whispering campaigns" against her, most recently centring on claims that the Edge Lane West delays and public inquiries may have cost the Liverpool taxpayer £6 million. Yet she is convinced that the majority of the city's residents are on Bevel's side and that there is a wider public interest aspect to this case.

"What I'm trying to save is £50 million of public assets being chucked in landfill at a cost of another £20 million," she says. "So I don't care if I have cost them £6 million.

"Every time the subject comes up in the local press, letters come in in defence of me. I get fan mail and most of the people I meet tell me to stick to my guns. I try not to take any notice of the negative stuff – you have to develop a very thick skin when you are challenging those in authority.



"I don't like living in these circumstances but can't go this far and not continue. I'm doing this now to prevent them from doing the same thing to other communities. It's not how I thought I'd be spending my time at this age of my life. But I'm so angry about what's happening that I honestly feel like it's something I've got to do.

"There aren't likely to be many in my situation – a trained architect who is so poor that they qualify for legal aid, with the skills and the time to pursue this.

"I feel like I'm unique and after having gone through it once, like a dress rehearsal, I know what's going on now."