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From the Chair:

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20 January 2005

ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee,  
Committee Office,  
House of Commons,  
7 Millbank,  
London SW1P 3JA

Dear Sir/Madam,

### **Empty Homes and Low-demand Pathfinders**

We are grateful for this opportunity to offer comment on the issues raised by the Committee, many of which have been a growing cause of concern to Merseyside Civic Society as both the disturbing scale, and what we believe to be the misguided direction, of HMRI activity in Merseyside have become almost daily more apparent.

We recognise that very serious problems are faced in securing the future of the housing stock in the areas identified as the focus of attention as part of the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder scheme. However, we are convinced that the approach adopted in Liverpool is very seriously flawed and is causing widespread blight in areas of well-maintained housing – while, at the same time, failing to inspire confidence that the ‘solution’ is not itself a bigger ‘problem’ with which future generations will be cursed.

This is partly a failure to appreciate, and to demonstrate a constructive response to, the significant local strengthening of the local residential property market that has occurred since the sweeping measures featured in the initial HMRI proposals were first adopted.

There are large numbers of sound properties, of desirable character and size, that were deemed to be of negligible market value at that time that are now clearly capable of commanding a fair or worthwhile price in the market place. Yet these properties, which, in other parts of the city, are much sought-after, are condemned to seemingly ‘mindless’ clearance and replacement by mundane and unimaginative new-build development.

We are concerned that it is the owner-occupiers, who have invested in their local area, who are losing out as a consequence of a well-established pattern of behaviour that is widely demonstrated by registered social landlords and the local authority in ‘problem’ areas in which they have failed to re-invest in their own properties. They next proceed to systematically pull out, or terminate the leases of, the occupants of their properties before boarding them up, thus reinforcing the impression of decline and dereliction.

This has an immediate blighting effect on the area and, in particular, on the values of the sometimes isolated owner-occupied properties that remain. What are they to do in this situation? They are offered the opportunity to sell to the RSL/local authority at a price that is depressed, primarily as a consequence of the RSL/local authority’s own failure to act to maintain its own property – before, ultimately, they are obliged to sell, at an even lower price, under the inevitably unattractive terms of a compulsory purchase order.



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The whole enterprise smacks of a conspiracy between the RSLs and local authority to 'carve up' the local property market between themselves - with no opportunity for the local community and affected residents to have a say in how the future of 'their' area is to be determined. This is quite apart from any consideration of the essentially desirable character of the properties – and the potentially considerable 'life' that remains in them.

We are concerned that, in these circumstances, there seems to be no objective assessment of the qualities of, and opportunities to improve, the properties that have been left empty or even those that remain in proud occupation – and that the whole process lacks the scrutiny to which even the slum clearances of the 1950's and 1960's were subjected, over which independent inspectors had the opportunity to adjudicate.

We are aware of strong local opposition to the New Heartlands funded demolition that is proposed in at least the following areas: Bedford Road / Queens Road (Sefton MBC), The Welsh Streets, The Groves and Edge Lane and Edge Hill (Liverpool).

We also understand that there are deep concerns, on the part of open space, amenity and environmental groups, that HMRI funding is being used to prepare precious local green space for development for both residential and other purposes at South Park / Stanley Gardens in Sefton and, potentially, at Newsham Park in Liverpool.

Fundamentally, we believe that there is much more scope for the imaginative use of local authority powers to secure the large-scale refurbishment of residential properties and to enlist the support of existing residents in contributing to the retention of neighbourhoods of enduring quality and character – rather than to pursue the 'simpler' approach of first getting rid of the people then sweeping away vast swathes of Victorian heritage housing and replacing it with the uninspiring offerings of the private sector housing developer.

Some demolition or clearance is likely to prove necessary and may, indeed, be desirable. However, as a matter of principle, clearance should **only** be resorted to when all other avenues of regenerative refurbishment have been fully explored. Further, that critical exploration should not be open to direct influence and manipulation by agencies that have a vested interest in the simple expedient of wholesale clearance and new-build.

What is apparent is that the continued commitment to the wiping out of 20,000 houses, when local economic conditions and, in particular, the local residential property market, have improved so dramatically, is now entirely unjustified, inappropriate and needs to be reviewed with urgency before the bulldozers have been unleashed to do their worst.

Yours faithfully

**Peter Brown (Dr)**