

# Wrecking ball report

**A controversial report that recommends bulldozing nearly 500 Toxteth terraced houses has been slammed as “biased” by critics.**

Liverpool Council’s latest neighbourhood renewal assessment (NRA) ignores a deal struck by mayor Joe Anderson and Conservative Party chair Grant Shapps last June to preserve some of the properties – recommending instead that the entire area should be flattened.

The report, written by consultants DTZ, may also frustrate communities secretary Eric Pickles, who overturned planning permission for clearance of the city’s Welsh Streets area and has shifted national housing policy towards renovation of empty homes.

A hangover from John Prescott’s £2.2 billion Housing Market Renewal programme, which knocked down 30,000 homes across northern England before it ended in 2011, the Welsh Streets have become a headache for ministers and the city council.

The houses were condemned as part of the HMR process but many residents fought to prevent demolition. Campaigners from Save Britain’s Heritage are now challenging in court plans by some authorities to use a £35.5 million government fund – supposedly aimed at finding alternatives to demolition in former HMR areas – to bulldoze empty houses. It is this money that Liverpool is likely to use for clearance of the Welsh Streets properties.

## Tinning up

The report reveals that the Princes Park area of Toxteth was actually improving until HMR arrived in 2004 – with the number of vacant homes below the city average and rising house prices. Since then, around £18 million has been spent acquiring and tinning up empty terraces, making the neighbourhood worse.

Despite the recession and the end of HMR, DTZ recommends



**Campaigners claim plans for Welsh Streets are flawed.** Photo: Ciara Leeming

that the original plans should remain in place.

Liverpool Council says a £15 million planning application will soon be submitted by housing association Plus Dane for the demolition of 280 homes and the building of 150 new ones, with gardens and off-street parking. Under this plan, 37 properties would be refurbished – a figure opponents say still does not go far enough.

David Ireland, of the campaign group Empty Homes, described the conclusion of the

report as “surprising” given changes to national housing policy and said his analysis revealed errors and examples of apparent bias in the report.

## ‘Biased’

He says the report gave no thought to selling the houses or offering them for self-renovation and only considered options that would extend council or housing association ownership and control of the land.

Empty Homes also questions the methodology, which gave

equal weighting to issues such as the appearance of vacant land and more critical questions such as the condition of houses.

“The wording of some of the criteria is biased, making it impossible for refurbishment options to score well,” said Ireland. “It appears that the NRA has been crafted to achieve a pre-determined recommendation of clearance and rebuild.

“The selection of the options betrays that the council is unwilling to consider any option that does not give it control of the area.

## ‘Vibrant neighbourhood’

Liverpool Council has vowed to press ahead. Its cabinet member for housing, Cllr Ann O’Byrne, said: “This review has been invaluable in providing an up-to-date picture of housing in the Princes Park area and gauging what local people want.

“Everything we are doing is aimed at creating a vibrant, attractive and sustainable neighbourhood, with a good mix of housing.”

CIARA LEEMING

## Lancashire university denies unions’

**A Lancashire university’s bid to be the first in the country to become a private company has come under fire from union members.**

The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) announced the proposal to staff in November last year and applied to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to dissolve the higher education corporation (HEC) and transfer its assets and liabilities to a company limited by guarantee.

If the plan goes ahead, it would enable UCLan to attract funding from private companies and have more control over its administration. UCLan claims foreign investors do not understand what an HEC is.

But members from the University and College Union (UCU) and Unison have launched a petition against the plans, claiming it is privatisation. Already more than 1,200 people have signed it. Opponents of the plan organised a meeting on the campus last week to consider the next steps.

Martyn Moss, UCU regional officer for the North West, said: “We stated our opposition to the proposals and now we want to engage in constructive dialogue with the university and try to find some common ground.”

He said there were concerns about future governance arrangements and that the plan paves the way for private equity firms to get involved in

running UCLan. Concern was also expressed about potential changes to members’ terms and conditions, particularly access to the public sector pension scheme.

Kevan Nelson, regional secretary, Unison North West, said: “It is crucial that we continue to work together to defend public services. Unison is totally committed to safeguarding public education and to ensuring that the educational infrastructure of the North West retains its core commitment to excellence that is open and accountable to local people.

“Unison will work to maintain educational provision throughout schools, further