

FALLING IN 'THE EAST'

East Manchester is the focus for the latest in Ciara Leeming's series of articles examining the government's Housing Market Renewal scheme. She finds again that the accent is on knocking down houses and replacing them rather than renovation

It's been a tough few years for Bill Booth and his neighbours. In just seven years their streets in Clayton West – a stone's throw from Manchester's Sportcity development – have seen a population haemorrhage that's left half the properties vacant and boarded up.

Since then, no one here has known whether their home will survive a regeneration drive swallowing up swathes of housing across East Manchester and replacing them with new build. Children have grown up and left home, residents died and pensioners lived out their retirement years in the shadow of phantom bulldozers.

As the months roll by, more houses empty, to be tinned up by the authorities. The effect for those left behind is an increasing sense of isolation.

Booth, 62, of Heather Street, says: "Seven years on, we're still not certain what's going to happen. This was a thriving community but then the housing associations stopped re-letting their properties and began boarding them up. The place has gone downhill since then. It's very unsettling. We are living in limbo."

His neighbour Alf Booth (no relation), 75, grew up on these streets and returned here more than 20 years ago. Alf (pictured above) smiles sadly: "Many of us expected to see out our lives here but we are being held over a barrel. For a good few years now, newcomers have been

reluctant to move here – and who would want to with all these empty homes and uncertainty.

"We're now starting to get problems with the vacant properties. The ceiling caved in on one and is causing a safety hazard. It's sad really, when you think what's happening. It is changing the way this area feels."

Clayton, two miles east of central Manchester, is one of a number of neighbourhoods where huge sums of public money are being pumped into regeneration. Past the luxurious mill conversions near the canals at Ancoats and a little further up the busy Ashton New Road, lies Sportcity.

This was the focal point for much of the 2002 Commonwealth Games and is now home to the Manchester City FC stadium, national squash centre and a gleaming, world-class indoor cycling track. New apartments line the streets – some boasting views of the huge Asda superstore.

It's also where – so long as a challenge by disgruntled MPs is unsuccessful – Britain's very first super-casino will be sited. It all feels very 21st century – spacious and modern yet lacking in charm. And the sneaking suspicion among Bill Booth and his neighbours, just a few streets away, is that the outcome for this area has already been decided – something denied by regeneration chiefs.

At an early stage, locals were asked whether they would prefer total or partial demolition or nothing at all. No clue was given about which streets were earmarked for clearance, so Booth and some fellow residents chose to sit tight and do nothing.

"No one here's against regeneration and progress," he tells *The Big Issue in the North*. "But what we are against is the demolition of perfectly good homes.

"Yes, it's cynical, but we think the developers are after bigger profits, which they can get by knocking down and rebuilding. Community members on the steering group feel they have no influence on the final decision. They go along to put our views forward but don't expect to get very far."

The reason for this cynicism is simple. Clayton West is at the heart of New East Manchester – one of the poorest parts of the UK and a zone singled out for special attention under the government's Housing Market Renewal (HMR) or Pathfinder scheme.

The Manchester-Salford project is one of nine taking place across the country – eight of which are in the north of England. Communities deemed "unsustainable" due to housing and social problems are now the focus of ambitious physical and economic regeneration plans.

Seventeen projects are being run by New East

Manchester and are at different stages of completion. A staggering 12,500 new properties will be built over the 15-year scheme.

Clayton West is still at an early stage – although a developer has been appointed and some consultation events have been held. Regeneration officials are satisfied residents are behind proposals for a radical overhaul of the area, although more discussions are planned before a final decision can be announced.

Elsewhere, however, matters have moved more swiftly. Some people from Ancoats were forced from their homes a year ago and moved into newly built properties – some of which are already letting in the damp. And last month Manchester City Council gave the go-ahead for two compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) – one in Openshaw and another in Clayton proper. They must be signed off by the government to come into force but, if approved, developers Lovell and New City Vision can get started on the projects.

Pathfinder has proved controversial since its launch in 2003 and is criticised for what many believe is its over-reliance on demolition and new build, at the expense of renovation. Conservation charity SAVE Britain's Heritage claims up to 400,000 mainly pre-1919 terraced homes will be bulldozed across England during the lifetime of the scheme – breaking up communities and hitting the poor hardest. In their place go mixed tenure developments of town houses and apartments, often at prices beyond most existing residents.

Property values have risen by 100 per cent in parts of East Manchester in five years, while earnings have failed to keep up. It's no surprise then that some are suspicious of the policy and fearful for the future.

Paula Richardson, an Ancoats resident who expects to be served with a CPO in the near future, says: "You do have to wonder whether some of these new houses are going to last out the regeneration process. Our homes are decent, well built properties and are less than 30 years old, but what is going up in their place is cheap, flimsy new build."

"This is a well sought-after area – some streets have had no empty properties for 10 years. People can't understand why they need replacing and are generally pretty worried about the affordability of these new homes."

The apparent pattern of mass clearance and



rebuild is causing such concern that campaigners from communities across East Manchester have joined forces in the hope of gaining more influence over the process. People from Clayton, Openshaw, Beswick, Gorton and Ancoats are among those who now meet regularly under the banner Communities Four Stability – to provide support and a source of



ways to cut the need for major house clearance."

New East Manchester says a "comprehensive programme" of consultation is put in place for every regeneration scheme, and that the sale and purchase of properties can continue throughout. A spokesman says: "Due to a lack of demand for small terraced houses across east Manchester, the number of voids of this type of property in

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ideas to others in similar situations.

They aim to hold constructive discussions with New East Manchester and its partner bodies to challenge decisions members feel pose a threat to community cohesion. And they have also invited John Earnshaw, project manager with the campaigning charity the Empty Homes Agency, to help them through the process.

Earnshaw, who has helped secure significantly reduced rates of demolition in the Broughton area of Salford and in Hull, says East Manchester is now taking up more of his time than any other regeneration area. "What I can provide is the leadership, experience and resources. I can focus on ways to challenge these plans and influence the final outcomes. We must engage from the earliest possible opportunity and find

some areas has remained static, despite the council, New East Manchester and residents' efforts.

"The new cost-efficient homes we are building bring a range of choice of housing types to the area for both existing and new residents.

Relocation assistance packages are available for residents who need to be displaced due to regeneration activity and all households affected are offered a 'like for like' offer.

"It is important to stress that individual financial circumstances are considered when discussing options with residents and to date we are not aware of any resident who, as a result of relocating to an alternative home, has been forced into debt or needed to take on a further mortgage."

