

After three long years of fighting, Steve Brooks has finally had enough. The father-of-six from Bootle in Merseyside has realised his battle is over. He will lose his home as Liverpool's love affair with the bulldozer continues.

Brooks had been a lynchpin of the campaign against Bootle's redevelopment under the government's controversial Housing Market Renewal Initiative, more commonly known as 'Pathfinder'. Others will fight on, but many now share his weariness.

In February, Sefton Borough Council was given the go-ahead to use compulsory purchase orders on yet another chunk of housing. Brooks's five-bedroom property, rented from Riverside Housing Association, is one of just 20 still standing. 'Houses are being demolished opposite me, round the back and on either side,' he says. 'It's very intimidating.' He may be forced to move to another part of Liverpool if a suitable replacement home is not available.

Bootle is one of nine neighbourhoods within the Merseyside Pathfinder, known as NewHeartlands, where huge sums of public cash – some £100 million so far – are being spent to rectify what officials describe as a 'failing' housing market. Just 15 minutes north of Liverpool city centre and even closer to the beach, Bootle was once home to the city's wealthiest merchants and is rich in a distinctive local industrial heritage.

Yet here, on the doorstep of the 2008 European Capital of Culture, more than 400 highly decorated Victorian villas and terraces will be cleared to make way for town houses and apartments over the next decade. Councils, local and regional agencies and regeneration companies that form NewHeartlands Pathfinder say 'managed clearance' is the only way to tackle a surplus of poor quality, low-demand housing.

Brooks disagrees: 'The policy seems to be that if you have terraces and poverty, it's time to bulldoze. But houses don't beat you up or sell drugs. If nothing's wrong with them it's madness to knock them down and waste all that money.' He says

the housing has been run down over time. 'Homes were bought up by the council and then declared void. The dereliction drives more people out.'

Pathfinder, launched in 2003 by deputy prime minister John Prescott before he lost responsibility for housing, is widely criticised as overly simplistic in its approach and inflexible to rising house prices.

In a damning report last year, leading conservation charity SAVE Britain's Heritage called Pathfinder a 'complete disaster' in which 'stable and sustainable communities are being savagely blighted', often on the basis of outdated evidence.

Early on in Bootle properties were

partially replaced with far more private housing as part of general regeneration in designated areas deemed to be at risk of 'market failure'. The cost to the public purse is expected to go way beyond the current £6 billion figure.

In many areas locals are suspicious about what they see as a reluctance to renovate and accuse the government of creating a funding formula that persuades cash-strapped councils to demolish and disperse in order to create convenient flat sites for developers. Many talk of 'social cleansing for profit' – the break-up of strong working-class communities to make way for a professional middle class, with the enormous development surpluses

Demolition derby

Sham consultations, compulsory purchases, mass demolitions and the displacement of entire communities. Call this a housing policy? **Ciara Leeming** reports on the government's Pathfinder initiative

bought up for £30,000 – now many are worth three times that but still face the clean sweep. The same thing is happening across the north of England and the midlands in eight other Pathfinder areas, where thousands of properties stand vacant falling into disrepair, all at a time when house prices are at record levels, council waiting lists are high and homeless family numbers are rising.

By 2019 the government's market renewal strategy could see up to 400,000 terraced houses – significant proportions of which are council or housing association properties – sacrificed and

split between the developer, the council and other funding bodies.

Since they learned about the plans in 2003, Bootle residents have fought to save their streets. They scoured council agendas and minutes, lodged objections and held protests. The group then took their case to an inquiry where they refused to be browbeaten by planning officials and legal jargon.

'Everything was stacked against us,' says Brooks. 'Council documents were put online, but we aren't all computer literate. We were excluded from council meetings, so found out about decisions a month

Pathfinder: the wrecker's ball

Nine urban areas of England make up the government's 'Pathfinder' Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI): Newcastle Gateshead; Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire; South Yorkshire; Birmingham and Sandwell; North Staffordshire; Manchester Salford; Merseyside; Oldham and Rochdale; and East Lancashire.

So far, £1.2 billion has been allocated to this

public-private partnership trial aimed at tackling housing market failure and low demand in working class areas where house prices have plummeted and tens of thousands of homes lie empty, reinforcing the social and economic problems of these areas.

'Pathfinders' bring together local authorities, the Regional Development Agency, local services, the Housing Corporation, social landlords and the private sector. They supposedly have the freedom to identify the local causes of low housing demand and decide the appropriate form of

intervention. 'There will be no blueprint,' promised the government's 2003 'sustainable communities' plan.

But the experience of Pathfinder has been fairly uniform. Sham consultations, compulsory purchases, displacement of whole communities, mass demolitions of often perfectly sound Victorian terraced housing and, of course, huge transfers of public land and money to the balance sheets of the private sector. Councils and social landlords stand accused of acting as cut-throat developers, deliberately running down and

late. The paperwork was overwhelming. We were treated like lepers.'

Three years of fighting the system without winning has left them cynical. Demolition began in January 2005. A hard core kept the protest going as more residents moved out. 'How can you fight the system when it's conspiring against you? The whole thing was a foregone conclusion.'

While Steve Brooks's story is depressing, others like him are still fighting, using a variety of tactics – and winning important victories.

One such victory can be found six miles south of Bootle in Toxteth. The heart of Liverpool's Afro-Caribbean community, Toxteth is now better known for its diversity than the 1981 riots that made it famous. It is also another of Merseyside's Pathfinder zones, where several localised battles against clearance are being waged. In the Lodge Lane neighbourhood, a well fought campaign by residents of all ages and backgrounds forced some vacant houses back on to the market.

'Social deprivation, poor education and the fear of crime are the real problems here,' says Laurence Westgaph, vice-chair of Lodge Lane Regeneration Group. 'Eighty per cent of some streets are housing association and many of these properties, plus those owned by the council, were derelict when they could easily have been renovated. People were having to leave the area to buy a house, it was that distorted.'

When the council launched its 'neighbourhood renewal assessment', a precursor to regeneration, Westgaph's group got involved and pointed out the obvious inconsistencies in the area's management. They campaigned for local registered social landlords (another name for housing associations) to part with empty homes along one street at full market value – the scheme was seven times oversubscribed.

It's not the only tactic. Last year, a £350 million scheme to regenerate Liverpool's Edge Lane corridor was delayed after grandmother Elizabeth Pascoe persuaded a court that a

emptying their social rented housing to cash in on the increased land and property values of regeneration and gentrification.

Critics ultimately blame the government's policy and financial straitjacket, pointing to VAT rebates on 'new build' not available for restoration and millions of pounds tied to major demolition programmes as part of two-year legally-binding contracts.

See SAVE Britain's Heritage's website for their report on Pathfinder: www.savebritainsheritage.org

compulsory purchase order had breached her human rights.

Traditional campaigning is also working. In Salford, people on the Whit Lane estate in Charlestown managed to ward off the Pathfinder bulldozers after 'framework documents' were put through their doors earmarking their properties for clearance to make way for new homes overlooking the river Irwell – part of a new development with a potential value of £400 million.

The community acted quickly. Within days trees were plastered with anti-demolition notices and almost 200 people had signed a petition. Three months later the council had withdrawn the plans, although demolition is continuing in nearby areas.

'We did our own questionnaire and found everyone was opposed,' explains community worker Graham Cooper. 'The council couldn't argue with it because we did it properly. It all seems quite underhand – the authorities seem to gradually buy up private housing until they have 75 per cent vacant and can go for forced

acquisition. But if councils weren't doing that in the first place this situation wouldn't arise.'

Cooper remains vigilant, despite the success so far. 'I'm certain they'll come back to Charlestown,' he says. 'We think they want to build flats on the riverbank and social housing doesn't fit into the plan.'

Working class communities around the country are going to great lengths to save their homes. While few would deny that some properties are beyond renovation, most believe that the vast majority could be refurbished to modern standards for a fraction of the cost of demolition and redevelopment and used to benefit existing communities.

Not every campaign succeeds but, increasingly, local struggles are starting to link up, initially across their own immediate neighbourhoods through community websites such as Fight For Our Homes and Indymedia, and gradually at a national level supported by lobby organisations including the Empty Homes Agency and SAVE. A national movement for housing rights seems to be emerging once again.

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