

Housing in Little London is in desperate need of investment but the controversial private finance initiative scheme chosen by Leeds City Council risks pushing out local residents, argues Stuart Hodkinson

LITTLE LONDON TAKES THE INITIATIVE

Donna McHugh is one of 1,400 council tenants in Little London, a neglected residential neighbourhood located right on the edge of Leeds's booming city centre. From her sixties high-rise flat in Lovell Park Grange, one of three tower blocks whose 17-storey frames hug the city's northern skyline, McHugh accepts her area needs a facelift but she loves living here.

"We're in the perfect location, right next to the city centre shops and all my friends and family live close by," she says. "Some of the housing's in a very bad way, the flats need double glazing and we've been waiting years for repairs. But without council housing I'd find it very difficult to afford a decent home. I'd happily live here for life."

Leeds City Council agrees that McHugh's community needs major investment. Last November the government approved its plans to pump £95m of desperately needed improvements into her estate using the controversial Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

Billed as comprehensive regeneration, the PFI scheme will bring existing council homes above the government's decency standard and build new council houses, something that hasn't happened in Leeds for a long time. The regeneration also promises new private homes for sale with a high proportion earmarked for affordable housing and major environmental improvements including a brand new hub of shops and community facilities. Council officers expect work to begin in early 2009 after they have selected their preferred private bidder for the work.

You'd think McHugh and her fellow tenants would be overjoyed at the news. Not so.

Last August she tried and failed to block the council's plans in the High Court after realising that her flat along with nearly 300 other units in the Lovells weren't part of the PFI refurbishment after all. Instead, the council planned to empty the tower blocks and sell them off to a developer to refurbish as affordable apartments for sale. McHugh claims she and others were misled during a two-week consultation period last year that gauged people's preferences.

"Some tenants and leaseholders agreed to it but they didn't know what they were filling in. The council told them they'd be able to stay and even buy a new flat. They never told us we'd have to leave."

The prospect of being forced out scares her.



Artist's impressions suggest the improvements that could be made in Little London

"I've been moving from house to house for years without any security and at the mercy of private landlords. I've finally found a place where I'm happy and I can start to rebuild my life, get custody of my child, and now they're going to kick me out. I don't understand why they can't just do up the flats and let us all stay."

For now at least, McHugh's flat is safe as last

"Finding a developer to take on the blocks is proving difficult; we don't know what to do with them"

December the council shocked everyone by announcing the sale of the tower blocks was on hold pending a review. Publicly, officers say they have listened to tenants and residents who overall had rejected the regeneration scheme in the consultation. Privately, however, a council officer admits the motivations are more financial.

"Finding a developer to take on the blocks is proving difficult; we don't know what to do with them," says the officer.

Other homes are also at risk. Some 150 flats and maisonettes face outright demolition to clear land for the new housing. If the Lovells tower blocks are eventually sold some 450 households could lose their homes.

The council has promised to give these people priority to eventually return to other parts of the estate when housing becomes available. But in a city with 32,000 people on the housing register and often hundreds bidding for a single council home, it has refused to make written guarantees. Council officials, however, point out that if the tower blocks are not sold off, the total number of council residences will be the same after the PFI scheme as before.

Lloyd Lythe, 78, arrived in 1959 as one of the first tenants in the original wave of regeneration in Little London. He knows everyone on the estate and everyone knows him. Now the Carlton Tower block in which he has lived for decades will be bulldozed to make way for new housing. He hasn't a clue where he'll go. "It's not right," he sighs. "I've worked hard all my life, paid tax, kept out of bother." If Lythe agrees to leave the area, the council will pay £3,800 compensation. "£3,800 for 48 years," he laughs.

Some residents may be happy to leave but Lythe's not interested in the money – nor he is sitting back waiting for the demolition ball.