

Save Little London Newsletter

Email us: savelittlelondon@gmail.com

14 March, 2006

Why we are here today

We are tenants, residents and supporters of Little London, a community existing on the edge of the city centre. We are here today to tell Leeds City Council that we don't want 435 council homes demolished on our estate. We don't want to be forced out of our own community as part of their proposed 'regeneration scheme'. We just want decent council homes to live in.

The background

In March 2002, tenants and residents of Woodhouse and Little London area of Leeds were balloted by Leeds City Council on whether they wanted a £35m Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to regenerate council housing in their area.

Under this PFI, money would be lent to developers up front by private banks to finance the refurbishment of our homes and area. The PFI 'consortium' would then manage the council housing for the next 30 years, collecting the rents in order to pay off the loan. In return, some council land and housing would be sold off for developers to turn into private flats or homes so as to make the PFI lucrative for the private sector.

The plan involved removing around a quarter of council homes (and the people living in them) by selling or leasing off some of the tower block flats we live in to a private

developer, and demolishing other homes to allow the developer to build so-called "affordable housing" for sale.

The Council called it a "once in a lifetime offer". However, we didn't really want to see our family or friends evicted so we could have a better home. We also realised that the Council was attempting to "gentrify" the area – that is, change the nature and ownership of some of the housing stock and land in order to attract richer people in and kick poorer people out.

Little London estate is a particularly lucrative site for property development because it stands right on the city centre boundary. Reducing the amount of council housing and increasing the amount of so-called affordable and private homes would enable middle class city workers to move in, and allow developers to make a small fortune from being able to charge the hyper-inflated city rates for flats and houses.



Little London will soon be 'for sale' under the Council's PFI scheme



The Council ignored our wishes

So when it came to the ballot, 54% of voting residents in Little London and Woodhouse said NO to the proposed PFI regeneration on a whopping 67% turnout – compare this to appalling 26.9% turnout for the Hyde Park and Woodhouse ward in the 2004 council elections and you can see the strength of feeling!

When no doesn't mean no

For Leeds City Council, however, this was the "wrong result" and they immediately set about correcting it. Using a detailed breakdown of the results across the area, they were able to determine that there was a majority in favour of PFI within the Little London area by itself.

Magically, within weeks they had devised a new regeneration proposal just for Little London and with Woodhouse residents now removed, re-balloted council tenants in the former area and got the YES vote they were after. However, almost half of tenants eligible to vote did not do so (46%), giving the PFI scheme no real democratic mandate.

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2002-2005: Nothing happens

After the second ballot, nothing happened for three and a half years. No regeneration took place; hardly any repairs happened. Finally, in May 2005, the Council invited tenants' representatives to a meeting to take the Little London PFI regeneration forward.

However, because of the three and half year delay, the government forced Leeds City Council to consult residents again and offered a choice between the major PFI scheme – now estimated at £85m – or a more modest £20m repair process to get all council homes up to the government's minimum Decency standard by 2010.

The truth about the PFI

When we saw the small print, we couldn't believe it. The PFI scheme – now called Comprehensive Regeneration – would see 435 council homes demolished or sold off to private developers. Only 125 new council homes would be built to replace those lost.

The released land and property would instead be used to create 400 new or refurbished private homes on the estate. 300 of this new private housing would be earmarked as "affordable" – between £55,000 and £110,000! Currently, council tenants can buy their flats for as little as £6,000 and their homes for around £20,000 under the 'right to buy' policy.

What this means in human terms is the forced removal from their homes of anywhere between 500 and 1000 people. If they agree to leave, they will receive £3,800 compensation plus moving costs minus any rent arrears; but if they want to stay, they would still leave the estate and would receive no compensation and no guarantee that they would be rehoused in Little London when regeneration work has finished.

Worse, work would not start until at least late 2008 and major rebuilding would not be completed until at least 2013 with the Council unable to guarantee an end date.

A 'con'-sultation

In February of this year, the Council conducted a two week door-to-door consultation of Little London's 1500 tenancies on the two options for improving the area.

This consultation, which cost in excess of £2 million of taxpayers money, was supposed to be fair and balanced. Yet in reality, the Council had already decided that they favoured the Comprehensive Regeneration Option and the aim of the consultation was not to "consult" but to "convince" enough tenants that the PFI scheme was what they really wanted.

This determination to push residents down the PFI road was seen in the unashamedly biased and totally illegitimate

nature of the door to door consultation itself. The complex information was only in English, discriminating against residents who have a different first language. Tenants who were housed in property sub-letted by the Council to various agencies were barred from the consultation.

The information sheets given to tenants emphasized all the negative aspects of the Decent Homes option and all the positive aspects of the PFI scheme. There was no mention that a large number of residents would be forced to leave Little London under Comprehensive Regeneration, and that the Council "could not guarantee that those forced to leave who wanted to stay would eventually be rehoused in Little London".

Unsurprisingly, in the face of Council propaganda, the results of the consultation released last week show a majority in favour of the PFI scheme.

We fight on to win

We don't recognise the results of the consultation. The process was flawed and unfair. We are going to fight the Council all the way to save our homes from demolition and stop private developers making £millions out of our misery. A legal challenge is pending, independent candidates for the May elections are standing by.

THANKS FOR READING!
PLEASE SUPPORT US!