



Response to Little London Draft Development Framework Consultation

To: Planning and Economic Policy Department, Leeds City Council

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1. Introduction

I am responding to the consultation in two capacities; one as an academic researcher employed on a two year ESRC action research project ('Autonomous Geographies') to look at how working class communities like Little London understand and critically engage with regeneration schemes using public-private partnerships; the other as the Community Advisor to the Little London Tenants and Residents Association, who have asked me to write an independent response to assist their own understanding of the development framework.

The response has been informed by a prolonged period of participant observation in the community and a number of interviews with members of LLTRA, Community Action Little London and Servias (CALLS), individual tenants and residents, and council officers in the Neighbourhoods and Housing and Development departments of Leeds City Council. However, they bear no responsibility for the views contained herein.

This document begins with a brief overview of the positive aspects of the development framework. This is followed by the negative aspects with some recommendations for the Council to consider. The conclusion argues that the draft development framework has much to commend it as well as much to reconsider, especially in relation to the proposed housing developments.

2. Positive aspects of the Draft Development Framework

Overall, the Council's holistic vision of the future physical form of Little London in terms of urban design and planning has some encouraging features that will probably find much support in the local community. These include:

- A range of new, modern housing types and brand new council housing
- The proposed environmental re-modelling, which will hopefully make the estate a more pleasant, safe and accessible place to live, work and pass through
- The Council's desire to see the 125 new council homes built at Carlton Gate to replace the majority of those scheduled to be lost
- The proposal to have 35 family units of council housing in this scheme and more family housing in general
- A brand new, publicly-owned community centre, which will be very popular
- Improved facilities for local shops and business are needed
- The creation and enhancement of public spaces, squares and walkways
- The creation of Lovell Park Avenue and the Green Corridor

It is particularly encouraging to see such a strong and robust set of guidelines and parameters, and the holistic approach being adopted. It is very much hoped that this framework does not become watered down during the competitive dialogue and final negotiations of the PFI procurement process.

3. Negative aspects of the Draft Development Framework

If the overall Draft Development Framework is to be commended for its principles of urban design and planning, it also contains a number of proposals and aspects that could undermine and negate the Council's principal stated objectives:

- to support and maintain decent neighbourhoods
- to help create community cohesion and support communities to be healthy and confident
- to sustain healthy, accessible housing markets
- to promote sustainability in all senses, especially with regards to the environment.

These main negative aspects are as follows:

3.1 Housing market implications

At the heart of the Draft Development Framework's vision for Little London is a significant change in the structure and dynamics of the local housing market. The Council proposes demolishing at least 140 council homes in the area (possibly 152 based on earlier figures with no guarantees that this will be the final total), re-providing 125 council homes, and building 100+ homes for market sale. The future of three more local authority multi-storey blocks – Lovell Park Flats – containing 297 homes is currently in the balance with the Council reviewing its decision to sell them off to a developer for refurbishment as flats for sub-market sale. Overall, this represents a major change in the mix of housing tenures towards the free market and away from social housing. There are several serious shortcomings to this approach related to affordability.

3.1.1 Affordable housing crisis

As figures from Leeds City Council demonstrate, Leeds is facing an affordable housing crisis. There are between 23,000 and 31,000 people on the Leeds Housing Register and possibly thousands more in vulnerable housing situations are not registered. Currently the lowest house prices in Leeds are more than four times the average salary while each month 6,000 people "bid" against each other for just 500 available social homes (Jones, 2006). This scenario

will get considerably worse over the next ten years caused by rising house prices, the estimated reduction in council housing by 10-15,000 and the current low rate of new build affordable housing. Leeds needs at least 1889 new affordable homes per year but is currently only building 240 on average per year (Outside 2007a). The City Centre in particular suffers from a lack of affordable housing. Therefore, Leeds – and Little London – desperately needs to retain its existing social rented stock. In the present context, the Council's planned reduction in the amount of local authority-owned housing in Little London by between 15 and 27 units (with possibly 297 more to go) is counter-productive and iniquitous. Moreover, the long term worry is that the prospect of housing refurbishment and estate regeneration could lead to an increase in Right to Buy sales in the area now due to the prospect of rising house prices in the future and thus high sell on values in the longer term. This could significantly erode the stock of local authority housing in the community and increase the unaffordability of housing in Little London and across Leeds.

It is highly unlikely that the new housing for market sale and rent will be affordable to most of the people of Little London or anywhere else in Leeds. The Council's policy is to oblige development sites of above 15 dwellings to have 25% affordable housing, split between 40% social rented and 60% submarket. It is not yet clear how many of the sites will pass the 15 dwelling level. The Council has a poor enforcement record in meeting its own affordable housing targets. In any case, the government's definition of affordability that underpins these schemes is simply out of step with reality – most people cannot afford so-called affordable house prices.

3.1.2 Rent rises for re-housed tenants

By demolishing at least 140 council-owned homes on the estate, a large number of individuals and families are being forced to bid for new housing either in Little London (which is relatively scarce) or across the city. There is evidence that some low income households have already been hit by a rent rise even though they moved within the Little London area.

3.1.3 Leaseholders priced out of the housing market

Experience of the on-going regeneration in Cross Green suggests that leaseholders will either be lumbered with a property swap they don't want, or will receive inadequate compensation based on under-valuations of their homes, denying them the chance of buying a new home in a neighbourhood that they want to live in.

3.1.4 No justification for demolishing existing council housing

There appears to be no evidence provided by Leeds City Council on cost or structural grounds to justify the demolition of Carlton Towers and the nearby maisonettes. If there is evidence from any stock condition survey to justify their demolition then this should be made available to tenants and residents to remove feelings of distrust. If not, then there is no reason why Carlton Towers shouldn't be retained, refurbished and modernised, with accompanying environmental re-modelling outside to make it a safe, secure and pleasant place to live. The absence of any justification for demolition leaves open the suspicion that the Council is demolishing perfectly reasonable housing in order to create a large enough development site to get the private sector interested in the scheme. What developers might want should have no influence on what is sustainable and right for the area.

3.1.5 No housing market justification

In order to make such a major change in the local housing market, the Council must provide good grounds for doing so. Across Leeds, council housing is being brought up to the government's minimum decency standard without recourse to PFI or comprehensive regeneration. In its 2006 Outline Business Case for the Little London PFI, the Council argued that Little London had a "fragile housing market" (Leeds City Council 2006: 3). However, if this is true and Little London is a special case, then there must be a rigorous evidence base for intervention. In my view, this evidence base either does not exist or has not yet been adequately presented by the Council. Statistics on crime, poverty, deprivation, unemployment and social exclusion tend to be based on the 2001 Census, making them completely out of date. Anecdotal evidence, meanwhile, suggests the area has improved dramatically in these areas. The performance of the housing market has similarly improved with the number of voids and the frequency of turnovers much reduced from six years ago when the PFI scheme was first proposed. According to the Council's own Neighbourhood-Oriented Model of Area Demand (NOMAD), Little London's score has improved from 78.33% (indicating significant decline) in 2002 to 53.3% (on the edge of decline), just 3.3% from being classified as "popular with specific problems" (Outside 2007: 16). In short, the area is much more stable and demand for council housing remains strong. In a wider context, Little London housing market crosses over into the City Centre housing market, 98.2% of which is private and predominantly unaffordable to most households in Leeds (Outside 2007b).

Recommendation: Leeds City Council should significantly reduce the amount of new build market housing and significantly increase the amount of new council housing to be built in Little London. Improving the existing council housing stock will go a long way towards reinforcing the area's upward trend.

3.2 The environmental costs

The overall environmental plans for Little London appear thoughtful and overdue. However, the framework also has some worrying implications for the environment, particularly on the net loss of green and open space and the eco-costs of demolition.

3.2.1 Net loss of green and open space

It is clear that the Council's proposals would mean a net loss of green and open space to the community with implications for natural habitat, biodiversity, sustainability, health and wellbeing. Within Little London there are 3 areas formally defined as Protected Green Space on which development is not permitted (except for outdoor recreation) unless the need for Green Space is already met and a suitable alternative site can be identified and laid out in an area of identified shortfall. The Council proposes development on 2 of the 3 Protected Green Space areas and also on three other open green areas. It is true that some of the existing Green Space and open green areas are either in need of serious investment, are unused or are unusable, and thus proposals to bring these spaces up to a higher qualitative level are welcome. However, the concern remains that at the end of the development phase, Little London is going to have considerably less green and open space to enjoy than before.

Recommendation: The Council should really be looking to increase and enhance Green Space in the inner city especially given the lack of green and public spaces in the City Centre, a situation likely to further decline given the current city centre development. The development sites should be reduced in size and number.

3.2.2 The eco-costs of demolition

The proposed demolition of housing raises the question of the environment. The Council is obliged to carry out policies under the principles of sustainable development and tackling climate change. From an environmental point of view, the refurbishment or re-use of a building is generally better than demolition. The environmental costs of energy, water and materials for refurbishment / re-use are less, there is less traffic, noise and dust pollution. It is also more convenient and financially sound as the time it takes to refurbish or re-use is generally quicker than for demolition and rebuilding. Only when a building has deteriorated to a point where it cannot be saved and no further use can be envisaged, should demolition be considered – this is clearly not the case for Carlton Towers or the maisonettes.

3.3 The use of the Private Finance Initiative

The Draft Development Framework proposes to use the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to fund the housing refurbishment and the environmental improvements. The development sites will form a separate contract, albeit part of the overall PFI scheme. Much has been written about the disastrous experience of PFI in hospitals, schools, council housing and other public services and facilities (see Craig 2006, Monbiot 2000, Pollack et al 2004). In short, the use of PFI is extremely worrying and opens up the strong possibility that the repairs, maintenance and re-modelling needed for the area will be done badly at hugely inflated cost to tenants, leaseholders and the taxpayer. Here is a summary of the recurring problems:

- PFI contracts take longer to procure and are more expensive than traditional methods, leading to delays in housing refurbishment and decency being met
- In 2005, 5 of the 8 first-round PFI housing pathfinders had not reached contractual agreement, 6 years after the government initiated the scheme
- The first round of PFI housing 'pathfinders' were on average 88% above their original estimated cost; the amount being sought from central government for PFI has risen by 250% (Hodges & Grubnic, 2005); delays of months can cost £ms over 20 years
- There are the huge costs of the bidding process as the Council must employ an army of legal, financial and technical experts from the private sector; consultancy fees during procurement average £500,000
- Affordability problems emerge if council properties remain un-let and there are vacancies – the Council must pay for the increasing costs transfer resources from other parts of HRA to for its PFI obligations
- PFI will mean a 20 year contract that the Council and tenants are locked into, giving little flexibility to change or respond to developments as they arise
- PFI means a chain of sub-contracting firms, all of whom are pressured to cut costs (wages, raw materials, etc) and thus reduce the quality of their work

Recommendation: The experience of PFI is clear: local authorities should wherever possible try to avoid it. This is difficult due to central government's tight constraints on local authority spending. However, as argued below, there is little evidence-based justification for Little London to be subjected to such a scale of intervention that necessitates PFI. Explanations with full costings as to why the ALMO doesn't have sufficient funds to invest in decent homes across Little London need to be made transparent.

3.4 Loss of garages

The proposed removal of most of the garages on the estate has some merits on grounds of safety, security and opening up amenity space. But it will also almost certainly push up insurance premiums for car owners and make Little London a more expensive place to live for many tenants and residents.

Recommendation: safer, better designed garages should be re-provided.

3.5 Community breakdown and escalating tensions

Little London is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-faith community and suffers very little social tension. However, the demolition of Carlton Towers and the maisonettes at Carlton Gate and Carr, and the strong possibility that many individuals and families will leave Little London due to the scarcity of housing opportunities on offer, has the potential to damage the social fabric of the local community. The current re-housing process is forcing the people in the Carltons to compete against each other for the scarce housing on offer as it becomes available in dribs and drabs. This is leading to frustration and fear among tenants and residents, and some are opting to bid for housing outside Little London when they actually want to stay here. This has potentially destructive implications for community stability, cohesion and well-being. I have heard firsthand accounts from tenants and residents complaining that relatively newly arrived 'foreigners' are getting preferential treatment ahead of those who have been there for years. The regeneration process as currently managed has the potential to create divisions and strife and see the community divide along racial and cultural lines. Worse, one of the major success stories in terms of community activism – Community Action Little London and Servias (CALLS) – will be made homeless by the demolition of Carlton Towers with the threat of having to close down if new premises for little or no rent can't be found.

Recommendation: if the Carlton homes must be demolished, then a different way of re-housing people must be found. One solution might be to place a hold on emptying the maisonettes and insist that new council housing is built first to allow a seamless transfer of people into the new housing. CALLS should be given free / cheap office space in any mixed development or the Community Centre.

3.6 Commercial hub

There are real concerns that the re-development of the shopping area will lead to existing local businesses suffering and being forced out of the area due to rising rents. Given the precarious situation of local post offices, this would be a disastrous development for Little London due to central role of the post office in community life – it is the heart of the community in many respects. There could see the bigger chains and brands take over with knock-on rises in retail prices that would run counter to the principles of sustainable development

Recommendation: the Council should retain ownership / control over the commercial hub site so that it can ensure rents do not rise to the detriment of local business.

3.7 Community centre

The inclusion in the development framework of a brand new community centre for Little London is extremely positive. However, there are a number of concerns about the eventual

building. First, the framework plans to re-provide a community centre of the existing size, yet the current size is arguably too small to encompass all the community activities that could take place, especially when considering that Little London's population is set to expand in the next 3-5 years. Second, there are concerns that it will be managed using a social enterprise model with the Council retaining ownership (and thus ultimate control) of the building and the community – or local NGOs – being made to part or full-finance the day to day costs by running it as a not-for-profit business. The experience of social enterprise is mixed, but there is strong evidence that business priorities – namely making ends meet – take over and the principle of 'free or cheap' facilities for the local community is eroded by the need to hire out spaces on a commercial basis. This feeds into a wider concern that the Council's increasing contractual liabilities under PFI (currently billions of pounds) are placing a huge squeeze on the general budget and as a result community centres face rationalisation, with more pressures to offload the cost of running these spaces to the community and voluntary sector and possible closures in the pipeline.

Recommendation: the new community centre should remain council owned and financed with the local community given the chance and support to run the day to day management.

3.8 Schools and Children's welfare

There are concerns about the impact that population fluctuations in Little London will have on both the existing schools (Little London Community Primary School and Blenheim Primary), and the children of the area. The potential loss of young children to the area from now until 2009 could have negative implications for the schools that must keep their intake levels up or risk losing funding and possible closure. If population falls did lead to this scenario, then the implications of population increases with the new housing after 2009 could be calamitous with the sole remaining school over-subscribed. All of this would have adverse effects on children's education and welfare as too would the possible displacement of young people from Little London if they had to move school and lose touch with friends and family.

Recommendation: there should be no rush to judgement on school intake numbers – a decision about the long term future of both schools should only be taken several years after the re-development of Little London has taken place .

3.9 Surrounding regeneration and development

The re-development of Little London cannot be judged in isolation from the Council's longer term plans for the immediate surrounding area. For example, there is the planned Cultural / Student Quarter at Brunswick Place, the student flats currently going up and planned for the future, the mooted re-development of the Army Barracks site and the possible closure and re-development of Blenheim Primary School playing fields. This regeneration activity is going to dramatically change the face of the surrounding area. There are concerns within the community about the potential for increased crime, disruptive nightlife, through traffic, and house prices / rents with a more gentrified quarter of bars, restaurants and mainly middle class students next door.

Recommendation: the Council needs to consider now the impact of its other regeneration projects on the design and re-development of Little London and alter its plans accordingly. These new developments should either extend the principle of mixed communities with a good supply of council housing, or, should instead provide much of the market housing scheduled for Little London and allow more social rented housing to be built.

4. Conclusion

The Draft Development Framework for Little London shows that Leeds City Council is serious about regeneration and is committed to ensuring strong principles and parameters within which the PFI scheme will have to operate. It is, overall, an encouraging document with plenty in to commend, especially the new physical environment being planned.

However, there are also several negative aspects and many more concerns that deserve to be reconsidered by the Council. Leeds will lose yet more council housing as a result of this scheme at a time when it needs to build it again, while there is evidence that re-housed tenants are being hit with higher rents and leaseholders are being priced out of the housing market. The case for demolition, on which so much of this plan rests, is also unproven. There are environmental costs associated with the proposed loss of green and open space and the demolition of housing, not to mention the well known problems that have riddled the Private Finance Initiative since day one and which have tax and public service implications for everyone in Leeds.

Added to this are concerns about the loss of garages, whether there will be any affordable housing that is actually affordable, the breaking up of the community and the escalating racial tensions, the possible threat to the local community action group, the possible harmful effects on local business of a more up-market commercial hub, the size and management of the new community centre, the impact of population change on the local schools and thus for local children, and the possible development projects surrounding Little London in the near future that could increase crime and disrupt community life.

Whether all or some of these possible scenarios actually become real is unknown at the moment. However, it is impossible not to conclude that in terms of an overall regeneration encompassing major re-development and re-design, there is a major evidence gap to justify such a dramatic, lengthy and expensive intervention in Little London. The estate certainly needs a lot of investment – because it has been neglected for the past three decades. But investment is not the same as a development vision that aims to “maximise the market potential of the area” as set out in page 6 of the draft development framework. This speaks more of a desire to gentrify the community as part of the city centre growth strategy.

References

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