



Friends of Newsham Park

*An organisation committed to making Newsham
Park a better place for the people of Liverpool*

PRESS RELEASE – NO EMBARGO

Prescott's Replacement Prods Council to Act Over Dangerous Historic Properties

4th June 2006

In one of her first decisions after replacing John Prescott as the Government Minister responsible for housing and planning, Ruth Kelly has served notice on Liverpool City Council, forcing it to sell off a row of derelict Victorian villas blighting one of Liverpool's finest historic parks. According to a letter to residents from ex-Chief Executive Sir David Henshaw, the council had been seeking to demolish the villas with money from her predecessor John Prescott's controversial New Heartlands 'Pathfinder' programme.

The decision by his replacement will delight residents of Newsham Park, in the inner city Kensington and Fairfield district of Liverpool, who have been campaigning to restore the large empty properties owned by the council and housing associations around the Grade II listed green space. It may also have wider implications, giving hope to communities across the country blighted by publicly owned land and buildings left in derelict condition.

The city and housing association owned homes around Prescott Drive have been a magnet for anti-social behaviour and arson since being left to rot some years ago. A series of suspicious fires in houses owned by Riverside Housing, LHT and the council culminated in an attack last December in which a man died.

Residents say the council and housing association's failure to invest in upkeep is holding the area back, at a time when many privately owned houses around the park have been undergoing extensive restoration thanks to Liverpool's booming housing market.

Earlier this year the press reported how local campaigner Jonathan Brown had uncovered a little known piece of planning legislation dating back to 1980 known as a 'PROD' – a Public Request to Order Disposal, which applies to publicly owned land that is harming the amenity of an area.

It was not clear at that stage whether the Government would accept the need to take legal action against the city council, but Mr Brown has now received a letter saying the new Secretary of State Ruth Kelly is "minded to agree" to his request, and has given the council notice that she proposes to make a direction "**requiring them to take steps for the disposal of their interest in the land**". This will open the door for restoration specialists to take on the properties and refurbish them for sale. The council have 42 days to explain why they should keep the land.

The reasons for Ruth Kelly's intervention, set out in a letter to the City Solicitor from the Government Office for the North West's Director of Planning Jo Lappin, are that:

"on the basis of evidence so far available to her, it appears that the land is not being used by the City Council for the performance of their functions; and, furthermore, she is not so far satisfied that the City Council has any firm plans to sell, develop or bring the land into use within a reasonable timescale."

Mr Brown said "The council and housing associations admit that they have no plans to invest in any of these homes until after 2010. This decade of dereliction is far too long to wait when public property is left in such dangerous condition, blighting a beautiful conservation area. The Victorian villas deserve to be restored to help solve Liverpool's housing crisis, and the money from sales 'ring-fenced' to invest back in the neglected historic park."

The Friends of Newsham Park have already successfully pressed the council and social landlord Riverside Housing to dispose of two derelict villas they owned on Judges Drive, on the north side of the park. The sale attracted considerable interest and yielded a £320,000 capital receipt for the city, which Kensington and Fairfield Councillor Frank Doran suggested would be spent locally. The buyer is obliged to restore the homes within two years or forfeit possession.

The community group scored a further victory in April when Tuebrook opposition Liberal Councillor Steve Radford persuaded the council's Resources Committee to pass a motion requesting

“that all long term vacant properties in the Newsham Park and Fairfield area are put up for commercial sale on the open market, bearing in mind the failure of the Council to protect the area.”

This has not yet been approved by the ruling Executive Board, but is supported by new Kensington and Fairfield Councillor Louise Baldock, who campaigned for restoration of Newsham Park during the recent local elections on May 4th, defeating Lib-Dem incumbent of 19 years Cllr Jimmy Kendrick in what was considered the city's biggest election upset of the night. The level of derelict properties across the ward was seen by observers as a decisive local issue, with Edge Lane resident Elizabeth Pascoe running as a Liberal "Stop Demolishing – Start Renovating" candidate and splitting the vote.

It is thought to be the first time that the legislation has been used in this way, and other housing and heritage campaign groups across Liverpool and the country will be considering Ruth Kelly's decision with interest.

ENDS – 775 words

Notes for Editors:

National body the Empty Homes Agency advised Newsham Park residents of the statutory right of any citizen to make what is known as a "PROD" - Public Request to Order Disposal - under the 1980 Local Government, Planning and Land Act, where property owned by public bodies is harming the amenity of an area.

The rule is an interesting legislative hangover from Mrs Thatcher's reign, originally aimed to encourage the disposal of land held by nationalised industries to private developers. But it applies to any underused property in public ownership.

It is not thought to have been activated for many years so the action by the Friends of Newsham Park constitutes an interesting legal move that may impact on local authorities including Liverpool who keep large stocks of derelict and underused property pending future development and demolition proposals.

The Friends group have been supported by local councillors, the Merseyside Civic Society and national amenity societies, particularly SAVE Britain's Heritage.

Park Information at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newsham_Park

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Friends of Newsham Park

Long-term neglect of large 6 to 8 bedroom family Villas in the Newsham Park conservation area is effectively a policy of demolition by stealth. It has undermined private investment around the Grade II Listed park and wasted key public assets.

Above left: 16 Prescot Drive from site of No 14; Above Right: Nos. 28, 26 Judges Drive (LCC/Riverside)



Above left: Prescot Drive from Newsham Park; Above Right: Nos. 24 , 22, 20 Prescot Drive (all council)

N.b. 20 and 18 burnt out since this photo taken



Above left: 22, 20, 18 Prescot Drive from Newsham Park; Above Right: Nos. 16 , site of No.14 (council/LHT)



Above left: 16 from site of 14 Prescot Drive; Above Right: Good condition on north side of the park (private)