

## **Deputation to the Council by Hands Off Our Homes**

**22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2009.**

**The draft Leeds Housing Strategy 2009 – 2012 notes that the Council has not built new Council housing since the 1980s.**

**We would ask all Council members to realistically face up to the consequences of that policy over the last 25 years or so because the period covers times when all the major parties have been at some time in control of Leeds City Council and both Labour and Conservative parties have had long periods in Government nationally.**

**For Leeds the policy to neglect Council house building has been disastrous. The figures will vary a little but it appears to be accepted that there are something in the region of 25,000 households on the council house waiting list and sometimes over 500 people bidding each week for one or two desirable homes that come up. Without a ranking of priority extra there seems little point in making the effort to bid for a home yet people do so in their hundreds out of desperation.**

**The full effects of the economic downturn are probably yet to be fully appreciated but already homelessness through mortgage repossessions is running at levels that are 300% higher than a few years ago and landlord evictions are at their highest rate for five years.**

**There has been a belief that “the market” could be relied upon to provide the housing required by the people of Leeds. However, with 25,000 waiting for a home and 17,500 empty homes in Leeds there appears to be a slight imbalance in need of speedy correction. We believe that it is wrong to blame the current problems on a financial crisis or “credit crunch” *out there***

**We note that the Housing Strategy document suggest that “home ownership remains the preferred tenure for the majority of people in Leeds” but what people might want and what they can obtain may be two different things. Gone are the days (we hope) of irresponsible lending by Banks and Building Societies and therefore the deposits required to be saved by potential home owners, the income required to maintain mortgage repayments, the credit rating deemed acceptable to a mortgage lender and the security of employment that is necessary for the option to purchase to become a realistic option is just not available to the vast majority of non-owners in Leeds. In such circumstances the security of a well built and maintained council property once again becomes attractive, particularly to those who have recently dipped their toes in to the house buying market and found the water less than agreeable**

**The Easel project and other private developments in Gipton have not created homes that are available to those former occupants of Council properties who have seen their homes demolished to make way for new private development that has now magically disappeared. The fact that half of the houses being built by Bellway Homes in Gipton and Seacroft as part of the EASEL project have been bought by the Council and a report to the Executive board disclosed that the regeneration programme had created one new job for a joiners apprentice suggest that an alternative strategy is required.**

**Let us pretend that affordable housing is affordable for the moment. The Draft Housing Strategy document informs us that without a major council housing programme the delivery of 'affordable housing' is largely dependent on delivery through the planning system as a result of wider private housing development.**

**This policy has been a total disaster in Leeds and across the country and we are now paying the price. In 2003, Leeds had an annual predicted shortfall of 480 affordable homes per annum until 2008 – over that period, Leeds averaged around 3288 new homes a year yet only 10% of these were 'affordable'. This contravened the UDP's affordability requirement of 15-25% of all new houses. The main reason – the Council's decision to enforce a lower rate of affordable housing from city centre apartment developments, and its subsequent failure to even enforce its own rules.**

**Now, according to the Council's own Housing Market Assessment, that shortfall is 1889 affordable homes per annum to 2021. We have no chance of getting anywhere near this number and the Council has never even tried. Its target was just 1800 affordable units over three years, less than a third of what is required, and that was before the credit crunch and the collapse of private house building.**

**The Council has now had to revise their plans for house building down from 10,200 new homes to 8,400 over a three year period to 2011 which the Council feels is a target they are confident of achieving despite the fact that there were only 100 recorded housing starts per month as of February 2009.**

**There has been a total failure of housing policy based on reliance on the private market. What we are calling for is that the lessons be learned and for there to be investment in first class public housing. Builders facing bankruptcy should be offered the chance to build that council housing designed to the highest environmental standards. It is the most effective way to tackle housing need, climate change and unemployment all at the same time.**

**On the 29<sup>th</sup> of January this year Gordon Brown addressed a Local Government Network conference saying "In the past we have placed restrictions on local authorities.....Today let me make it clear, if local authorities can convince us that they can deliver quickly – and cost effectively – more of the housing that Britain needs, and if local authorities can build social housing then we will be prepared to give them our full backing and put aside**

**anything that stands in their way..... we will not allow old arguments and old ideologies to stop us getting on with the job”.**

**. We hope this Council will embrace the new mood for council housing and leave the market to its own devices.**

**The control of council housing is also of great importance. Two of the three ALMOs set up to manage council housing have been found wanting. Only those with a three star rating on audit can bid unilaterally for grant to build, purchase or lease homes. We believe that all council housing should be taken back under the control of a democratically accountable Housing department.**

**But what about those who need houses now and cannot wait for a council house programme to be planned, financed and constructed?**

**There are 17,500 empty properties in Leeds. 15,200 of these are privately owned and a large proportion is believed to be the one or two bedroom apartments in the city centre. In March this year the government and Empty Homes Agency issued new guidelines as part of a new push to get councils to make more use of their Empty Dwelling powers. We are aware that there is some reluctance in Leeds to use the powers available in order to take over available properties. We ask - Which is more important, an already collapsed property market or people who need homes to live in?**

**Incredibly, the council is still demolishing houses that it is not planning to replace. As an example 36 homes on the New Wortley estate, some of which are occupied, are to be demolished when at the present time there is an obvious need for renovation rather than demolition.**

**Our demands:**

- **Prioritise land and available resources for council house building**
- **Step up the Empty Homes strategy – use your powers**
- **A moratorium on all demolitions of homes**

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