

SAVE wins hard fought Welsh Streets Public Inquiry

Pickles says leaving Ringo Starr's birthplace in a stub of street is not enough.

Liverpool's Welsh Streets have been saved from destruction thanks to a strong decision from the Secretary of State following a three-week public inquiry last summer.

In his decision letter the Secretary of State strongly supports SAVE's arguments, and does not accept the conclusions of the Inspector Christine Thorby who recommended permission for the planning application which proposed to demolish 400 of the 440 terraced houses on the site, bringing only 40 back into use.

Crucially, the Secretary of State calls for market testing and other options for refurbishment stating that demolition should be a last resort.

He writes:

"Overall... the Secretary of State is not persuaded that the scale of demolition proposed in this case - has been demonstrated to be necessary and that sufficient forms of market testing and options involving more refurbishment have been exhausted. Consequently... he concludes that the proposal does conflict with the policy set out in the May 2013 Written Ministerial Statement to take forward George Clarke's best practice recommendations on empty homes."

The Public Inquiry took place last summer. SAVE was the sole Rule 6 party, and our team of witnesses was led by Barrister James Potts of 39 Essex Street. The grounds for the call in were: good design, conserving and enhancing the historic environment, empty homes, other matters including whether the scheme creates a healthy inclusive community, challenge of climate change, wider planning framework for both matters, and planning balance i.e. whether this is consistent

with national and local policy.

The Site

The Welsh Streets consist of a grid-plan of streets built in the 1870s as bye-law housing very close to Grade II* Princes Park. The estate layout and the terraced houses were designed by the Welsh-born architect Richard Owens and constructed by Welsh builders. They were intended to house Welsh families, among others, seeking work in the growing economy of Liverpool. Most of the streets were given Welsh names.

Until 2007 the majority of the site was still inhabited, with high levels of resident satisfaction and the properties in good condition. Since then most of the site has been emptied of its inhabitants.

In 2011, SAVE purchased 21 Madryn Street, a few doors from Ringo Starr's birthplace at Number 9, and helped a local couple bring it back into happy occupation for an initial £3,000.

SAVE bought 21 Madryn Street to prove demand and to show just how easily and cheaply these homes can be reoccupied, preventing devaluation.

The Application

The planning application was for the demolition of 400 properties with 40 retained; 16 on Madryn Street, 18 on Kelvin Grove and 6 on High Park Street. For part of the area, Phase A, there were detailed proposals for new residential development, mainly semi-detached or short terraces of two-storey houses, partly using the existing street plan but also removing Rhiwlas Street and inserting a new wide 'green street' cutting across the existing layout from Voelas Street to Kimmel Street. For the other part of the area, Phase B, between Kimmel Street and Admiral Street, comprehensive demolition was proposed and there are outline proposals for 70 new residential units, removing Gwydir Street and Treborth Street from the street plan. Residents in this area were told that they would be rehoused in the new houses on the site: however it came to light during the inquiry that this was not the case.

The SAVE Team

SAVE had a great team including forming planning and design officer Alec

Forshaw, architect Trevor Skempton, former Director of Empty Homes charity David Ireland, structural engineer Ed Morton, local Beatles historian Dave Bedford, estate agent Paul Sutton, and architectural historian Gareth Carr. We also had support from the National Trust and Professor of Architecture at Liverpool University Dr Neil Jackson, and local Beatles historian Phil Coppell. Fiona Deaton of Maisna Heritage put together an illuminating Heritage Statement about the architectural and cultural significance of the area.

Our case contained new evidence about the architect of the buildings, Richard Owens, the subject of a recent PhD thesis by our witness Gareth Carr. Thanks to his research it was established that the houses were 20 years older than was originally thought and were part of a larger estate by Owens, one of several he laid out for Liverpool at this time of great expansion for the city. Carr argued that the Welsh Streets and Owen are pivotal to the understanding and the development of the terraced house nationally and even internationally, not just in Liverpool.

The Decision from the Secretary of State 16th January 2015

Almost all of SAVE's arguments were supported by the strongly worded decision letter from the Secretary of State.

Planning Framework (NPPF):

The Secretary of State writes that the "Scheme does conflict with the Government position as set out in the Written Ministerial Statement of 10 May 2013 and the acceptance of the recommendations in George Clark's Empty Homes Review which makes clear that refurbishment and upgrading of existing homes should be the first and preferred option and that demolition of existing homes should be the last option after all forms of market testing and options for refurbishment are exhausted."

Heritage Significance:

The Secretary of State supported SAVE's heritage arguments.

"The Secretary of State agrees with SAVE (IR 59) that the Welsh Streets are of considerable significance as non-designated heritage assets of historic, architectural, cultural and social interest."

Contrary to Liverpool Council's arguments that the Welsh Streets have little or no heritage value, the Secretary of State considers, "that the surviving built and

cultural heritage in the Welsh Streets is of considerable significance for the above reasons and that the proposal would have a harmful effect on the significance of the Welsh Streets as a non-designated heritage asset.”

“The Inspector considers that there would be a change in the nature of the immediate setting from which would arise some small, less than substantial harm [IR 98]. The Secretary of State considers that the Inspector’s assessment of this harm as small underplays the degree of harm to the setting of those listing buildings that would arise from the end of the harmonious relationship that SAVE identifies (paragraph 150 Annex D to the IR) and the impact of the new housing facing onto South Street. The Inspector acknowledges that the setting of the listed buildings would not be preserved (IR 245) and the Secretary of State attaches considerable importance and weight to this.”

Design:

“The Secretary of State notes the efforts to achieve a degree of continuity with the existing heritage and townscape (paragraph 218 Annex D to the IR), but he does not agree that the design would fit in well with the character of the area (paragraph 219 Annex D to the IR). Rather, he agrees with SAVE that the design of the proposal is poor and fails to respond to local character, history and distinctiveness.”

“Though the proposals retain some of the existing street names and the geographical location and orientation of those streets, the Secretary of State considers that in other respects the existing character of the Welsh Streets would effectively be lost. Existing density would be halved and the Secretary of State agrees with SAVE that the proposed scheme takes a suburban approach given the space surrounding buildings and the focus on the private plot rather than the collective street.”

“The Secretary of State also agrees that the loss of mature street trees would be a significant loss in design and sustainability terms, and that they should be retained and managed appropriately.”

“The Secretary of State notes that new build houses themselves will not be much larger than the existing terraces in terms of internal floor space. He agrees with SAVE that the new Green Street would be an inefficient use of space, as there is no

shortage of public open space in the area”

Social well-being:

However, the Secretary of State considers that the proposals have to be considered in light of the Government’s position as set out in the Written Ministerial Statement of 10 May 2013 and the acceptance of the recommendations in George Clark’s Empty Homes Review which makes clear that refurbishment and upgrading of existing homes should be the first and preferred option and that demolition of existing homes should be the last option after all forms of market testing and options for refurbishment are exhausted.

The Beatles and Tourism:

In regards to Ringo Starr and saving the integrity of birthplace and area where he grew up, the Secretary of State agreed with SAVE that it would be detrimental to demolish most of the street where Ringo Starr was born and grew up.

“The Council state, at IR 78, that No 9 Madryn Street (birthplace of Ringo Starr) has been saved in the interests of its cultural significance, along with part of Madryn Street. The Secretary of State notes that only a stub of this terrace would be saved. The Secretary of State agrees with SAVE that the demolition of much of Madryn Street would significantly harm the ability to understand and appreciate this part of Liverpool’s Beatles heritage which he considers to be of importance to the City. Although there are other surviving terraced streets in the area where visitors could go and see a similar environment to the one where Ringo Starr was born, the Secretary of State places importance on the actual street where he was born and he agrees with SAVE that the proposal would be short sighted as regards the future tourism potential of Madryn Street.”

“The Secretary of State agrees with SAVE that the Order scheme proposal would be short sighted as regards the future tourism potential of Madryn Street.”

Conclusion from the Secretary of State:

“The Secretary of State considers that the potential viability of the scheme has been demonstrated but he is not satisfied that the purpose for which the Council is proposing to acquire the Order lands could not be achieved by alternative means.”

“The Secretary of State has concluded that there is not a compelling case in the

public interest to justify sufficiently the interference with the human rights of those with an interest in the land affected.”

Clem Cecil, SAVE Director, says: “We salute the Secretary of State’s decision. We have been arguing for the heritage value of these terraced streets for many years and we are delighted that this has now been officially acknowledged at the highest level. We heartily concur with the need to place these houses on the open market to allow buyers to come forward. It is vital now to break the deadlock that has led to these houses and the area deteriorate over so many years. Many inspiring projects are bringing empty homes back into use in Liverpool today, these streets can be next. We hope that this decision will bring a final end to demolition on this scale that was the hallmark of Pathfinder.”

Marcus Binney, SAVE President, says: “This is a triple triumph. First for saving the Streets where Ringo grew up. Second for recognising that these empty homes can be just as spacious and far outnumber the proposed replacements, and third for recognising the Welsh streets have value as a model neighbourhood laid out by one of Liverpool’s most significant builders. Our appeal to Liverpool Council is simple: Let people live in these houses again. We have bought one house and made it a pleasant home. Now the others must follow.”

Jonathan Brown, SAVE’s Northern Caseworker, says: “This victory should give some small comfort to those unnamed thousands displaced from their homes over the last 15 years. SAVE, a tiny charity with just three staff, have supported residents across these neighbourhoods, in a David and Goliath battle against a £2.2bn bureaucratic bulldozer.

“Liverpool’s Welsh Streets were an extreme example of the madness of market renewal by blight. At the start of the project they were in better condition than the city average, with fewer empty homes, and even the city council’s own figures accept that house prices were rising and conditions improving.

“From 2002 onwards they were subject to a ruthlessly managed decline by

social landlords Plus Dane Group and the city council, with tenants cajoled out, properties deliberately damaged, and owners forced to choose between living in ever-more run-down streets, or accepting derisory offers for their blighted houses.

“Community efforts at compromise were rejected out of hand, and £20m in scarce public funds spent on ruining a 140 year old neighbourhood.

“Even as national policy swung 180 degrees against demolition in favour of renovation, and alternative offers of funding came forward, the authorities insisted on completing their land assembly of the Welsh Streets, agreeing to retain a token 8% of the area as a furore over removing a Beatles birthplace exposed them to international embarrassment.

“The Secretary of State's decision draws a line under managed-decline as a tool of housing policy. Plus Dane Group and the Council should accept the news with good grace and agree to work with SAVE and renovation specialists so these houses can once again become homes. The renaissance of nearby Granby Street shows how quickly and successfully such an approach can be once the dead hand of a demolition order is lifted.”



Martin Rowley's CGI, commissioned by SAVE, of how Madryn Street could look if the houses were brought back into use

Background

Pathfinder, otherwise known as Housing Market Renewal (HMR), was introduced by John Prescott in 2002. It claimed to address alleged housing market failure in certain parts of some Northern cities, and placed 400,000 terraced houses under direct threat of demolition. The housing targeted has been predominantly Victorian and Edwardian terraced housing. The issue is not one of vacancy or of uninhabitable homes – prior to the announcement of the scheme occupation levels were normal, homes were perfectly habitable and the cost of repairs and updating would have been modest. The claim of market failure was essentially that house prices were lower than elsewhere. Some 30,000 houses have been demolished.

The policy failed to consider the human element - the effect it would have on entire communities that were uprooted and rehoused, often against their will. In March Condemnation has been cross party, and in 2011 the controversial policy

was scrapped by the present government, and resources switched from housing demolition to renovation, following a seven year campaign by SAVE and many local community groups. As a result of these efforts, public policy is now directed towards the re-use and refurbishment of empty and historic housing, with demolition only as a last resort.

For more information and images, please contact the SAVE Office on 0207 253 3500 or office@savebritainsheritage.org, or Clem Cecil on 07968 003 595, or Jonathan Brown on 07806 590 325.