

# Strategies for Buildings at Risk

## A potted history of the use of Statutory Powers in Liverpool

### **INTRO SLIDE**

- Heritage is of paramount importance to Liverpool's unique identity and also its appeal as a commercial, retail and visitor destination (more than 1.5M people live and work in the Liverpool City region). Heritage is therefore a key part of the City's present and future prosperity. It is this principle which underpins the Buildings at Risk programme that I manage in my capacity as Buildings at Risk Officer for Liverpool City Council.
- Heritage at Risk as a phenomenon is fairly self evident. However, for purposes of this presentation, it refers to individual buildings and structures of national importance and which enjoy statutory protection, i.e. are listed, but are under threat as a result of neglect or decay. Vacant properties in deteriorating condition ultimately at risk of being partially or totally lost. By their very nature heritage assets are essentially irreplaceable.

### **SLIDE 2**

- Back in 1991 when the first audit of heritage assets was made, the extent of the problem made the need for re-evaluating the approach to heritage management in the City all too apparent.
- To give you some idea of the context: in 1991 almost 1 third of listed building stock (roughly 700 buildings) were under threat (at risk or vacant / vulnerable - c325 actually at risk) and hitherto no LA intervention in terms of statutory action against negligent building owners. There was a need to turn back the clock & overcome the inertia caused by years of under investment and indifference towards redundant listed buildings. Since then it has been a steep learning curve and our current approach came about 10 years after the initial buildings at risk survey.
- The 1990s was an era of steady progress and saw numerous CAPs & HERs tackle buildings at risk in key City centre areas (Canning, Duke Street, Seymour Terrace). Successful though these schemes were they failed to address more entrenched difficulties in areas like Ropewalks where a long list of endemic problems persisted. In 2000 the situation was still characterised by:
  - An underdeveloped local economy which meant that investment in derelict historic property was largely perceived

as unprofitable. With little underlying monetary value attributable to historic fabric a short term approach was frequently adopted. The value of vacant land was very often higher than that of a redundant building which enjoyed statutory protection. This had the effect of inducing building owners to play a waiting game, by not maintaining or deliberately undermining their buildings in the hope of procuring a cleared site once the structure became sufficiently dangerous to necessitate its demolition.

- This downward spiral had a knock-on effect on neighbouring properties inducing abnormally low property values, increased vacancy & progressive deterioration.
- The class of Ownership (largely absentee landlords) was also a problem in being unable to deliver schemes, either in isolation or within key investment areas (larger land holdings).
- Lack of ingenuity or willingness on the part of private developers to go the extra mile and 'handle with care' historic buildings at risk. Dearth of necessary conservation skills.

### **SLIDE 3**

- What was required in order to bring about the necessary change in Liverpool? Hinged on recognition at a political level of:
  - i) The value of Heritage (over & above lip-service – taking up the reins by making use of stat powers available and being pro-active)
  - ii) The existence of grass roots support for local heritage within the area you are seeking to preserve / enhance. Outstanding universal value of Liverpool's buildings may not have been acknowledged by UNESCO at this stage, but it was already a well known fact in Liverpool & UK generally.
  - iii) The potential for investment in local heritage to form the basis of regeneration throughout a wider area.

### **SLIDE 4**

- The democratisation or 'unlocking' of peoples' enthusiasm for built heritage tends to put pressure on the political machine. In such an environment clear political support to make use of statutory powers for the purpose of safeguarding historic buildings and conservation areas becomes increasingly likely. The availability of public funds for tackling B@R also becomes more likely
- It also leads to greater consistency in the local authority's approach since formal action, of one sort or another, sets a precedent for

further action to be taken where similar circumstances prevail. When being pro-active the City must be, and indeed seen to be, even handed.

## SLIDE 5

- In less than 10 years LCC has gone from a “oh well, plenty more where that came from...whoops there goes another listed building” approach to something more akin to making best endeavours to save historic property under threat. Transformation complete. How did this happen?

## SLIDE 6

- Relentless local press involvement – In Liverpool the Echo’s *Stop the Rot* campaign arose spontaneously (March 2001) on account of the strength of feeling in the City over the decades of neglect of the City’s World renowned architectural heritage. Things reached crisis point when a grade II listed building began to collapse into the street, falling into the path of a local Councillor.
- Focus of interest in the historic environment lead by English Heritage (Govt adv body). They conducted an Opinion poll at the time. This revealed that 89% of those asked acknowledged the importance of heritage in regenerating Towns and Cities, and 96% acknowledge the importance of safeguarding the heritage of Liverpool.
- English Heritage had a key role to play in harnessing grass-roots support, engaging political leadership and linking up all the positive elements to ensure progress. Assisted in the funding of a full time Buildings at Risk Officer (LCC’s response to Stop the Rot) in October 2001.

## SLIDE 7

- HELP! Launched March 2002; an umbrella project with three inter related themes – buildings at risk coming under the management of the historic environment theme.
- Capital of Culture (2003) / World Heritage Inscription (2004) all proved extremely useful in developing the momentum and establishing a strategic approach towards BARs.

## SLIDE 8

- Formula for progress: When safeguarding heritage equates to establishing political credibility, this means £££ for Buildings at

Risk. Derelict buildings present a quality of life issue, a pride of place issue, an economic issue. These are the sorts of things politicians are interested in.

- BUT! Money will not just arrive in the BAR Bank– you need keep on asking for it. Don't ask you don't get, Ask once and you'll probably get nothing, keep asking and eventually you will get something – if only to silence the weary. By 2003 We got £1 Million from NWDA + best part of £800k from EH & the City Council to sustain a 4 year programme. This sounds like a decent war-chest but among 300+ BARs such an amount simply represents the beginning of the campaign.

## **SLIDE 9**

- With these generous but limited funds a Radical Prioritisation of Building at Risk throughout the City based on 1991 survey data was carried out. Combination of severity of condition & perceived benefit of a successful outcome. Striking a balance between saving what is in worst condition and intervening where the greatest conservation gain will be made.
- Hit list of 65 Buildings drawn up.
- All buildings surveyed to point of identifying the need for urgent works.
- Bone fide cases graduated to the next stage of the programme.

## **SLIDE 10**

- Since 2002, 12 Urgent Works Notices have been served – 10 implemented by the City Council, 2 by building owners. 4 Repairs Notices have been served, 3 CPOs made under.
- Collective effort has lead to considerable peripheral benefits, not least in the sense that the City Council are no longer afraid of using its powers and has become much more efficient at exercising them.
- The fear of statutory action in the wake of 'threatened notices' backed up by instances of decisive LCC intervention has induced many private owners to improve their properties.
- Of the 71 included within the 3 year NWDA programme; 18 have been restored, 19 have been temporarily stabilised under UWN legislation and, regrettably, 15 have been demolished.
- Last figure demonstrates that it is impossible to prevent all losses, however desirable it might be. Programme envisaged as a pragmatic attempt to stimulate regeneration and to prevent further losses wherever possible through implementation of structural holding works of a temporary nature.

- The remaining 19 buildings remain subject to ongoing monitoring / possible future action depending on the availability of funding – highlights the importance of a long-term budget to ensure the effectiveness of a large scale Building at Risk campaign.

### **SLIDE 11**

- Since 1991 the percentage of Buildings at Risk in Liverpool has fallen from 14% to 5.3%. National average is between 5 and 6%.

### **SLIDE 12 – In conclusion...**

- Statutory powers certainly do work, but not necessarily in the way you might expect. In Liverpool we have now become accustomed to the unexpected. Legal processes can be extremely slow, to the detriment of the hist env., and the order in which things happen is frequently unpredictable when dealing with buildings which have serious structural defects / economic shortfall / chronic maintenance backlog. With a spirit of perseverance one should, however, proceed undaunted.
- The lesson to be taken from Liverpool's experience is don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. This may mean taking people to court and getting down to the nitty gritty of why and how buildings fall apart. After all it is the proper role of the local authority to engage pro-actively in the business of saving listed buildings. In terms of the 'hard cases' concerning everyday grade II LBs, if LAs don't intervene nobody else will. BPTs might be developers of last resort. Local authorities have a responsibility to make this last resort a possibility.