

Housing and Residential Journalist of the Year – Martin Hilditch

With a lively style and gripping stories, Martin delivered the most compelling and entertaining housing journalism of the last year. His creative approach and meticulous research delivered a series of must-read articles for *Inside Housing's* subscribers.

His first piece, *Trouble In The Garden*, saw Martin take a look at two of the most high-profile issues in the housing sector – planning and land supply. Against the backdrop of a national governmental drive to create a new generation of garden cities, Martin visited the first such development in the UK – Letchworth – and discovered how many residents were now campaigning against new homes. The piece examined the qualities that define a garden city and how a council's attempts to fulfil its planning obligations and address the national housing crisis were causing tensions in the well-to-do town. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/analysis-and-data/trouble-in-the-garden/7008316.article>

His second article, *What Lies Beneath*, saw Martin investigate what went wrong on a housing scheme, built in just 2009, that is now being demolished because of safety concerns. The hard-hitting piece probed whether mistakes in planning guidance had contributed to the problems. The homes had been built on contaminated land – but without any protective membranes beneath them so carbon dioxide had leaked into some of the properties. The leaks were serious enough that in a couple of instances they could have been life threatening. By visiting the site Martin found out that other new homes, built a few years previously on the same site, had been protected – raising serious questions about why the more recent development had been built without the membranes. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/analysis-and-data/analysis/what-lies-beneath/7010852.article>

Martin's final piece, *Football's Coming Home*, investigated the relationship between Premier League football clubs' expansion plans and housing delivery. Martin spoke to some of the key players involved in negotiations with the clubs and looked at how planners have attempted to make sure stadium redevelopments have delivered on local housing priorities. It looked at different councils' housing strategies and how they have attempted to balance their own planning rules with clubs' concerns about the viability of their expansion plans. The lively piece also discovered the housing schemes where football fans can live in properties named after their sporting heroes or wallow in nostalgia on streets such as Midfield Drive or Promotion Close. It provided a comprehensive overview of the impact of nine major club expansions on house building in their local areas. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/analysis-and-data/investigations/footballs-coming-home/7010992.article>

Martin's informative and imaginative approach delivered gripping articles time after time in 2015. It is for this reason that he deserves to pick up this award.



Like the town they come from, Letchworth's protestors are well-planned, orderly and peaceful.

Today, almost 300 people have braved the cold of a bleak midwinter morning to voice their displeasure at plans to build large numbers of homes in Letchworth, which is famous (in housing circles, at least) as the world's first garden city.

The town has had its fair share of national attention in recent years, because the two main national political parties have been enthusing about how a new generation of garden cities could curb England's growing housing crisis. Meanwhile, Letchworth -

"I see it as a destruction of the concept of the garden city."

the granddaddy of them all - has been looking to deliver its own solution to the problem. But as today demonstrates, plans for a big expansion have proved controversial.

Peaceful protest

The group, wrapped up warmly in overcoats and anoraks, meets in the middle of the central square before marching in a circuit around the town

centre. Police are forced to divert traffic away from the main streets as the protestors unveil placards and banners and stroll past bemused Saturday shoppers.

While the strength of feeling is obvious, this is the most genteel of demonstrations. Even some of the placards contain politely qualified demands, with one reading: 'No more houses - without more infrastructure'. Another precisely-worded complaint suggests that 'You can't get down the A1(M) now, never mind another 10,000 homes'.

Children clutch brightly coloured balloons stating simply 'save Letchworth's green belt'. Apart from ►

Trouble in the garden

Politicians want to create a new wave of garden cities to meet housing need. But the world's first garden city is also looking to do its bit - much to some residents' disappointment. *Martin Hilditch* investigates

Top: A march through Letchworth, protesting against the potential building of 1,537 homes in the town. **Below:** Protestors Charlotte Simmons, Nathan Huntley and Jeremy Huntley

one young boy distractedly banging a plastic toy drum, there's little noise other than the gentle background murmur of protestors chatting to each other as they walk. If Marks and Spencer organised demos, this is what they would look like.

Just how big, though, are Letchworth's plans for expansion? Do they risk jeopardising the original purpose of the garden city, as the protestors suggest? Or is the demonstration a symptom of a now middle-aged town unhappy with any threat to the status quo?

Letchworth's status certainly plays a significant part in the debate (one protestor even carries a placard bearing the mildly-disapproving image of the town's founder, Ebenezer Howard). The concept itself is fairly simple: the garden city would take all the best elements of the city - good employment prospects, relative wealth - and merge it with the best elements of country living, such as green space and affordability. It would be surrounded by an agricultural belt to help make it self-sufficient and prevent urban sprawl.

Founded in 1903, the town has always been proudly aware of its heritage. Even the JD Wetherspoon pub in its centre - the Three Magnets - is named in reference to Mr Howard's attempts to describe the differing attractions offered by the town, the countryside, and a hybrid of the two.

The house building plans which have upset some people would certainly see a large expansion of Letchworth, although this would be over a 20-year period. The proposals come from North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC), which is trying to pull together a local plan - as it is required to do by the government - setting out the scale of development through to 2031 and the locations where it is proposing to deliver the homes. Its 'preferred options' consultation paper, published in late 2014, envisages 1,537 new homes in Letchworth. Given that the 2011 census states the town currently contains 14,271 homes, this would boost the number of dwellings by more than 10%.

One proposed site in particular is drawing the protestors' ire - green belt land to the north of an estate called the Grange, on which 1,000 of the homes would be built. This includes 111 acres of agricultural land - 4.5% of the land currently farmed in Letchworth. Adding an interesting twist to the dynamics, the land is currently owned by Letchworth's Heritage Foundation, the charitable foundation charged with preserving the garden city and running many town-wide services. The foundation, which is the target of much of the protestors' anger, allowed the site to be considered for housing and agreed for it



to be included in NHDC's local planning process.

Letchworth resident Sigi Dlabal, who moved to the town three years ago, says she thinks the Heritage Foundation is 'in breach of what they were set up to protect'.

'I really do think they are committing a crime,' she states. 'I see it as a destruction of the concept of the garden city.'

Ms Dlabal, who despite the obvious strength of her feeling and words is incredibly friendly and speaks in a thoughtful and considered tone, adds that in her view the town should have 'UNESCO heritage status'.

'The Heritage Foundation was set up to protect the heritage,' she adds. 'The heritage is the town with the green belt around it.'

"I don't think long-term because you just don't know what the world will be like."

There are 'tonnes of brownfield sites' in Letchworth that should be built on instead, she adds, pointing me to her Facebook page which details other options including a site of disused office blocks.

'The sites need to be cleared,' she admits. 'A lot of them are contaminated but you need to do it for the next generation. Instead of building 1,000 houses on one site, why can't you build 100 houses on 10 sites?'

Mum-of-two Stacey Slattery has also turned out for the protest. She lives on the Grange and her home backs on to the proposed 1,000-home site. She says she's opposed to the development for a number of reasons, including the environmental impact and the likely effect on Letchworth's already overstretched health service and schools.

Ms Slattery is not opposed to any development, but says putting 1,000 homes on the site bordering the Grange feels like far too many. ▶

What is a garden city?

The principles defining garden cities were initially set out by Ebenezer Howard in 1898 and sought to mesh the best elements of town and country life, such as good employment and communications, and healthy and affordable living. The first garden city - Letchworth - was founded in 1903, with Welwyn following in 1922.

Unveiling plans for a new generation of locally-led garden cities last year, the government suggested they should be new settlements that contain high-quality design, accessible green space and good infrastructure.

'I have always thought I have been very lucky and I have always thought it [her view] would go - but not to something on this scale,' she adds.

She says she worries more about the impact on her children in the immediate to medium-term future - in terms of pressure on school places and loss of green space - than the longer-term housing options.

'I don't think long-term because you just don't know what the world will be like,' she adds. 'Trying to get on the housing ladder is a nightmare now, so I imagine that will be more difficult, but I don't worry too much about that. I'm a here-and-now person.'

A few days after the protest, I speak with Nick Wright, head of development at Letchworth-based North Hertfordshire Homes. He is a firm supporter of development on the Grange site. Mr Wright speaks as passionately as any of the protestors about why he thinks the site should be built on, saying prices are currently 'sky-rocketing' in the town.

'It is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for middle-income households to buy in Letchworth,' he states. 'You are certainly looking at £300,000-400,000 for an ordinary three-bedroom, semi-detached house that is nothing particularly special.'

'Our concern is that if the houses aren't built, then that affordability situation will get worse and worse and worse,' he adds. 'And where do future generations live? Where do young people who aspire to live in the town they were born in go if there is no building?'

Mr Wright says he doesn't see any alternative to building on the Grange site and that the council has tried to include as many brownfield sites as it is realistically possible to bring forward in the plan period.

'I think that the council is right and the Heritage Foundation is right that it is worth, over 30 years, sacrificing a relatively small level of green belt. The alternative is that Letchworth becomes pickled in aspic. You are saying to your sons and daughters: "Move 20 miles to the north".'

Pros and cons

Another Letchworth resident wrestling with these issues is David Levett, portfolio holder for planning and enterprise for NHDC. The Conservative councillor, who lives in a social rented home owned by North Hertfordshire Homes, is a staunch defender of the current approach, although acknowledging that it is not perfect. He says that at least 40% of the homes on any new development will be affordable - and at least half of these should be affordable rented homes for local families.

This is an issue that is close to Mr Levett's heart. One of his four chil-



dren currently lives in private rented accommodation 'in what was formerly a council house' because she doesn't want to move away but can't afford to buy.

'Because she is adequately housed, she doesn't meet the need to go on the social housing waiting list,' he adds. Mr Levett says he thinks that the whole country's attitude to housing needs to change, if we are to start meeting needs effectively.

'It is our attitude to property as an investment [that needs to change],' he states. 'We don't think of it as a home.' His daughter's home, for example, was 'bought by the owner [under Right to Buy] who now rents it out at a private rent that isn't cheap', he states, adding that he disagrees with the Right to Buy policy. I bump into him after a meeting in which he reveals his reason for backing the current approach in Letchworth. 'We're not doing it really for our own children,' he states. 'But it is the grandchildren you think of.'

Mr Levett acknowledges that many protestors think that more could be done to bring forward brownfield sites. But he says the only sites that can be included in the local plan - if it is to pass inspection - are ones that are clearly deliverable. If landowners don't want to bring other parcels of land forward, there is little that can be done to force them, he adds. The council can't use compulsory purchase powers because this could only be legally justified if there aren't viable alternatives available to meet need, he states.

He stresses that including the site in the local plan is not the same as a planning application and that any developer who did submit a proposal would have to address issues such as

Letchworth: The facts

- Apart from being the site of the first garden city, Letchworth is equally proud of being the home of the UK's first roundabout.
- Letchworth provides a home to a colony of rare black squirrels.
- The town was the main setting for the 2013 Simon Pegg film, *The World's End*.
- The European premier of the 1997 Hollywood blockbuster *Con Air* was held at the town's art deco cinema. Its director, Simon West, is from the town.
- Letchworth is surrounded by a 13.6-mile 'greenway' - a circular route created by its Heritage Foundation to enable people to 'discover the countryside without straying far from the town'.

the impact on green space, schools and healthcare.

The Heritage Foundation didn't want to make a new comment when approached. But it pointed to a previous statement issued by its chair, Colin Chatfield, last May when it decided the land north of the Grange should be included.

At the time, he said that using brownfield sites would have been preferable but 'unfortunately does not address the demand'. The foundation had received a 1,000 signature petition against the plans, he added, which focused on the loss of green belt land. He added that the decision had been made 'with the future of the town in mind'.

These are tensions that the visionary Mr Howard had anticipated. In his book, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, he raises the possibility that the gar-

den city will one day build on the zone of agricultural land around its edge 'and thus forever destroy its right to be called a "garden city"'.

This would not happen, Mr Howard thought, because the land will not be 'in the hands of private individuals' but administered in the interests of the whole community. But he adds that this should not mean that the inhabitants prevent growth and 'thus preclude many from enjoying its advantages'.

'The town will grow,' he adds. 'But it will grow in accordance with a principle that will result in this - that such growth shall not lessen or destroy but ever add to its social opportunities, to its beauty, to its convenience.'

Looking forward

Based on this it would appear that the protestors are absolutely right that they are engaged in an argument about what defines life in a garden city. But the answer is far less straightforward than it might appear. Mr Howard certainly intended expansion to be controlled and carried out for the right reasons - but he was not anti-growth and also wanted as many people as possible to experience the benefits of life in his utopia.

Given that the consultation on NHDC's local plan preferred options has only just closed, the arguments in Letchworth are set to continue throughout 2015. But as the Conservatives and Labour parties look to garden cities to solve the nation's housing problems, a fundamental debate about what they should look like is happening under their noses in a small town in Hertfordshire. And what could be more fitting? After all, that's how it all started.

MANCHESTER CITY



In the middle of last year, the owners of Manchester City Football Club made a huge new signing.

Amid great fanfare, Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG) - the investment and development company owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of Abu Dhabi's ruling family - formed a joint venture company with Manchester Council. The main aim of the company, called Manchester Life, was to build homes. If plans work out, the agreement will create the space for £1bn of investment over the next 10 years, kick-starting delivery of more than 6,000 properties in the city's east end.

At the beginning of this month, the company firmly set this brave new world in motion when planners granted permission for 302 private rental apartments in New Islington and a further 124 apartments for sale in Ancoats - the first of six phase-one sites due to deliver 830 new homes. There's more to the scheme than the figures - in fact, what you're looking at is the masterplan that will help transform a historically industrial area into a thriving network of neighbourhoods that will feed the city's wider expansion plans.

Home ground

This is one of a number of housing regeneration sites that Britain's towns and cities have been able to get over the line thanks to the involvement of football clubs - and more specifically their plans to expand by shifting into new, bigger premises. Today we can reveal the full story about how

Main: Manchester Life plans at New Union Street in New Islington; Inset: Murrays' Mill, in Ancoats; Below: Maine Place

English Premier League clubs' ambitions have helped - or will help - housing provision (as well as all those 'oh-so-nears', where potential has not been fulfilled).

The roots of Manchester Life, for example, lie very clearly back in 2003, when City shifted from their former ground, Maine Road, to the 55,000-seater City of Manchester stadium - built by the council when the city hosted the 2002 Commonwealth Games. The old site is already hosting 320 homes for sale delivered by Prospect GB (a subsidiary of social landlord Riverside Group) and is now known as Maine Place. This contains a variety of designs named after fan favourites, such as former striker Uwe Rosler (whose four goals in a match against Notts County are perhaps the reason he has been immortalised as a four-bedroom home).

"The old site is already hosting 320 homes for sale."

Most importantly, the club's shift to a bigger site enabled it to attract ADUG precisely at the right time (when it was considering buying an English club). In turn, this led to the creation of Manchester Life. A report presented to the council's executive last year makes it clear that it is because of the club that ADUG 'has come to know the city council's vision for regeneration and its ability to deliver major initiatives'.

For Paul Beardmore, director of housing at Manchester Council, the planned £1bn regeneration 'would not have happened without ADUG's investment and support' and its involvement with the football club has been 'totally fundamental' to the progress.

However, he adds, the council's advance planning was vital too. If there is a lesson that Mr Beardmore thinks other councils could learn from Manchester Life, it's simply to make your own play. In Manchester this involved land assembly, remediation and a clear strategy for the future. While there has been some criticism that none of Manchester Life's homes will be social housing, its approach is consistent with the council's long-stated aim of rebalancing its housing market.

'Manchester had, in my view, an ►



Manchester City's owners are planning to build 6,000 homes in partnership with Manchester Council. Martin Hilditch investigates how a wave of stadium developments have paved the way for new housing

Football's coming home



ARSENAL



Above: Highbury today. Right: CGI of the new Tottenham Hotspur stadium. Below: The former home of Stoke City is still sitting empty

exceptional approach to how it tried to do things, which was “don’t chase the money”,’ Mr Beardmore adds. ‘Set your policy, set your strategy and make the money come to that.’

Local turf

Islington Council was certainly on the ball when Arsenal Football Club was looking to relocate from its former ground, Highbury, in the late 1990s. The club’s ultimate construction of the £390m Emirates Stadium, which has been its homes since 2006, helped transform a mile-long stretch of north London and led to the construction of 3,000 new homes (almost 1,500 of which were affordable and provided by 8,000-home Newlon Housing Trust, including 449 for social rent, 536 for shared ownership and 482 for key workers). Highbury was converted into 650 flats.

Back in 2002, when the club secured planning permission, Sarah Ebanja was deputy chief executive of Islington Council. Today, Ms Ebanja is Newlon’s chair. Given that the final phase of affordable housing was delivered in November last year, she’s effectively seen the project develop from start to completion.

When the club initially sounded out the council about moving to Ashburton Grove, an extensive brown-field industrial site that the council was looking to regenerate, Ms Ebanja says that the council had a clear message.

‘From the council’s perspective, we wanted a lot of new homes and a significant proportion of them to be affordable,’ she states.

The club’s desire to create a world-class stadium and surroundings ►

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR



STOKE CITY



meant the council was able to push for the biggest possible benefit in its Section 106 planning deal, she adds. 'On several occasions, Arsenal did say that we were taking the mick,' she states. 'They had to pay for everything. We were pushing the boundaries to see how far they would go.'

Arsenal seems pretty happy with the deal. For starters, as a London Assembly report on stadium-led regeneration pointed out this year, annual match-day revenue has nearly tripled from £33.8m in 2004 to £100.2m in 2014.

Arsenal director Ken Friar adds it is 'proud that our move to Emirates Stadium was able to bring so much to the borough'.

Just up the road, another major regeneration project is gearing up - at the home of Arsenal's arch rivals Tottenham Hotspur FC. Spurs are on their way from their current White Hart Lane home and have permission to build a new stadium just along the road. Unlike Arsenal, the plans caused controversy because, until recently, they included no affordable housing (although 222 affordable homes have already been completed on Tottenham High Road and a further 34 delivered in Northumberland Park as sites are pulled together for the redevelopment plan).

The club's current planning permission - agreed in 2012 - would see 285 new homes built as part of the stadium development. All of these would be for market sale (this was a renegotiation of a previous agreement to deliver 200 homes - 50% of which would have been affordable). Earlier this year, however, the club decided market conditions mean now is the time to revisit the 2012 consent - and proposed 579 homes, including an as yet unspecified amount of affordable housing. A new planning process with Haringey Council is gearing up.

Still, ultimately whether that process is slow or fast, Spurs should deliver new homes. Some stadium moves, however, have been a complete letdown. It is nearly 20 years since Stoke City FC moved to its current Britannia Stadium home in 1997. Developer St Modwen acquired its former Victoria Ground base as part of the funding package for the new stadium. Yet, despite planning permission being granted for 113 homes in 2013, the ground is still standing empty.

Relegation zone

There has also been imperfect progress with Leicester City's old ground at Filbert Street, which was demolished to make way for housing when the club moved to the King Power Stadium in 2002. A 664-bedroom block of student housing has since been delivered. Plans to build hun-

Liverpool FC and the Anfield regeneration

Back in June 2012, after much deliberation about whether it would build a new stadium in nearby Stanley Park, Liverpool FC committed its future to its historic Anfield ground - expanding it to 60,000 seats.

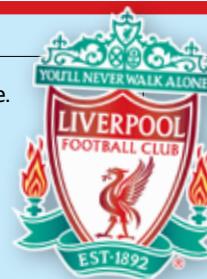
Shortly after, this led to it linking up with Liverpool Council and social landlord Your Housing Group (YHG) as part of the wider Anfield regeneration partnership.

The club's decision gave the area's regeneration a massive shot in the arm. After years of uncertainty following the government's axing of its housing market renewal programme in 2010 (Anfield, which had suffered from low housing demand, had been in a yet-to-be started phase), the council and YHG had already drafted new plans - but the club's decision enabled them

to do even more.

In total, the plan will see 600 out of the original 900 homes in the immediate surrounding area retained (the rest have been demolished) and the delivery of a new hotel and business centre by YHG.

Lorraine Donnelly,



development director at YHG, says: 'The catalyst was the football club deciding to stay. That made it clear how we would invest.'

'The regeneration is happening as we speak. We are changing people's lives.'

For more on the Anfield scheme, visit www.insidehousing.co.uk

dreds of new homes elsewhere on the site have so far come to nothing. Developer Filbert can currently build 43 homes - none of which would be affordable - on part of the site, just off Lineker Road. But it can wave arriverci to that scheme unless building work starts before permission expires next month - the council says there are no signs yet of development.

But for every failure, there is a success story. A total of 24 social rent homes and 20 social rent sheltered homes were delivered on the site of Southampton Football Club's old

“Residents are now living in blocks such as Le Tissier Court - named after former club heroes.”

Below: Promotion Close is on the site of Sunderland's former home, Roker Park

ground, The Dell, when it was demolished. These were part of a 228-home Barratt Homes development, with residents now living in blocks such as Le Tissier Court - named after former club heroes.

Warwick Payne, cabinet member for housing and sustainability with Southampton Council, says 'hundreds of residents can now say they live on the spot where Saints' greatest players from past decades showed their skills'.

A total of 135 homes were also built by Wimpey Homes on the former Roker Park home of Sunderland Football Club when it was demolished in 1998. Today fans can reminisce from their homes on Midfield Drive, Turnstile Mews or Promotion Close.

SUNDERLAND



Season ticket

Looking to the future, Galliard Group has submitted plans to develop West Ham United's current Boleyn Ground into 838 homes when the club moves to the 54,000-seater Olympic Stadium. Like Spurs, the proposed amount of affordable housing - 6% - amounts to little more than a few pretty bubbles to appeal to planners.

At the time Sir Robin Wales, mayor of Newham, said the initial offer lacked any substantial affordable housing and was 'insulting and totally unacceptable'. He called on the developers to 'drastically rethink this ridiculous offer'.

Councils, in their role as match referees, must take ultimate responsibility for making sure club redevelopments help meet local need. Manchester and Arsenal provide examples of how clear direction from a council can dovetail with a club's ambitions. The potential win for local areas is clear.

A total of 5,682 homes are set to be built because of the nine stadium moves either planned or carried out by the clubs we looked at.

If Manchester Life fully delivers that figure could jump to 11,256. The prize is a big one - but councils have to make sure they've got the right game plan.



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Main picture: The condemned houses on Newbyres Crescent. Below, right: Newbyres resident Chris Sharp

Just six years ago, Newbyres Crescent, in the old mining village of Gorebridge, was the pride of Midlothian Council.

Today, the development of 64 council homes, built in 2009, lies in abandonment. Take a walk along the road and it looks more like a nuclear fallout zone than the thriving new community originally envisaged.

Almost all the homes on the street are boarded up, with triangular, yellow signs on the doors and ground floor windows warning people to keep out. Despite this, the remnant bric-a-brac of family life is scattered everywhere you look. Outside one home, two badminton rackets and a frisbee lie by the garden fence. Strings of Christmas lights hang limply from the front of another house and two small ornamental stone dogs maintain their perpetual guard at the back door of a boarded-up bungalow. Once neatly-tended lawns have fallen into disarray and in one back garden, a discarded bottle of weedkiller lies defeated beneath the now-towering thistles.

The abandoned properties are a stark physical statement of the big questions that need to be answered about Newbyres Crescent. How could things have gone so wrong that the newly-built homes now lie empty and sealed off? What lessons can be learned and - as many residents want to know - who is responsible?

Potentially fatal

Problems first surfaced back in September 2013 after residents from two homes - numbers 87 and 89 - got in

touch with doctors. Friends of the family in number 89 say they went to hospital after suffering from sickness and dizziness. Investigations revealed the two properties contained high levels of carbon dioxide (a colourless gas, which is toxic in high concentrations because it reduces the amount of oxygen in the air).

Due to concerns about their health, the residents of both homes were immediately moved out. A report by Fairhurst Engineers - appointed by Midlothian Council to look into the problems - later revealed the two houses contained 'potentially fatal levels' of carbon dioxide.

"A newly-created incident management team concluded there was 'significant risk to public health'."

Initial monitoring by Fairhurst suggested only these two homes were affected by high carbon dioxide levels. There was then a gap of several months until, in March 2014, NHS Lothian's health protection team received a phone call from a Midlothian GP - from Newbyres Medical Centre - who had seen a number of patients come to his surgery with symptoms including nausea and headaches over the previous couple of days. All the patients were from Newbyres Crescent.

Local councillor Jim Muirhead, who had been working to help adequately rehouse the two families from numbers 87 and 89, says this ►

What lies beneath

Built in 2009, the 64 council houses in Gorebridge's Newbyres Crescent should have been a dream destination. Instead, they exposed families to such serious health risks the homes are now being demolished. *Martin Hilditch* investigates



is when the problems 'snowballed'.

'To be honest, everyone was in the dark [up until this point],' he states. 'It was difficult to find out in the initial stages exactly what was going on.'

After the medical reports, it quickly became apparent that the council had a major incident on its hands. Reviewing residents' clinical records - and finding other incidents of headaches, sore throats and nausea - a newly-created incident management team concluded there was 'significant risk to public health'. In total, three more properties - numbers two, four and six - were eventually found to have carbon dioxide levels which 'exceeded levels regarded as not fit for habitation'.

On the move

Following these worrying developments and further testing, the council eventually decided - in June last year - that there was no option but to move everyone else out too. This would be done in stages because of the scale of the operation and despite Newbyres' deserted appearance, several residents remain on the street today.

Chris Sharp, 21, a student and army reservist, lives in his mum's house which has not yet been decanted. The home - full of cardboard boxes indicating the family's imminent departure - overlooks number 89, where the first problems were reported. 'That was the first house to get boarded up,' Mr Sharp says, pointing over the road. 'Then it hit the whole street.'

He then takes me inside and shows me the alarms that were installed in all properties to detect carbon dioxide after the council began the complicated process of relocating everyone. 'It goes off quite a few times,' he confides. 'It's a wee bit worrying, but I just get on with it.' He says the family open the windows and doors if the alarm sounds.

Once all the residents are removed, the homes will all be demolished and new properties built in their place - at a cost of roughly £12m. The investigations by Fairhurst eventually found that the danger had been caused by ground gases - possibly from former coal mines - entering the homes during periods of low atmospheric pressure or when there is rising groundwater. This was possible, a report by Fairhurst concludes, 'as the existing properties on the site do not have any recognised gas defence/mitigation measures incorporated in the structure'. The replacement homes will all



Above: Max Debono-De-Laurentis

have protective membranes beneath them.

It is the absence of any defences that raises serious questions for all concerned in the development. The presence of mineworks beneath Gorebridge was hardly a surprise - indeed they are such an integral part of the area's history that Scotland's National Mining Museum lies just up the road. Also, a number of homes literally next door to those being demolished, which were built just eight years previously, are safe because of the protective membranes that lie underneath them.

Real consequences

Dr Max Debono-De-Laurentis, who still lives in one of the condemned bungalows with his wife, is keen to know why his property was never protected. Surrounded by packing cases and crammed bookshelves he speaks from the front room of the home he will soon be leaving.

'As far as we were concerned, we were here for the next 20 to 30 years,' he says sadly. He says it should have been 'common sense' to put protective membranes in place given the nature of the ground beneath. 'It was never a legal requirement to get a membrane down,' he says - adding with a hint of sarcasm, 'Obviously it is now.'

"As far as we were concerned, we were here for the next 20 to 30 years."



A Midlothian Council spokesperson confirms it is now compulsory for all new developments within the council boundaries to have protective membranes beneath them.

It is too late for Dr Debono-De-Laurentis, though. For the moment, he and his wife are left feeling 'a little bit unsafe' in a condemned home in a virtually empty development.

A spokesperson for the council states that 'due to legal advice' it was unable to answer questions about why protective membranes weren't installed and whether this was an oversight or they were deemed unnecessary. However, a report from Midlothian's chief executive Kenneth Lawrie to a council meeting last November revealed it is in discussions with its lawyers about 'the legal liability for the cause of the ground gases leaking into houses'. The report adds that costs for demolition 'should be recoverable from those parties who are found to be at fault'.

The story of Newbyres Crescent stands as a cautionary tale to developers looking to build on brownfield, contaminated land.

But, with the last residents imminently set to leave the estate, the question of who is responsible for such an unmitigated disaster needs to be answered before everyone can really move on.