



Behind the protest banners, volunteers and local tradespeople have begun renovation. Photo: Ciara Leeming

CENTRE OF ATTRACTION

Toxteth locals seek to reopen Caribbean club

Dismay as board wants to bring in a developer

A group of activists have fixed up a disused Caribbean social club amid fears the land could be sold to a developer.

The Merseyside Caribbean Centre in Toxteth, Liverpool, closed in 2013 and since then a board of community representatives has been negotiating with the council with a view to it re-opening.

But after a developer unveiled plans to build more than 400 homes on the site, a group of locals lost patience with the process and took matters into their own hands.

They have decked the building in protest banners and put in hundreds of man-hours to get the building up to scratch – fitting new boilers and floors, doing plumbing

work and painting throughout since February.

A surveyor had said it would cost £50,000 to do these works but the volunteers have spent less than £1,000 – with local tradesmen donating their time, expertise and materials.

Generating income

They hope their hard work will convince Liverpool City Council to give them the lease so they can open the centre and start generating income and providing community members of all ages the space to meet.

They fear their community is falling victim to gentrification, with changes in the area already contributing to the closure of many traditional Caribbean meeting places over recent years.

A group spokesman said: "For six years we believed the board were doing their job and trying to save the centre but

when we realised they could be trying to sell it we stepped in and said: 'No, we're not letting this happen.'

"Liverpool is home to the oldest black community in Europe and Toxteth is at its heart. Yet this social club is the last thing we've got. We don't even have a carnival anymore, and all the clubs and Caribbean cafés which used to be around here have gone. Liverpool 8 is being gentrified and we're slowly but surely being pushed out."

"The Caribbean community are like nomads. We have nowhere to sit and nowhere to teach our kids about our culture."

"This centre could be a hub, where people could be safe. The older people would have somewhere to sit and play dominos and the young lads – the 16 to 25-year-olds who are most at risk of getting involved with knives – would have somewhere to go which

keeps them off the streets and where they could learn to respect other people."

Built in 1977, the centre is a stone's throw from the trendy Georgian Quarter and across the road from Liverpool Women's Hospital.

It closed after struggling to pay its bills and in 2016 the Elliot Group put forward proposals for the site. The plan, listed as Kingsley Place on the firm's website, would include 438 residential units across a mix of townhouses and one, two and three bedroom apartments. The developer promised a new £2 million Caribbean centre, on the condition that it relocates to another part of the site.

The centre's board is broadly supportive of these plans and plans to consult locals on them. But protesters say they would lose valuable outdoor space, which is used for barbecues and parties, as well as the basketball court that helps keep local teenagers off the street.

Ambitious plans

Since the overgrown concrete court has been cleared by the volunteers, groups of youths who are ordinarily fierce rivals have played basketball together.

Although nominally a Caribbean centre, there have been inquiries from Somali and Argentinian community groups about using it for social events – something the group hopes to encourage.

Volunteer painter Ruth Conroy, 62, has ambitious plans to run community initiatives from the centre if the council can be convinced to support its reopening.

"We aren't looking for grants from the council. We want to prove we can be self-sufficient," she said. "A lot of people in this area are struggling to make ends meet but I really believe we could make a difference."

"I would like to start a food and household co-operative here, where we cut out the middleman and provide fresh fruit, veg and meat for whatever price we pay for it. We would also like to create

a pot of money for people in dire straits – when they are struggling to pay for a funeral, for example. And we've got to try to address the issue of knife and gun use through youth provision. We've lost many kids in this community and have to address it."

At a packed public meeting last month, a vote of no confidence was passed in the existing board and those who attended voted unanimously to resist development plans and preserve the building. No councillors or board members attended the meeting.

In a statement, the African Caribbean Heritage Board said it was approached in 2016 by the Elliot Group with a proposal to redevelop the site and that consultations had found the majority of the community were in favour of a new centre in the existing location. Members have spent two years in discussion with the council and the developer to negotiate terms and conditions of the offer and the Elliot Group is ready to submit its planning application.

The board will be taking part in a consultation event along with the council and developer to answer queries and understand concerns.

The statement said: "The City Council and the Elliot Group have maintained their position that the new fit-for-purpose centre needs to be relocated... to provide a viable development scheme. If the scheme is not viable it cannot progress and cannot cross-subsidise the funding of a £2 million community centre.

"The board are aware that a protest group is active in the area. The current protest in no way reflects accurately the position of the ACHC and until such a time as the board have spoken to the wider community, we are in no way a part of or responsible for the information being disseminated by this group, or their activities to date."

A spokesman for Liverpool City Council confirmed the council was in talks with a developer and the board of the Caribbean centre.

CIARA LEEMING

Paved good intentions



New paving stones in the centre of Blackpool, devised by young people as part of a programme to promote mental health in the town. Forty-two of the paving stones, containing ideas or suggestions for how to cope with stressful situations, have been put down by contractor John Sisk and Son, as part of Blackpool Headstart's Resilience Pathway. A guide explaining the 42 moves features on signage at the ends of the Resilience Pathway on Talbot Road. People will also be signposted to a website, which will go live on 11 June. The website will offer advice and guidance, as well as a blog produced by young people.

NEWS IN BRIEF

NORTHERN PLANNING VISION

Planning for housing, transport and infrastructure needs to be more joined up in the north to bring growth and prosperity not only to major metropolitan areas but also neglected towns and communities, a new report says. Ambitions for the North from the Royal Town Planning Institute calls for an "overarching spatial vision for the whole of the north of England".

MOBILITY REDUCED

Higher rents are reducing the financial gains from moving to better-paying parts of the country, and mean that young people are less mobile than they were 20 years ago, according to Resolution Foundation research. The number of people aged 25-34 starting a new job and moving house has fallen from 30,000 in 1997 to 18,000 in 2018.

GREY DAY IN HULL

The famous Earl de Grey pub in Hull city centre is to be rebuilt brick by brick after Hull City Council gave the go-ahead for a new hotel near the Bonus Arena. Hull Council planners insisted the pub, currently closed, be rebuilt in a new location overlooking Waterhouse Lane – but the Hull Daily Mail reported it is not clear it will re-open as a pub.

SHEFFIELD BREXIT EVENT

Brexit Civil Society Alliance is hosting a roundtable discussion on what Brexit means for the civil society sector in Sheffield on 25 June, 13:30 to 16:30. It will address questions about the replacement of EU funding that the third sector receives, the maintenance of fundamental rights, key legislative changes resulting from EU withdrawal and other issues. Free tickets from bit.ly/2Ednn45.

Got an event, campaign or story from your area? Call 0161 831 5563 or email news@bigissuenorth.co.uk