



LIMERICK'S revival. Was it a chimera, a dream that could not be realised? Five years ago, the John Fitzgerald Report heralded a new direction for a city that had lost its way. Public and private investment was to be harnessed, and a new social vista shaped.

The now mythical figure of €3bn was pitched as the purse required to make this heavyweight contest happen; half from the State, the other from private pockets. But the €3bn was a projection, a potential financial scenario contingent on the health of the economy, and the success of State agencies to deliver attractive options to invest in the 'regeneration areas'.

Now, these agencies are to expire on Jun 14, and their remit is to be subsumed in the amalgamation of Limerick City and County Councils.

So, how far down the road has the Treaty City been taken?

CATHAL MCCARTHY,
CHAIRPERSON LIMERICK
REGENERATION WATCH

"Our voices have been suppressed for a long time. Silenced, ignored, brushed to the side," says Cathal McCarthy, a married father of three and a Rosbrien resident. Frustrated by their treatment since so-called regeneration began, Mr McCarthy and his neighbours, and their Northside counterparts, established Limerick Regeneration Watch — to stay involved.

Mr McCarthy's concerns for his community long predate John Fitzgerald's Report on Limerick. "Back in 2001, elderly people were being targeted on my street. Houses were being hit — people being burnt out of their homes. We thought it was a gang looking to take over the place.

"There's people around here dealing drugs who never get touched," he says. "So, we started coming out en masse, as a street. Just not accepting it. And we formed a residents' association, secured money from the government, and plans from the council to knock and rebuild houses up here.

"We signed off on the plans and had proper participation from the council then, believe it or not," he says. "But then, along came 'regeneration' and we were to be absorbed into it. So, the council wouldn't sign off on the plans."

"Brendan Kenny [Regeneration Agency CEO] met with us. We got someone to take the minutes. And



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David Young
talks to
residents in
Limerick
estates partly
demolished
after essential
funds failed to
materialise,
and to the
Regeneration
agency, which
is due to
disband in June

that was the only meeting we had, Mar 2008. Even though it said in the master plans they'd continue to engage with us, they never did.

"Their plans were to have the regeneration areas emptied," says Mr McCarthy. "Brendan Kenny described St Mary's Park [on the Northside] as prime real estate two years ago. They haven't succeeded though. Because people are digging their heels in.

"In a regeneration area, the council isn't legally obliged to refurbish or re-let its property ... Boarded-up houses are easily broken into. Actually, we gave the council a list of 18 tenants who wanted to move within Moyross, into Delmege. They just ignored us, though.

"Instead, they ripped down perfectly good houses," he says.



WHERE once part of a terrace, this house now stands alone as a result of the demolition being undertaken to regenerate the Moyross area. Privately owned, No 8 Delmege Park is a property that the City Council must acquire in order to remove.

As can happen vacant property, No 8 was broken into and vandalised. And now stands as testament to the anti-social behaviour in this neighbourhood.

"In Clarina Park, [Southside] they knocked most of the houses. And they were only 15 years old. Well-built. Not a thing wrong with them. That's just depopulating. Especially when you consider — across all four regeneration areas, it was estimated 52% of the houses were homeowners.

"Take Ballinacurra Weston, some houses, like Bride Phillipps' place," he says. "Proper remedial works would sort that out. You can gut and refurbish a house for €25k. In some cases, they spent more on demolition. In Tralee's regeneration, they moved people out. Paid their rent. Knocked, rebuilt, and moved them back.

"Instead, all they've managed to do is break up communities. I rang John Fitzgerald in 2007, to ask him about the thinking in the plan. I pushed if it was to break up the gangs. And I told him 'that won't work. That won't work at all.' And it hasn't.

"You can talk about designing out anti-social behaviour, but that doesn't account for the people who engage in anti-social behaviour," he says. "Social regeneration is about people's values. It takes years. But if they'd taken that approach, they would've got a changed attitude.

"I don't really believe they had any intention of helping us at all. They came in to finish off these communities. That's how I feel. And I think after five years, that's been demonstrated."

BRIDE PHILLIPPS



Bride Phillipps: "I've put three coats of paint on the wall to cover the damp."

The house beside Bride Phillipps' catches the eye: not for its emptiness, but for the refuse strewn around it, now engulfing what was once a back garden. Yet, this isn't what preys on her mind the most.

"I'm here on Lenehan Avenue, two years this June. I was living up in Clarina," she says.

"But the place was infested with flies. It was all from dampness. I had a man from the health board up. And they told me they had put €23,000 into that house.

"I'm not being funny, but I asked them 'where?' I couldn't see it. All they'd done was the windows. Out of 10, the place would've been a five. And here? Well, I'd say it's much the same. Unfortunately, I didn't see the

place before I signed up for it. My young fella was sick in hospital, so I just said 'yes,' when they offered me the house."

"It only took me an hour-and-a-half to move because of dampness. So, we left three quarters of our stuff behind."

Pointing to the refuse dump over her wall, she says, "It's an e-fin' joke. This is meant to be regeneration. C'mon. I've got on to all of them in Regeneration and the Corporation. And they've told me there's been no other complaints," she says.

Walking around the back of her house, she explains how the scorched rubbish mounds have been there since she arrived. Inside, Bride stands on bare concrete, and opens the cabinet doors to show the mould growing in the cupboards. "I can't put down flooring for the dampness. I keep wiping it off, and it keeps coming back," she says.

"That's why that cupboard's sitting on the table. I've put three coats of paint on the wall to cover the damp — to stop it coming through onto the shelves."

It's a sunny day, yet an open fire blazes in the living room. Bride points to the peeling wallpaper: the wet patches joining up and a section of wall that's been recently repaired, from ceiling to floor, filled with plaster to stem a leak. "Come in to the front room and I'll show you the wall by the bed. It's drenched. I just re-dressed that bed this morning. And the duvet's sopping," she says.

She beckons me to hold it for myself — it's wringing wet. We pass through the front door, to the heckles of neighbours across the street. Bride simply smiles, and waves them off.

MATT COLLINS,
BALLINACURRA WESTON
RESIDENTS ALLIANCE

"This was a fine place where people owned their own houses, but the anti-social behaviour started to get bad 20 years ago. Unemployment was a major factor, I guess. And the drug scene, it got worse. But what really killed it were the off-licences," he says. "Adults buying drink for young people. It's never been so easily got."

Now 55, and a father of five, Matt recalls how they tried to cope back then. "We had CB radios. We all got them and started talking to each other. And we curbed a lot of the messing. It was like a vigilante service. We weren't beating anyone up, but if anything was going on we'd know about it," Mr Collins says.

"It wasn't our place to do it. But the guards weren't doing it," he says. "I mean, a dedicated garda service promised in the Fitzgerald Report. Where is it? Why are there so many cameras going up all over these places, and they're not being monitored? We were told by the gardai the new camera system in Weston would



Matt Collins: "Are you the fella going to be facing down the barrel of a shotgun at night?"

Have the Northside and Southside Agencies been successful?

"You have to look at what the situation in 2006 and 2007 was like. With six men shot dead the areas were as close to anarchy then as you'd get anywhere in the world. I worked for 25 years in Dublin, and I'd never seen anything as bad.

"But things have improved an awful lot. A lot of the criminals have been put away. And the place is cleaner. There's more stability; more activities going on. But there are still problems out there.

We don't want to be giving excuses but the regeneration master plan was developed right in the middle of the worst economic crisis the country has seen for a hundred years.

So, we've a long way to go yet."

Why wasn't there a phased approach along the way, as set out in the Fitzgerald report?

"Expectations were very high when things were outlined for the regeneration areas. People wanted a quick solution. The reality is — this is a situation that's been going on for more than 30 years. Probably the worst in the country.

"It was never going to be solved in five years. There were 600 burnt-out houses. We get criticism for not re-building. It would've been madness to build then because the houses would probably have been burnt down quicker than we could've built them.

"But for the last year or so, we've been saying the time is right to start building."

What about the shrinking communities?

"A lot of families have been moving out over the years. While that was good for the families themselves, it did a lot of damage to the schools, to the shops. People would've been waking up of a Monday morning to find out their good neighbours of 20 years were gone. And they were left with a boarded-up house beside them."



What are the crime rates today?

"They're comparable with anything nationally or internationally now. A lot of the leading criminals have been put away. We had to cut the heads off ... the top people to allow us to get in there. The kids have more to do now than just looking up to the criminals like they did before."

Why are good houses, such as those in Delmege Park, being knocked?

"In the master plan, that part of Moyross ... is all destined for demolition. So, if the master plan says everything has to be demolished, the quicker that's done, the better. If you start allocating houses to people on the waiting list, you'll never get the regeneration done, even if they're in reason-

be like having eight new police," he says. "But they don't work."

They must've cost a mint. It was the change in behaviour here that moved me out," he says. "I ended up moving to an infested house, though. Oh, we had such a battle with rats. But I didn't care. We had to leave. I remember my wife — Maggie — telling me 'Matt, there's a rat on your foot' — and I feeding the baby at the time."

Back in Ballinacurra Weston, Matt returns to the boarded-up houses. "Look up Youtube, and you'll see what this area was like when we started the group. And how many houses we've gotten them to take down," he says. "We had to. Because kids were getting hurt. They were finding syringes everywhere."

"Even though our group — the residents' alliance — wasn't being recognised, we'd still get the shit work," he says. "Like City Council calling at 4 o'clock in the morning ... 'We've got a problem in one or two of the boarded-up houses. There's a few guys having a party, and our men are afraid they'll be attacked. Maybe a face that people know could accompany them.'"

"We're good for that. But we're not good enough to be recognised," he says. "There's only eight or so of us involved. Going into the lion's den. These fellas might be packing [guns]. There might be drugs there. Are you, then, the fucker that ratted them out?"

"Are you the fella going to be facing down the barrel of a shotgun at your window, at night? I still have all those worries. I won't sit at a window without a curtain being closed," he says. "I got nominated to represent my neighbourhood. So, I feel I have to do it. I never wanted to rule the world."

able condition. For areas that've suffered so much over the past 20 years, is it fair to put vulnerable families into them? There are probably people who'd take the houses. But is that the right thing to do? Our view is there's been so much damage caused in these areas, they need a radical solution."

Was the public investment figure based on the notional value of the land?

"That was never the intention at all. That's wrong. It wasn't about making state land available to the private sector at all. The hope was that if the public sector could change these areas, that the private sector would come into them, and build private housing. Not give them land to do it.

"The private sector in Limerick — to be involved — would have to have bought itself in. If land became available, they could buy, and go and build houses on it. And put them on the market. The private sector just wasn't interested in the regeneration areas in Limerick at all. And certainly not interested in it at all now."

Are the Regeneration Areas better off today?

"Overall, yes. Real progress has been made. But I accept, some areas, are worse off."