

Clear the decks

It's known as one of the UK's worst estates. But ambitious plans to revive this former Navy estate can change all that, says **Simon Brandon**

'They call it Beirut up here now,' says cab driver Barry Amos as he pulls away from the infamous Rowner estate in Gosport.

Parts of the estate are a no-go area for taxis at night these days. One driver keeps a copy of the Portsmouth News from 6 October in his boot, as it contains a story of a colleague who was beaten up and robbed in Rowner the week before. 'So I can show people if they complain,' he says.

Rowner Village, a group of buildings at the centre of the estate, must – as Beirut used to – lurk at the bottom of the list of ideal places to live. A huddle of squat, seven-storey concrete blocks overlooks a derelict maze of locked buildings, a gloomy underground loading bay and an alien forest of long-abandoned skylights.

The precinct, as the village is also known locally, is a place to make your heart sink. The lifts haven't worked for the past five years. At ground level three or four shops remain open; the other eight or so retail units either appear empty or are boarded up. Google 'worst estate in Britain' and Rowner makes an early appearance.

It was built in the 1950s as married quarters for the Royal Navy. High grass bunds divide the blocks of housing, a remnant from the estate's Ministry of Defence days when it needed to be defensible. But they aren't enough to save the precinct now.

This month, Gosport Council finally gave the go-ahead to a £140 million scheme to redevelop Rowner Village in an eight-year project that will see the demolition of the precinct and its surrounding buildings.

The organisation behind the redevelopment is the Rowner Renewal Partnership. Its members include English Partnerships, which has invested £7.5 million so far; house builder Taylor Wimpey, with £16 million; Portsmouth Housing Association, which has provided land and £6 million; and Gosport Council, which has chipped in more land and £2 million.

'This must be the biggest project to have come forward, certainly in this south central part of the country, for a very long time,' says the partnership's director, John Butler.

The plan is to start by building some new homes to the south of the precinct, decant the precinct's residents into them and begin demolition.

'Our aim is that those who are affected who want to stay on the estate can do so; those who wish to move away will be offered rehousing opportunities elsewhere in the borough; and owner-occupiers can take the equity they have in their own homes and put it into a new home, if they wish, on the estate,' Mr Butler explains.

But not everyone is happy with the partnership's plans. The Village Residents' Association is chaired by Suzan Veale, a private landlord whose company owns around 20 per cent of the properties in the precinct. She claims the entire block could, and should, be refurbished for £2.3 million, a figure she says is based on a quantity surveyor's report. Any argument that refurbishment is not an option is, she says, untrue, and against the wishes of the majority of residents. Her claims are treated with disdain by Mr Butler.

'These sorts of figures don't have any connection with reality at all,' he sighs. 'The debate about the village has been ongoing for 15 years. It's fantasy land to imagine that refurbishment is possible here. If it was commercially possible, someone would have done it.'

In fact the estate's problems go back almost 20 years, when the Navy sold the freehold to property tycoon Peter de Savary in the late 1980s. Would-be owners queued up for days to snap up the leaseholds. Cabbie Mr Amos was one of them.

'I camped outside the night before the sale started,' he says. 'I paid £25,000.' That was for a two-bedroom flat in 1988. He sold it in 2000 for £13,000. The housing boom passed Rowner by.

'The Ministry of Defence, as they have told me in the past, when they sold it, thought it was going to be a redevelopment scheme,' says Ian Lycett, chief executive of Gosport Council. 'Private owners came in, gave it a lick of paint and a new kitchen and bathroom and sold it. The mortgage people were desperate to lend, so they were lending on it, and then suddenly they hit problems.'

The buildings began falling apart. Balconies dropped off, the fabric crumbled and service charges went through the roof. Currently they stand at £1,555 per annum, a sum comparable to that paid on £750,000 flats in Chelsea. Residents fell into arrears and the decline gathered pace.



'You started getting major crime issues,' continues Mr Lycett. 'It was almost a no-go area at one time. That's when we started with the safer and stronger communities fund, the single regeneration budget, all those sorts of things. We started working with the police, trying to raise the community back up again, and we have effectively done that. But we've still got these issues. You've got ducting through the building that's full of grease, asbestos, damp, leaks... it's just unhealthy to live here.'

Refurbishment, agrees Richard Filer, development director of major projects at partnership member Taylor Wimpey, is not an option. 'You'd have to strip everything back to the concrete frame, take everything off and move 301 families somewhere, and you'd still have the same social problems when you finished because of the design.'

Boom town

Local residents encountered on a walkabout of the estate seem pleased with the plans. 'My home's getting blown up,' says one teenage girl riding past on a bicycle, although a nervous glance around reveals no immediate danger. Judi Ammari, who is handling public relations for the partnership, explains to the girl that she can go along to the public consultation and tell the developers and architects what she wants. 'I want the whole precinct to be exploded,' she replies.

Veronica Jessop has lived on the estate since 1989. 'If it wasn't going to be torn down it would fall down,' she says. 'You look at the precinct and tell me a lick of paint and a new bathroom and kitchen would have made a difference... Something has to be done, and the only thing to do is to knock it down and start again.'

Still Ms Veale disagrees. 'There are some leaking roofs and no lifts,' she says. 'Everything else is just cosmetic.'

The residents spoken to during the day are not, Ms Veale adds, representative of the consensus. 'I can introduce you to 251 residents that are against [demolition], out of 302,' she claims, though without qualification. And the refurbishment can be paid for out of residents' service charge payments, she believes. 'They [Rowner residents] are not as hard up as you think they are.'

→ Continued on page 21



From top: a community support officer with Rowner estate residents; Rowner Renewal Partnership director John Butler; a graffitied wall on the estate; plans for the area Left: the estate is in need of more than a lick of paint

The design of the buildings and the open space do not encourage the kind of living that the people of Rowner deserve in the 21st century



Local children say Rowner should be demolished

But Ms Veale and her fellow private landlords face accusations that their interests are not aligned with those of their tenants. The buy-to-let leaseholders are simply protecting their investments, says Mr Butler. 'If you buy a property for £25,000 and charge market rents, you are going to get a very good return indeed... Those who have bought flats here as investment properties are the ones shouting loudest against this.'

He accuses Ms Veale and her fellow nay-sayers of 'talking up' the market: 'They have stood up and said, "This place is great",' he says, incredulously. 'She claims to have solved the drug problems, but you talk to the residents and the kids and you get a completely different story.'

A group of local kids back up Mr Butler's version. 'I think it should have been knocked down ages ago. It's not safe for all the children,' says one boy. 'All the druggies and stuff.'

He points towards the derelict Naafi, where naval families used to shop, in the centre of the precinct. 'All the tramps

go in there to do their heroin. It's full of needles... I see people trying to get up the stairs to their house and they have to move the tramps out of the way with their kids.'

But Ms Veale, who lives in London, maintains that crime is low and that any drug problem is minimal. 'Did you see junkies walking around with needles hanging out of their arms?' she says. She claims property prices in the precinct have trebled over the past three years, although the average sale price of a property in the precinct's postcode in 2007 so far is just £31,600.

But a visit to the estate is enough to challenge any rose-tinted view. Perhaps as purpose-built naval accommodation, with 100 per cent employment and military police patrols, the building's fabric and the murky, rubbish-strewn warren beneath the precinct were better cared for. But as general housing the precinct, to all outward appearances, is now a decrepit eyesore.

'There is much to be proud of here, especially in recent years. But it's clear

when visiting the estate that many of the homes and communal areas are in a very poor state of repair,' says Mr Butler. 'The design of the buildings and the open space do not encourage the kind of living that the people of Rowner deserve in the 21st century.'

Two weeks ago the partnership launched a public consultation. The response has been, says Mr Butler, 'incredibly constructive', another claim which is at odds with Ms Veale's.

'An awful lot of people came through the doors and the number who were against the plans was surprisingly few,' says Mr Butler. 'I had expected more.'

A divergence of views is to be expected, he adds. 'It's been coming for a long time, and when it finally comes, it's a shock to people.'

But come it will. The green light is flashing. The opposition will doubtless fight on, but it seems that the regeneration of Rowner is going to be good news for the majority – and that includes Gosport's cabbies.

Rowner: plan of action

The details of the redevelopment of the Rowner estate have yet to be finalised pending public consultation, but the project's main timetable is well established.

The first step is to build new houses on empty land to the south of the precinct, with the first of these becoming available in 2009 to rehouse residents from the areas scheduled for demolition. From there the project will follow the same pattern, building new homes for residents before their old properties are razed.

'About 500 homes will be demolished,' explains John Butler, the Rowner Renewal Partnership's director. 'We propose to replace them with 800 houses and flats.'

At least 30 per cent of the new properties will, he adds, be affordable housing available through Portsmouth Housing Association.

'The aim is that the community will be really involved in developing the proposals,' says Charles Campion of project architects John Thompson & Partners. 'We'll be having initial one-to-one meetings and group meetings, and that will lead up to the planning weekend [sometime in November]. And we'll be there with a blank sheet of paper.'

A masterplan is expected to be ready for consideration by planners early next year, and the whole project is scheduled for completion in 2015.