

It once held thousands of inmates but lies abandoned, waiting for work to start on 1,000 homes

Women's lost years haunt prison site

Emily Finch tours derelict Holloway Prison. Right, a campaigner and the Peabody housing association boss take opposing sides on plans to build homes on the site



EVERY corner of the empty site tells the story of the thousands who had to call Holloway prison their home at one point

in their life. There are a few spectres of normality – a cat flap, a dance studio and a small health centre nicknamed

“the Pizza Hut” by inmates because of an angular shape which resembles the restaurant chain.

But every window features narrow white bars distinguishing each building as somewhere people have had their freedom taken away.

The pristine garden once tended by prisoners, now holds bushes taller than men, with weeds choking the tulips and the roses. Wildflowers have taken over the exercise yard and tiny oak trees are growing in the gaps between the outer wall of the prison and the concrete floor.

On the north corner of the site lies Block D, the health wing. From the outside, it looks similar to any block of flats but the narrow slits for windows reveal their true purpose. A palm tree peeks over the walls of the upstairs terrace, allowed to keep growing with no hands to cut it down.

The perimeter walls are curved to help lessen any damage from explosions, recalling the episode from the prison's history when suffragettes blew a hole in the wall in defiance of the treatment of women in early 20th century Britain.

Holloway Prison was closed by the then chancellor George Osborne in 2016 in a move that shocked prisoners and prison officers, who were all moved out within weeks of the announcement.

With the women dispersed to prisons outside London, they faced, and continue to face, huge hurdles when accessing services and seeing their families.

In March, housing association giant Peabody announced that it had bought the site from the Ministry of Justice for

Huge opportunity to do things differently

LAST Thursday, I had a tour around abandoned Holloway Prison, writes Glyn Robbins. It's part of the charm offensive of Peabody housing association, which bought the 10-acre site in March for £80million, with the help of a £42million loan from the Mayor of London.

It plans to build 1,000 desperately-needed homes, of which 600 will be “affordable”. Campaigners argued that the best use of Holloway would be keeping it in public ownership, under democratic control, and building council homes. Now, we have to deal with Peabody, a private business with a mixed record of building the homes we need.

Peabody has assets of £6.3billion. Last year, it recorded profits of £175million and paid its chief executive £278,750. For every home it builds for social rent, it builds two for the private market.

It regularly sells homes, at auction, to property speculators. Its tenants complain about poor services. It isn't accountable to local people or politicians.

The Community Plan for Holloway prioritised housing, green space and social facilities, including a women's centre, recognising the prison's history. The council agrees. But it will be a battle to ensure Peabody's commercial interests don't take over.

Having used our money

to bankroll Peabody, Sadiq Khan must make sure that doesn't happen. But his own housing policies are worrying. He hasn't kept developers in check. Even when he supports council housing, the rents are too expensive. There are still big questions about what he means by “affordable housing”.

Current developer-led housing policies are failing. Holloway is a huge opportunity to do things differently. In the aftermath of the Extinction Rebellion protests, energy efficiency should be at the heart of the redevelopment. Every effort should be made to reuse and recycle the buildings and materials on the site and preserve its significant bio-diversity.

There's a chance to use innovative design, involving local people and former inmates, to create a place that integrates with the community and its needs.

But Peabody wants to demolish everything. There's a real danger of another bog-standard development, with separate facilities for private owners and social tenants and homes at prices few can afford. It's up to all of us to make sure that doesn't happen. We need to know the terms of the loan to Peabody and insist politicians don't let them get away with business as usual.

● Glyn Robbins is a housing campaigner and academic

After 167 years, we can open up this land

PEABODY has a long history in Islington, writes Brendan Sarsfield. We manage around 5,300 homes in the borough with the vast majority being let at a social rent. We have a strong community focus, investing in our neighbourhoods and the people who live in them.

We're also pleased to be working with the council and development partners in Islington to deliver more than 100 new social-rented homes in the months to come. And, of course, with the support of the Mayor of London, we recently bought the former Holloway Prison from the Ministry of Justice.

With the council and others we are excited about bringing this important site back into use. Housing is the most important issue in Islington – and across London – which is why we are proposing more than 1,000 new homes, with more than 60 per cent genuinely affordable.

When we announced that we had bought the site we promised we would spend a great deal of time engaging and listening to the community about what is needed here. This has already begun.

We would like to thank all the interested individuals and groups who came on the tours of the prison last week. Despite some intermittent rain more than 70 people were taken around the grounds

to get a sense of the scale of the site, the challenges involved in bringing Islington's Special Policy Document to life and how, after 167 years of being closed off, we can make this land open to Islington again.

The tours of Holloway are the start of the consultation process, which will continue throughout the planning and construction phases. Don't worry if you missed out – more tours can be organised via contact@hollowayprisonconsultation.co.uk.

In the months to come we will be hosting a series of consultation events starting with a blank map of the site.

Following these events we will be holding workshops, talks, further consultation events and publishing regular updates online (www.hollowayprisonconsultation.co.uk) and in print.

We are going to be transparent and open with the design and decision-making process, which includes sessions with the groups we have already been in touch with (and any we have missed).

We would like to reassure residents and businesses that we will be listening to the community and actively welcome all ideas for the future of Holloway.

● Brendan Sarsfield is Peabody chief executive



Security patrol at Holloway Prison, top. For more pictures of the site go to www.islingtontribune.com

£81million and now plans to build more than 1,000 homes there, with 600 of them affordable. But for now, only dog handlers with alsatians

roam the 10-acre site day and night.

To find out how you can go on a tour email contact@hollowayprisonconsultation.co.uk

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