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NO MORE FIGHTS AT THE TOLMERS CORRAL

Extract from a speech by Frank Dobson, MP for Holborn & St Pancras South at the opening of new flats in Tolmers Square, London NW1, on Saturday 30 October at 11 am.

"Those who remember the old Tolmers Square always recall the Tolmers Cinema which stood in the middle. It looked like a converted church. The Tolmers Cinema was to the Empire Leicester Square what a doss house is to the Ritz Hotel. In the last few years before it closed it seemed to be showing 'Gunfight at the OK Corral' every other week. I must have seen it six or seven times myself. Looking back I think it was an omen.

"Years later when I was leader of Camden council the fights over Tolmers Square were the most bitter and protracted of all the struggles we had in trying to get decent housing for local people in spite of the private ownership of the land. At the height of the property boom we nearly did a deal with Stock Conversion. Thank God we drew back at the last minute. We were exhorted to try another deal instead. That would have depended on getting a Tory Government to make a compulsory purchase order on the land and then for the Council to pay up to £12 million for it. We decided not to try that either.

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"Then a year or so later we bought the land for £4 million. The first approach came from Stock Conversion. Mr Robert Clarke got in touch to say that he'd been so moved by a television talk on housing by Lord Goodman that they thought they'd sell to us. I nearly laughed my head off. What he really meant was that there was a Labour Government and the bottom had dropped out of the property market.

"So we bought the land and immediately got on with building and rehabilitating housing to produce good homes for ordinary people at rents they can afford. Some lovely houses have been provided in Coburg Street, Drummond Street, Euston Street, North Gower Street and Starcross Street. Now the housing in Tolmers Square is completed and the Hampstead Road housing will be ready shortly.

"This means that high-quality homes for nearly 900 people have been created. For the first time ever the land round here is owned by the people and is being used to benefit the people. For the first time ever nearly everyone round here will live in good conditions. That's no coincidence. Under private landlords the land and buildings round here were devoted to private profits. I remember the raddled ruins into which the houses were allowed to decay by the private owners.

"It took public ownership, public funds and public commitment to transform this area from a decaying slum into a place where local people can live a decent life. The history of this area is an outstanding example of what can happen only if private profiteering is replaced by public service."

ends

Frank Dobson MP
House of Commons
London SW1

tel 219 3000