

Low cost starter homes delayed as council planners await instructions from redevelopment officials

Joined-up thinking leads to arrested development



● Thwarted plans: John Littleton at the former St Chad’s Church site, Tunstall, where development is in limbo

Picture by Dave Randle

DEVELOPERS in North Staffordshire are being thwarted over plans to build homes on brownfield sites because they might compete with the region’s housing strategy.

One such developer is J Littleton & Company, of Tunstall, which says it has come into direct conflict with the £2.3 billion Housing Market Renewal programme being undertaken by Renew North Staffordshire.

This is aimed at renewing the region’s ageing housing stocks, but has led to a moratorium on housing plans outside of its initial area of operation.

Littleton partner John Littleton said he submitted a planning application for flats on the former site of a church in Tunstall in June last year.

Although Government guidelines say applications should be dealt with within eight weeks, he says he was only told his plans had been rejected four weeks ago.

Mr Littleton, whose company paid £250,000 for the former St Chad’s Church, accused planners of failing to issue clear guidelines.

He said: “This is all a lot of money for a developer to have tied up in land which we can’t develop for an undetermined period of time.

By Deputy Business Editor David Elks

“The problem is that they don’t seem to have thought things through. I wanted to know why they weren’t able to tell me back in June what was happening, but no one seemed to know the answer. This is a big city, and if there are eyesore buildings they should be cleared up, not left to decay.”

The firm snapped up the site off Scotia Road in Tunstall, and tabled plans to construct 14 two-bedroom and six single-room flats.

Mr Littleton said his company had bought the land from another developer and his architects been given an indication from planning officers that the proposals would be recommended for approval.

He said: “We put in an application and met the conditions of highways, sustainable location and low cost housing.

“A shortage of low cost housing has been created because no one is really building it at the moment.

“We wanted to address that need by building those flats. We spent £250,000 on the land and a further £4,500 in putting in an application which has been turned down.”

Renew North Staffordshire is

planning to demolish 14,500 homes as part of the £2.3 billion Pathfinder housing renewal scheme.

Work will be concentrated first in the “early intervention areas” of Meir, Middleport, Hanley South and Cross Heath, Knutton and linked estates.

Andy Sharp, communication manager at Renew North Staffordshire, said developments immediately outside the Pathfinder region were assessed in the light of their impact on the residential areas included in the programme.

He said: “As you can imagine, the agenda is pretty much focused around getting to grips with delivering urban change in these areas.

“It is fundamental that even when there is development outside these areas, we have to have a clear view in terms of housing and industry so that it does not affect the overall strategy.

“For example, if someone wanted to build a house in Tunstall, then it would have a negative impact on market renewal taking place in Middleport.”

All local authorities affected by housing market renewal confirmed they are now reviewing planning policies to take account of the Pathfinder programme.

Mr Sharp conceded that the

ment of sites like this, which would be best suited towards housing.

“It’s a difficulty because the site is like most pottery buildings. It is Victorian and is constrained for a modern manufacturing process, and therefore cannot be re-used.”

A spokesman for Stoke-on-Trent City Council confirmed it is operating under the guidance offered by Renew North Staffordshire.

A spokesman said: “In 2004 we were awaiting planning guidance from Renew North Staffordshire.

“This delayed a number of planning applications more than we would have liked, but the situation is now resolved as the guidance has been received.”

Council leader David Leech, who sits on Newcastle Borough Council’s planning committee, said: “There is no policy with regards to the planning committee making decisions about applications from within the Renew area or outside the Renew area.

“Every planning application is treated individually on its own merits. Clearly the Renew area is an important one but that is not at all an exclusive area for development within the borough.”

Stoke-on-Trent North MP

Joan Walley said she had already spoken to Renew North Staffordshire to ensure it struck a balance between the delivering a framework for regeneration, and small in-fill projects.

Ms Walley said: “There are billions of pounds which will be coming into the region through housing renewal, and it is important that we get the right framework for sustainable communities. It’s right that there should be controls to ensure that major residential schemes are not allowed to divert or undermine Renew’s work.

“But there also needs to be measures to ensure that sites such as St Chad’s, where the community around is keen to see it developed after being left unchecked, are also addressed.

“I have already asked Renew to assess this when they are looking at small in-fill sites which are subject to anti-social behaviour, or low level environmental crime, or other elements which bring down the quality of the neighbourhood.

“I’ve asked that they should send someone to look over what can be done in terms of maintenance or upgrade.”

david.elks@thesentinel.co.uk

Leader: page 11

THEWeek

The Potteries

WHEN George Andrews grabbed a bite of his banana, he never thought it would cost him so dearly. He tucked into his healthy snack while driving along the A500 through Stoke-on-Trent.

But a beady-eyed police officer spotted him with the piece of fruit in his hand while he tried to negotiate a bend and issued him with an on-the-spot £30 fine.

Mr Andrews, a sports presenter on Signal 1, said: “It was a fair cop. I was eating a banana while I was driving and negotiating a bend. It was the most expensive banana I’ve ever had.

A POTTERY firm has called in the receivers with the loss of 26 jobs.

Hugh Padley, of Fenton-based Staffordshire Fine Bone China, was forced to call in the receivers after ploughing all his personal savings into the business.

The firm’s 26 employees were notified and sent home. The company’s overall debt has not yet been established. It comes after the firm reported huge interest in its products at the Spring Fair at Birmingham’s NEC, in February.



● Called receivers: Hugh Padley, boss of Staffordshire Bone China

Newcastle

A GIRL guides meeting at a church hall was disrupted by unruly youths who threatened them and threw stones at the centre’s windows.

Up to 40 teenagers gathered outside vandal plagued St Andrew’s Church Hall, in Porthill, banging on doors and swearing as children as young as 11 were attending the 5th Burslem Girl Guides evening, from 7pm until 9pm.

Community leaders hit out at the police who, they say, did not respond to the incident.

Officers only called church leaders the next day to ask what had happened.

HUNDREDS of engineering jobs are under threat after power giant Alstom announced plans to sell some of its operations in Britain.

A programme of undisclosed disposals is being considered by the French-owned firm which has three power engineering operations in Britain, including 160 employees at West Avenue, Kidsgrove.

The Moorlands

PLANS for a hi-tech laboratory have been unveiled as part of a £2 million investment in a cement works in the Staffordshire Moorlands.

Lafarge Cement UK has announced plans to relocate its quality control and support laboratory from Greenhithe in Kent to its Caudon Works at Waterhouses.

The company has just submitted a planning application to the district council for permission to build the new high-tech facility.

ALTON Towers has been sold off to an investment firm controlled by the Government of Dubai in a deal worth £800 million. The Alton park, which employs 2,500 people at peak season, today confirmed it has been sold, along with other attractions in the Tussaud Group, to Dubai International Capital. The theme park stressed that the change in ownership from previous venture capital owners Charterhouse would not affect the running of the business.

Mid Staffs

TENS of thousands of pounds are to be spent on an eight-mile section of the National Cycle network in Staffordshire.

The county council is ploughing £80,000 into a new rural off-road bike route.

Route 55 will run along a disused railway line between Derrington and Gnosall, near Stafford, and then on to the Staffordshire/Shropshire border.

The three metre wide course will have a smooth stone surface while the verge will be a haven for wildflowers.

Preparatory work is already underway, including cutting back overgrown trees, shrubs and undergrowth.

STAFFORDSHIRE County Council has ruled out suggestions that residents of a homeless hostel will be forced to sleep rough when it shuts in the summer.

The assurance came as officials discussed how to care for residents when the Bethany Trust hostel, in Newport Road, Stafford, closes.

The meeting was held as a newly-formed social task group from Stafford’s Local Strategic Partnership called for the authorities to consider housing the homeless in one of three alternative venues.

South Cheshire

A HEADTEACHER has axed all processed foods from her school’s dinner menu in a push to get children eating more healthily.

Fear Tree Primary School, in Stapeley, near Nantwich, is among the first in Cheshire to stop selling favourites such as chicken nuggets, fish fingers and turkey shapes at lunchtime.

Headteacher Mary Hennessey-Jones said she decided to only offer healthy options after watching the critically acclaimed television series, Jamie’s School Dinners.

SIX people were arrested in Crewe last weekend as officers cracked down on drunkenness and violence along Nantwich Road. Operation Yellow Card saw two men arrested on suspicion of assault on Friday night. On Saturday a man was arrested for being drunk and disorderly, another man accused of skipping bail and a further man arrested on suspicion of supplying Class A drugs. Twelve cans of beer were also taken from under-age youngsters.

Clearing a path to a new era of exciting opportunities

Q. How important is the housing market renewal pathfinder and what should it achieve?

A. Pathfinder is a £2.3 billion initiative which, over the next 20 years, aims to move North Staffordshire from its industrial past to a new era of opportunities in housing, jobs and the environment.

How will the Pathfinder work?

A. It is a strategy driven by both housing and radical improvement to the environment.

It is aimed at making the urban core of the region’s conurbation competitive and sustainable.

It links housing to the environment

and creation of jobs and wealth. This includes the creation of a vibrant centre for business and enough housing to support shops, community facilities and transport networks.

The plans initially involve targeting five “early intervention” areas, and will eventually include the demolition of 14,000 homes and the construction of 12,000 new homes.

What other ideas are included in the Pathfinder?

A. It envisages the creation of a new heart of the city, building on the existing city centre, Festival Park and a proposed University Quarter.

Q&A

Existing assets in the area such as the canal, parks and open spaces and 460 acres of former steelworks land in Etruria Valley will form the basis of a new district for city centre housing, business and leisure.

The scale of regeneration makes it

one of the largest regeneration projects in the UK.

What are the seeds of the crisis which the Pathfinder is trying to solve?

A. Experts say the crisis can be traced back to the 1940s, because the city retained its terrace housing stocks which other industrial cities like Birmingham cleared after the Second World War.

The council instead decided to invest in a massive council house building programme to create estates like Bentilee, which are now in far better condition than much terrace housing.

done to encourage large businesses to invest in the area after the stamp duty blow.

He said: “We need to attract large businesses into the area if we’re going to put Stoke-on-Trent on the map.

“We need household names setting up their depots and headquarters here, so that we can be known as the home of these large companies.”

He said road connections were now in place to make the region more appealing and there was plenty of land available. But he felt the land was controlled by a small minority of developers and there was lim-

ited opportunity for entrepreneurial development. He said: “We’ve got to see an improvement in the planning regime so that new companies can get quick answers to their planning inquiries.”

Mr Cheetham said he knew of a lot of companies that had gone elsewhere because it took so long for the planning authorities to deal with their applications.

He added: “In other towns companies are welcomed and encouraged to come in. In Crewe and Stafford, you get much quicker responses.”

The abolition of stamp duty relief is due to be partly replaced by a Local Enterprise Growth Initiative.

The scheme will release £300 million of funding over three years, which 30 local authorities in the most disadvantaged areas of the country will be able to bid for.

It will be spent on enterprise measures such as business incubation and mentoring, but a spokesman for Stoke-on-Trent City Council said the authority had not yet been given details of how to bid for the cash. However, an initiative funded by the North Staffordshire Regeneration Zone

(NSRZ), regional development agency Advantage West Midlands and the city council will plough £2 million into four new enterprise centres, creating 180 jobs over the next two years.

Tony Joynton, project manager at inward investment agency InStaffs said that while this initiative was welcome, it would not compensate for the removal of the stamp duty relief. He said: “Businesses are still unsure of what is happening. We will have to wait and see how it will pan out but I’m surprised Gordon Brown did this when he did.”

PLANNING authorities in North Staffordshire are being urged to help attract business to the area following the commercial property stamp duty relief abolition.

Sentinel Sunday reported last week how plans for a superstore in Burslem had been delayed and a proposed office development in Stoke had been cancelled because of the scrapping of the stamp duty relief.

Business leaders are still waiting to see the full effects of the Budget announcement earlier this month.

James White, tax partner at accountants Baker Tilly, said the week had been spent

By Business Correspondent Richard Babington

renegotiating deals made before the change in policy.

He said: “A lot of people are considering their positions. It’s a real blow: it’s certainly making the area less attractive to investors.”

Ian Cheetham, a partner at Festival Park-based commercial property agents butters john bee, said more needed to be