

Uncertainties over funding and competition from non-Government projects could put development plans in jeopardy

Election casts doubt on future of £2.3 billion housing project

By Deputy Business Editor

David Elks

PLANS to regenerate North Staffordshire's housing at a cost of £2.3 billion could be dropped just two years into the 15-year programme.

The body responsible for spearheading the scheme has admitted it may have to carry out an "orderly exit strategy" after the General Election, expected to take place on May 5.

The Conservative Party has pledged to scrap plans to demolish 14,500 houses under the housing renewal Pathfinder programme if it wins the forthcoming election.

But, while some property experts believe a Tory victory remains unlikely, they have raised concerns about the way the 15-year scheme is funded even if Labour returns to power.

At present, Renew North Staffordshire is preparing a bid for up to £70 million in cash for the second phase of the project, after gaining funding for its first two years.

Hardial Bhogal, director of Renew North Staffordshire, said a possible change of Government would not affect the £23 million it has received for the latest financial year, but could affect future funding tranches.

Mr Bhogal said: "We have to be realistic and have to have contingency plans in place. If there was a change in government we will have plans for an orderly exit strategy."

The concerns emerged as Caroline Spelman, Shadow Secretary for Local and Devolved Government, confirmed the Conservatives would drop the Sustainable Communities Plan, of which the housing renewal programme forms part.

Mrs Spelman said the existing policy was "environmentally damaging and misnamed".

She said: "Mr Prescott's housing plans are destroying the character of our northern towns and cities, demolishing homes where they could be refurbished.

The Deputy Prime Minister's idea seems to be focused on demolishing the north and concreting over the green fields in the south.

"This isn't the way to go about solving the housing crisis which the Government has created."

The threat to funding would directly affect the existing financial commitment of £2.3 billion that the current Government has given to Renew North Staffordshire over the next 15 years. It will be used to demolish 14,500 ageing or blighted properties across parts of Stoke-on-Trent and the construction of 12,000 new homes.

The purpose of the programme is to stop the decline in population numbers across the conurbation created by the lack of ageing housing which leads to higher than average levels of void properties.

However, rather than giving out the cash in one lot, Renew North Staffordshire has to bid for portions of funding made available every two years. This allows the Government to review the progress of each Pathfinder, and whether the project is running effectively.

Renew last year won £67.5 million



● Future development: Paul Shaw from Millwood Homes which has been contracted to develop houses on the former site of Churchill China in Cobridge. Picture by Alex Severn

Pottery giant get crockery over planning delays

POTTERY giant Churchill China has become the latest company to be affected by planning delays created by the £2.3 billion housing market renewal programme.

The tableware manufacturer, which employs around 900 people in the city, wants to sell its former Alexander Works in Cobridge, having invested £3 million in new manufacturing facilities at its Sandyford headquarters. It planned to sell the 9.25 acre plot to a developer looking to build 138 homes just a mile away from the city centre. However, the plans have ground to a halt because of an 11-month delay in getting an application for houses heard by Stoke-on-Trent's planning committee.

This has meant that the listed company is sitting on assets worth £2.5 million which could be used to further develop the

business. Paul Shaw, a director at Millwood Homes which has been working with national builder JS Bloor to realise the plan, said Renew North Staffordshire was "stifling" development.

Mr Shaw said: "I have been dealing with Churchill China for some time and it has always been committed to being in Stoke-on-Trent. Instead of shipping everything overseas, it has invested £3 million at its main factory operation and, as a result, the Cobridge site has become surplus to their requirements.

"It's horrible, closing down, but we can't do anything with the site. And while it stays like that Churchill is sitting on the money from the land which could be better spent in its business, I'm sure."

As Sentinel Sunday reported last week, the crux of the problem has been created

because schemes to turn disused pubs, potbanks and churches into homes are being rejected by planners because they are not within five areas being targeted by the first stages of the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder programme.

The unofficial moratorium affects all land in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle outside of Cross Heath, Hanley South, Knutton, Meir and Middleport.

Renew North Staffordshire is acting to ensure its regeneration work is not diluted by competing developments in nearby areas.

However, Mr Shaw warned Renew's intervention could put off outside developers while the unofficial moratorium continues.

"Renew North Staffordshire is running the city," he said, "but they are stifling the development of it at the same time."

"It doesn't matter whether it is a single plot or a site for 138 homes like ours — they don't want development."

"What amazes me is that Renew talk about regenerating the urban core of the city, but this would be closer to the city centre than the Hanley South area."

"It's close to Forest Park Primary School and would be better suited to houses."

"The factory is also visible as you come along the main arterial road into the north of the city."

"It's more frustrating because they are an unselected body who are making decisions which affect the whole of the city."

Tony Joynson, project manager for inward investment agency InStaffs, said:

"In an ideal world Renew North Staffordshire would have a strategy that was now available, but it hasn't and it's causing a lot of frustration."

for the first two years — this will be targeted towards development in the "early intervention areas" of Meir, Middleport, Hanley South and Cross Heath, Knutton and linked estates.

It is now working up a second prospectus to apply for up to £70 million funding which is due to be submitted to the Government by September.

This process follows a letter was sent to all nine of the housing market renewal pathfinders outlining how much money each can expect in the second allocation of funding between 2006 and 2008.

Renew North Staffordshire is currently expected to get some-

where between £40 million and £70 million.

Mr Bhogal also addressed concerns about planning delays, highlighted by Sentinel Sunday last week, faced by developers seeking to transform land outside Renew's five early intervention areas.

The unofficial moratorium affects all land in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle outside of Cross Heath, Hanley South, Knutton, Meir and Middleport. The issue is further complicated because the local planning framework for Stoke-on-Trent, which gives guidance on what types of planning permission will be granted to different areas, is unlikely to be ready

until Spring 2007. This is because of the process of trying to integrate existing planning policy with that of Renew North Staffordshire's own strategy.

Mr Bhogal reiterated that the success of the scheme required other developments not to compete with the Government funding. He conceded there could be delays in planning but said an interim planning framework had been drawn up and could be in force within three months. He said: "There may have been delays in applications, but that is not because of delays in master-planning."

"That process is on time. It could be frustrating but if we allow homes

to be built without an overall strategy then it could aggravate the problem of vacant homes that we are trying to address."

"We are reaching out to developers and trying to establish a way for their plans to come forward."

However, property developers have continued to raise concerns about possible stagnation in the development of disused properties.

Mike Herbert, regional director of regeneration developer St Modwen, said: "Although Housing Market Renewal was announced some two to three years ago, the future for former industrial sites such as the Corus steelworks remains unde-

cided until the overall strategy has been established."

"Renew North Staffordshire issued a full prospectus to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister last March, but detailed master plans have not become clear and the concern is that potential inward investors could be discouraged by a lack of clarity about the future."

He added: "Housing Market Renewal and all that comes with it is strongly supported by the development sector. However, it must be used as a positive force for progress and not for delay."

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"I'M NOT Sigourney Weaver, my name is Susan and I'm a carer." Hollywood actress Sigourney Weaver, in a letter to the organiser of a conference on autism at Vale Park, Burslem, at which she arrived under her real Christian name Susan.

"THE streets are full of folk, all donating eggs or toys and clapping and generally appreciating the efforts made by us motorcyclists at these events." Dave Evans, of Talke, speaking in a letter to The Sentinel about the "marvellous" reception given to the Stoke-on-Trent Motorcycle Egg Run by people living in Bentilee.

"THE fact is that community officers are pulled into the town centre to deal with alcohol-fuelled violence." Chief Inspector Jeff Moore, of Newcastle Police, explaining that only by purging a district of crime would officers be freed to patrol outlying villages.

"IF YOU placed speed bumps on main roads, drivers would just move on to smaller side roads to avoid them." Bentilee councillor Maurice Lewis, on plans to build speed bumps across 30 streets in Bentilee.

"SOME of the sunsets, especially in winter, were just fantastic, but it was on foggy days that you'd occasionally get to see some unworldly sights." Stoke-on-Trent City Council development control manager Paul Edwards, speaking about working in Unity House.

"WHAT a stab in the back for the men and women Mr Blair sent into the line of fire." Conservative leader Michael Howard, who has vowed to save the Staffordshire and Cheshire regiments from a controversial merger if he wins The General Election.

"GUEST stars in future episodes include Anthony Worrall Thompson, Peter Andre and Lionel Blair. That's how good it is. The Azerbaijani of TV dramas." Sentinel television reviewer John Woodhouse, on the new series of Footballers' Wives, which got under way on Thursday.

"THEY have been throwing things up at the windows, putting up posters, and calling me a 'murdering bitch'." Diane Carrago, a 19-year-old student from South Africa living in Cheadle, who is being terrorised by vigilantes who believe that she is Maxine Carr, the former girlfriend of the Soham schoolgirl-murderer Ian Huntley.

"THE internet now dwarfs all other betting channels and is increasing, year after year." John Coates, chief executive of Festival Park-based betting firm Bet365, which is taking on 20 extra staff amid a growth in online gambling.

"THE buses are white at the moment because they went straight out on the streets after coming off the production line, but they will be painted in First's colours." Bus firm First, which has introduced nine new buses which have yet to be painted in its distinctive livery.

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