

## **Sustainable Communities Policy Review - Stoke**

[Evidence collated from an SDC visit, Audit Commission North Staffordshire Pathfinder report (2004) and materials provided by RENEW.]

### **Headlines**

- Stoke is part of the North Staffordshire Housing Market Renewal Area. Over the 18 year programme, the Pathfinder (RENEW) plans to demolish 14,502 homes, construct 12,528 and refurbish 36,134 to decent homes standard, achieving a net reduction in the housing stock of 1,974 dwellings.
- A clear intervention framework has been established, identifying eight 'areas of major intervention' where the focus is on change, and six 'renewal areas' where the focus is on retention.
- Stoke has four main challenges - the condition of the housing stock, its 'polycentric' urban form, the condition of the land, and issues around long-term demand. Another key issue is funding - market renewal funds are only available on a 2-yearly cycle, causing problems in continuity.

### **Context**

The development of the Pathfinder programme is being overseen by a partnership involving the four local authorities, English Partnerships, Advantage West Midlands, Government Office and the Housing Corporation, Health, the Police, a private developer and housing organisations. Central to the Pathfinder's strategy is the rationalisation of the conurbation's poorly performing 'polycentric' form. There are plans to strengthen Hanley as the commercial core and Burslem, Tunstall, Longton and Newcastle-under-Lyme as residential centres. Significant areas of new housing will be introduced to the west of Hanley in the currently derelict Etruria Corridor and the northern part of the Etruria valley, the aim being to create a new, enlarged heart to the conurbation. Outside the urban core the interventions envisaged are less intensive; the focus is on diversifying monolithic and poorly designed social housing estates through selective demolition, redevelopment and environmental works. Interventions for the central core are expected to account for 80% of the programme, but the Pathfinder sees few prospects for sustaining some other areas as major residential centres in the long term, focusing on demolition and a gradual shift towards a more commercial character in those areas.

### **Housing & community facilities**

Housing development is focussed in the following areas:

- City Centre South (Hanley, Shelton, Etruria) - a mixture of new-build, refurbishment and demolition - including the flagship City Waterside neighbourhood, where hundreds of new homes are being built alongside the Caldon Canal within walking distance of shops, jobs and entertainment in the city centre.
- Middleport - major change is planned with a mixture of refurbishment, environmental improvements, new homes and clearance of properties that are beyond repair or unpopular.
- Knutton, Cross Heath & Lower Milehouse - the aim is to create better housing choice by reducing the number of housing association properties and encouraging new house building.
- Meir - the aim is to improve choice by reducing the number of council rented properties and encouraging developers to build new private homes. Existing council homes will be improved and a modern complex of homes for older people will be built.
- Birches Head, Burslem Park, Chesterton & Normacot - these are general renewal areas comprising older terraced housing in need of modernisation, but lacking the problems of empty homes and unstable ground that affect other parts of Stoke. Funding in these areas will be directed to housing and general environmental improvements, and these areas will provide replacement homes for people affected by clearance in nearby neighbourhoods.

Housing challenges are many and various. The urban form in the inner core reflects its distinctive industrial past, and the shift away from manufacturing is likely to have a continuing impact on the housing market. The use of waste from the potteries to provide foundations for houses has led to subsidence in some areas, and the problem is compounded by the natural fault lines running through the area. The weakest housing markets are in areas of terraced housing in the inner core, where the quality of housing and the environment is very poor; local demand exists for new-build rather than the existing terraces, due to the attractions of gardens and parking. The problems of poor, degenerating housing are compounded by the very low incomes of residents, which prevent investment in properties.

RENEW is tackling demolition with a bite-sized approach – taking down 20 properties, rebuilding 20, then starting the cycle again; this approach garners community support, but is also the product of the biannual HMR funding regime. The decision whether to refurbish or demolish properties is based on a 5 step analysis: collecting a baseline of housing stock data, including tenure; judging this information against the DCLG sustainable community indicators; comparing this to the recent English Heritage study, that lists areas of local heritage value; using a neighbourhood renewal survey to gauge fitness; and carrying out a ground survey. Alongside this more intensive change, streets on main ‘gateway’ routes into the general renewal areas have been improved with external work such as new roofs, windows, doors and boundary walls, with whole terraces renovated at the same time.

Local schools are being upgraded or rebuilt as part of the ‘Building Schools for the Future’ programme, and new health facilities are being provided in some communities. Safety is being improved with new street lighting, and transport is being upgraded with better bus routes and safer streets. Many local projects are underway to create better community facilities like play areas, health centres and children’s centres that offer a range of care and support. RENEW proposes to designate Hanley as the city centre for the area, with plans to tackle the bus station and local bus service as part of the Hanley city centre regeneration programme. Whilst there is currently no passenger transport executive in the area, the Mayor is working to set one up, with the main aim to link Hanley, Stoke (where the train station is located) and Etruria with a reliable, frequent bus service.

RENEW has developed a financial assistance package for people in priority areas who own older homes in need of modernisation. This consists of a range of interest-free and low interest loans to enable homeowners to improve their homes in the way they want, when they want. These loans will be offered alongside other assistance options including access to new affordable homes, shared ownership and homeswaps.

There are a number of concerns with the current approach. Whilst in Hanley, new developments with a mix of property types have been so welcome that they have sold off the plan, it has been suggested that the more affordable properties are not of an adequate size to live in comfortably thus encouraging short-term habitation. Some new private developments are not in optimal locations, situated on the periphery of the urban centre and thus distant from services and supporting infrastructure. Private developers favour building flats in the area since these make substantial profits and are popular elsewhere; however, the market for flats in Stoke is largely absent.

Other issues with the current strategy concern the decision-making processes around condemning areas for demolition. One such area, Slater Street, is set for demolition and rebuild on the rationale that the houses are too poor; the intention is to reconnect Slater Street to Middleport centre by adding more housing and green space to fill in the gaps. In a recent house condition survey, 60% of the houses failed with category 1 hazards (i.e. did not meet the Decent Homes Standard); only 15% were voids, over half were buy to let, and 25% were

owned by a local Housing Association. RENEW carried out a net present value analysis of refurbishment versus clearance, and on that basis decided on demolition. A potentially more sustainable alternative course of action might involve building infill housing to reconnect the street to the local urban centre alongside a programme of refurbishment of the existing condemned properties to improve the perception of the area.

### **Environment**

Improving environmental quality is a key theme in RENEW's programme, through the separation of housing from incompatible uses such as polluting industries and arterial roads, and extensive improvements to the quality of green space. The overarching vision is that North Staffordshire could be transformed into the 'greenest conurbation in Britain'.

RENEW is working with the Land Restoration Trust to deliver open space across Stoke. Much open space in the area comprises contaminated brownfield ex-industrial land (disused steelworks, ex-coal mines etc). Where it's economically viable for private developers to remediate and provide housing on a piece of damaged land, this is the preferred course of action; however, if not, RENEW work with the Land Restoration Trust to remediate the land and designate it as public open space. One risk with this approach could be that the value of the derelict, unremediated land for biodiversity and local informal recreational use is not taken into consideration, running the risk of turning locally important sites with unusual biodiversity into species-poor, management-intensive amenity green spaces.

### **Society & Economy**

60% of the pre-war population of Stoke was lost as a result of suburbanisation and the local loss of the potteries industry. RENEW hopes that the programme of works will create many local jobs in construction and related businesses, and attract new business investment by radically improving the city environment as well as creating a new business quarter to attract well-paid jobs. The companies chosen to deliver the housing programme have agreed to offer local people skills training in order to train them for future construction employment. RENEW plans to support Stoke's economic reinvigoration by reviving traditional local skills and making the most of the strengths of the two local universities. Other areas of focus include developing the provision of logistics (to support the boom in internet shopping) and the service sector.

Community consultation on the housing proposals has been undertaken in each of the key areas. Detailed surveys of housing conditions and residents views in the form of 'neighbourhood renewal assessments' have been undertaken, and local people have had the opportunity to comment on masterplans for each neighbourhood at a series of open days. In each Area of Major Intervention, a panel of local residents has, with RENEW, selected lead developers from a shortlist of three and visited schemes developed by the bidding companies to see how they have worked in other areas.

There is currently roughly 15 years of new-build housing already in the planning system, but the population of Stoke continues to decline. Housing alone is unlikely to deliver the required boost to the local economy or sufficient local jobs to support the levels of housing provision. Whilst there is undoubtedly strong community support, there is also significant local opposition. Community opposition groups have formed, for example 'Middleport Against Demolition' and have gained media support for their campaign.

### **Governance & Making it Happen**

The 18 year HMR programme amounts to £2.3 billion of which just over a third, £860 million, will be met from Market Renewal funding. RENEW makes use of the HMR fund for housing work, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund for environmental ('street scene') work, and English Partnerships and the RDA for employment-related work. Coordinating disparate funding

streams that don't always overlap could be a significant challenge. The 2 year HMR funding regime causes significant problems; private developers feel that there isn't enough security, community support can waver in the face of delays, and it's impossible to start work until the money is in place.

Radical change in the condition of social housing is only possible if local councils release their social housing stock to a RSL, otherwise improvements must be made from the local authority Decent Homes budget; DCLG rules don't allow the use of HMR funds for improvements to social housing unless it is managed by a RSL. Additionally, if a private developer works with an RSL they receive an additional 40% in funding, therefore there is a significant incentive to provide much social housing, but only through RSLs.

DCLG's monitoring regime appears to require significant resource commitment; the process requires each Pathfinder to provide evidence and make a submission to the Audit Commission who then make recommendations to DCLG, on the basis of which money can then be released to the Pathfinder. Additionally every 6 months the Audit Commission audits RENEW against one of 8 themes - e.g. value for money – focusing on a different theme each visit.

RENEW has recently developed a collaborative approach to masterplanning, inviting all stakeholders to participate. New local development frameworks enable all stakeholders to input, and a 'Single Implementation Plan' draws together over forty local projects with a programme project management approach.