

Nobody denies that change is needed in Seedley South. But whether it should be in the form of demolition or refurbishment has become a hot topic ahead of the May elections.

By **Ciara Leeming**

Ballot box battle

Now suddenly our plans don't have the 'wow factor' and more houses have to come down. So why was this option on the table in the first place?



Karen Ainsworth seethes with bitterness and resentment.

The mother-of-two, from Seedley South, in Salford, has learned that her home is among 166 earmarked for clearance.

What makes things worse is the feeling her community has been 'shafted', as she puts it, after a year of consultation. She and other Seedley South residents are furious that their ideas for regeneration, put together by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service – paid more than £10,000 by the council to act as independent community advisors – have been sidelined by Salford Council for not being 'transformational' enough.

The row has become a political hot potato in the Langworthy council ward, one of the most apathetic areas in the country. In last year's local elections, just 23 per cent of residents voted. A higher turnout when residents return to the polls on 3 May this year could hand the seat to the anti-demolition Liberal Democrats for the first time, giving the Labour council a bloody nose.

Ms Ainsworth says: 'We think this consultation was about box-ticking; giving the impression there's been engagement with the community. We were given

the option of low demolition and block improvements, and that's what we chose. Now suddenly our plans don't have the 'wow factor' and more houses have to come down. So why was this option on the table in the first place?

'The whole thing's been a sham. It's all about making money from developers.'

Seedley South's terraced streets stand half empty, the vacant homes tinned up. Grass grows in the footprints of dozens of properties which have been cleared over the past few years. Nearby businesses struggle to keep going as the population dwindles.

The wider Seedley and Langworthy area is undergoing massive regeneration, helped along by millions of pounds of public and private money – Salford Council says more than £13 million from the public purse and £75 million from the private has been invested so far. Salford MP Hazel Blears, currently seeking to replace John Prescott as deputy Labour leader, took an active interest in the scheme, chairing the local partnership board until she was appointed to the cabinet last May.

The flagship project is Urban Splash's £40 million 'upside down houses' development at Chimney Pot Park – where 400 two-bed Victorian terraces are being modernised and bought largely by young professionals. From here it's less than a mile to Salford Quays – some of the most valuable land in the city, and where the BBC plans a huge northern base.

Yet the contrast could not be greater. Set back from the main roads, Seedley South feels like a community forgotten – with high crime rates and social blight.

Regeneration was promised seven years ago but locals, many of them owner occupiers, lost patience as they watched other schemes unfold.

Now, finally, £3.4 million from the Manchester-Salford housing market renewal pathfinder could help kick start improvements to the area. No one disputes change is needed. But there the two sides diverge.

A working group, featuring several residents' representatives, met weekly with TPAS over the course of six months to discuss options put forward by the council. Nearby streets have benefited from major facelifts over recent years and properties fetch upwards of £90,000 when they go on sale. Before regeneration began in 2000, average prices were under £10,000.

This evidence has convinced many locals that the housing market would pick up naturally if Seedley South's empty homes – mostly now owned by the council – were brought back into use. Under their plan, nine empty houses would be demolished to create space for car parking.

But despite making the option available to the group, officials now say it lacks the radical element required if money is to be released by pathfinder. More demolition and new build are, they believe, the only answer.

Within weeks of the report, Salford Council unveiled a new proposal – never seen by the local community – which would see the clearance of an additional 43 houses, 25 of which are already empty.

The plan, which brings total demolitions to 166, is due to go before the pathfinder board in June – more than a month after the local elections – to see whether funding is available.

The move has outraged residents. Although the council has since backtracked slightly, agreeing to send both options to outside consultants for appraisal over the coming weeks, the gesture is being seen as too little, too late.

Norman Owen, a councillor and leader of Salford Liberal Democrats, has been supporting the community throughout the process. His colleague Lynn Drake will challenge sitting councillor Gina Loveday for the seat next month.

'Salford Council needs to be fair and open to the people of Seedley South. There have been certain dishonesties here. To put forward a plan for regeneration without consultation, as is happening now, is not on. And why were local people offered minimal demolition if it was never really an option?' asks Mr Owen.

'The community's preferred option now seems to be back on the table – perhaps because the issue has turned out to be so sensitive.'

Salford Council stresses that residents are being listened to and that no decisions have yet been made.

Ms Blears, for one, admits the issue could affect next month's election result, but supports efforts to secure the area's future sustainability.

'It's hard for people to understand why their house needs to be demolished, and we need to be sensitive to that, but at the same time we need to transform Seedley for the long term,' she says. 'These proposals may well end up an election issue.'

Ms Loveday, one of three Labour members representing Langworthy, is also convinced that the council's amendment is for the best – largely because it is more likely to attract private investment.

This, she believes, will be vital if Seedley South is to be turned back into the thriving area it once was. 'The council believes there's a need for more three and four bedroom homes in this area,' she says. 'A few developers were approached with the TPAS plan but the interest wasn't there because there wasn't enough land available for them.'

'Of course there's a possibility I won't be on the council after the election to see this through. But as councillor I have to look at securing funding which will change this community for the better. The plans must be right if we are to get funding, otherwise nothing will happen at all.'

It's the possibility that Ms Loveday won't survive May's poll that residents are pinning their hopes on.

'The way we see it now is that this election is our chance to give Salford Council a shock,' says Ms Ainsworth. 'We might lose our houses, but if we get a change of councillor here they'll realise that we're not going to be trampled on.'



Karen Ainsworth: says community has been shafted

Timeline

2001

Regeneration of Seedley South first discussed.

2001

Consultation on proposals to flatten 236 homes receives a negative response from residents. The council agrees to reconsult.

August 2006

TPAS appointed as independent community advisors at a cost of 'more than £10,000', according to chief executive Phil Morgan. It works with residents for the rest of the year.

January 2007

TPAS report outlines the community's preferred option: demolition of nine properties (plus the 114 already earmarked under previous masterplans) and block improvements.

Mid-March 2007

Council announces that a new plan, featuring demolition of 52 houses (plus the 114), will go before the local pathfinder board for appraisal.

26 March 2007

Council agrees to send both options to consultants who will decide which to forward to the pathfinder.

3 March 2007

Local authority elections.

12 June 2007

Pathfinder committee due to discuss plans for Seedley South. A steering group may then be established to involve the community in the process.