

'If we continue to stop and start it's not going to happen'

Alex Bell speaks to housing associations and relevant figures about the challenges and opportunities of decarbonising the North West's social housing market

"We're still pretty close to the beginning," says Patrick Berry, Together Housing Group's executive director of property, when asked what stage the decarbonisation of social housing in the North West is at.

"Most social housing organisations have not committed to a strategy or a plan which has resources behind it," he says. "They are operating on a hand-to-mouth basis with whatever funding becomes available."

The social housing sector is awaiting the third wave of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF), a £1.25bn cash pot to support up to 140,000 social homes. This will come from the new Labour government, following the party's landslide victory.

Reflecting on how SHDF has so far impacted the sector, Berry says: "Everybody's looking for certainty. What we've seen in recent months, from the [Conservative] government is a kind of politicisation of the net-zero agenda and backing down on previous commitments which doesn't help. The whole thing is very much a long-term strategy. If we continue to stop and start it's not going to happen."

Together Housing Group has made significant investments in retrofit insulation works, renewable heat and solar photovoltaic (PV) and battery systems and has set ambitious targets to deliver thousands of renewable installations to 30,000 properties by 2035.

But Berry says: "The other major challenge we have is District Network Operators (DNOs). It's going to be extremely difficult to achieve our target because we can't get the consent from DNOs to connect heat pumps to the system. There's already a lot of noise around decarbonising social housing which isn't backed up by action."



AEW's vision for Harpurhey, Manchester

James Traynor is managing director of ECD Architects, which is retrofitting more than 10,000 homes through the SHDF. It has offices in Preston, Glasgow and London.

He says: "Some of the region's towns and cities have some of the oldest housing stock in the country. This brings challenges in construction as there is a higher proportion of solid-wall homes, many of which may be listed or in conservation areas. Even where this is not the case, the size, position and detailing of the original home may limit what can be incorporated."

"A specific challenge in the North West can be the higher moisture content in the existing building fabric and this risk needs to

be managed very carefully to avoid unintended consequences. Even more important is the challenge of resident engagement. Some residents may be reluctant to switch from their gas boiler to a new technology."

AEW's Danny Lomax, architect and retrofit co-ordinator, says: "Retrofitting social housing is also a public health issue. Reports have shown that failing to improve poor housing costs the NHS £1.5bn per year."

"Retrofitting social housing is also a massive opportunity for job creation, with 14,000 roles needing to be created each year for retrofits at the scale required to meet 2050 net-zero targets."

Fusion 21's Oliver Mooney was asked to identify the top three opportunities associated with decarbonising social housing stock.

"Incorporating energy-efficiency measures presents a major opportunity and can streamline the decarbonisation process," says Mooney. "Another opportunity lies in early engagement with supply partners. Lastly, developing capacity and resilience within local and regional supply chains offers a chance to boost the local economy."

Onward is one of the largest registered providers of social housing based solely in the North West. Sandy Livingstone, executive director of property, says: "Short-term funding deals for decarbonisation don't work. The next round that comes out – SHDF wave three – is for three years. A three-year deal is better than we've had but, ideally, if you want my magic wand, I'd like a deal for ten years."



ECD Architects' plans for Shieldfield Towers, Newcastle