

Levelling up Stoke-on-Trent with Phil Cresswell, Director of Housing, Development and Growth, Stoke-on-Trent City Council



Before the pandemic, Stoke-on-Trent was experiencing an economic resurgence, the like of which it had not seen in generations. With many cities and towns across the UK looking at their plans for economic recovery, Phil Cresswell spoke to Matt Masters at Michael Page, about how Stoke-on-Trent is planning for a post Covid-19 world and specifically Levelling Up Stoke-on-Trent.

Phil, you started your career in Staffordshire in the 80s, back then the city was a very different place, has it felt like coming full circle, coming back to Stoke-on-Trent?

It has in many ways. I came to Stoke-on-Trent from Merseyside because of the vision that was outlined by the administration about a desire to create a new narrative for the city and how physical regeneration played an important role in order for the city to change the economic and social outlook for Stoke-on-Trent. Four years later that narrative is well known and also talked about nationally, not least when the Chancellor announced Stoke-on-Trent's success, fate and fortune in his autumn statement. That was a moment I will remember for a long time, that was a moment I thought yes, we were right to work really hard and support the Levelling Up bids we wrote back in June 2021.

The Stoke-on-Trent that I knew in the 80s and 90s, when the city had been significantly affected by the collapse of its dominant industries such as coal mining and what everyone relates Stoke-on-Trent to – ceramics had started to change, but what struck me was the amount of opportunity the city had. Other authorities had already taken a more interventionist approach to try and utilise some of their assets, and Stoke-on-Trent's ambition was now rising to the fore in a North Midlands economy that was benefitting from its strategic locality, perfectly positioned as the gateway to the North West, East Midlands and West Midlands too. You can't change your location as a city, and Stoke-on-Trent has the perfect positioning and is at the heart of the UK.

Even now, I still see many of the public buildings that I had a role in designing back then and almost thirty years later the council and the public sector are again taking the lead and intervening to breathe life into some of those sites, creating new opportunity, jobs and building a better sense of place. Levelling Up Stoke-on-Trent is all about taking the opportunities the city has and delivering them quickly.

What has the recent journey been like for Stoke-on-Trent?

Over the last four-plus years, Stoke-on-Trent has had one of the strongest and best performing economies anywhere in the UK. In fact we were the fastest growing economy when measured by job creation, prior to the pandemic. We occupy such a unique position in the country - our physical location, the social and physical assets that we have, and their competitiveness is why the city is such an attractive place for investors, developers and also people looking to live and increasingly spend their leisure time. We are a lot more accessible and affordable when compared to our neighbouring core cities. That's great news for home owners, businesses and investors alike! The fact we also are on the cusp of Staffordshire Moorlands and have great leisure attractions like World of Wedgewood and Alton Towers also helps our visitor economy too.

We have brought forward and developed over one million square foot of additional employment space and have the same amount either being built or already on site; we have delivered and started a number of game-changing schemes such as Etruscan Square, Smithfield, Spode and the Goods Yard, and of course the success of Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone.

We have also built a significant number of new houses across the city and even in the teeth of the pandemic, we have a significant pipeline of projects and a continued strong and substantial demand from investors and developers for both residential and employment land. Importantly, we can also service and deliver on that demand. We have the space, the sites, a willingness and the resources to really engage and support investors. So, the recent story of Stoke-on-Trent has been one of delivering on our potential, and that's also the story of our recovery strategy – *delivering on our potential* – in addition to Levelling up Stoke-on-Trent, we use the phrase **Powering Up the City**, and that's exactly what's happening here.

What has the pandemic meant for Stoke-on-Trent in terms of place-making?

We are still clearly seeing the impact on our communities and as a council we are doing all we can to support people and their families. Economically at present, we are tracking slightly ahead of the national curve in terms of unemployment. There is still an element of our industrial heritage behind this and also the impact on SMEs and areas such as hospitality and retail. Again, we are working hard to support businesses in the city. Stoke-on-Trent is also not a panacea, and in some of our wards we still have and see significant challenges with void retail spaces in our towns. There is no quick fix to some of this and we are working with those communities to identify what is needed there, what the future can be based on and how we start to bring this forward as we move away from retail-led schemes to other uses.

It was important therefore that quickly after the team responded to the immediate impact of the pandemic, they started to think and to plan our strategies to see the city powering back out of the other side of the crisis. It is important also that while we consider Covid-19, there is also the issue of Brexit to consider too. We are seeing record levels of inflation in pricing, all of which add to the challenge of delivering projects and schemes that really will make a massive difference.

We are using and co-ordinating our own knowledge and that of our partners in the wider public and also the private sector to really understand what is going on locally, regionally and nationally. This is so our response and strategies are resilient; they provide us with control and agility over elements of the market that we can control and means we are able to take advantage of market opportunities. Like a lot of locations, we have a lot to lose, but unlike a number of other locations, we have significant and competitive assets that we can utilise.

For instance, If you want to develop Grade A floor space with us as a co-investor, with access to an available workforce who don't have to commute or who don't want to now spend an hour on the M6 or on public transport, then we can provide that in a city centre location with a real mix of cultural assets. That's exactly what we are doing as part of our plan as we help the Home Office settle into the city as part of their own levelling up plans, right here in Stoke-on-Trent.

What has been interesting is we are seeing a modal shift clearly in terms of working patterns. As a city and region, nearly half a million people live within a 25-mile travel-to-work radius. The shift to home working has seen people re-discover their local areas, our parks for instance have never been so busy and the footfall to them is tracking at about 40% above the national average. And while the city centre has seen an impact in terms of footfall, it is holding up very well in comparative terms. Our enterprise schemes for flexible and competitively priced work-spaces is an example of such innovation and intervention onto the office market in Stoke, the City Centre and Longton.

We know from our investment team, that organisations are evaluating where they need to be located, considering costs, location and also now the well-being and requirements of their staff. The enquiries haven't dropped during the pandemic, in fact for all the reasons we have just talked about they have increased. With people now very focused and aware about quality of life and affordability, Stoke-on-Trent is very appealing right now and with people not needing or feeling the need to live and travel into core cities the opportunity presents itself for Stoke-on-Trent to adopt the mantle of a competitor or disrupter brand.

We have had a really successful economic story, we have spent in some ways a number of years tackling the issues of the past and the next challenge is to take the city, a city that's on the up, and develop what will be the next iteration for Stoke-on-Trent. There is a huge amount of exciting work for someone to come and do in the city. Our Levelling up Stoke-on-Trent team is central to the city's future – this is a fantastic opportunity to really come and make a mark and to get your hands on what I think are some tremendous professional challenges and therefore opportunities.

Within the city, designing the next phases for Smithfield and master planning and overseeing a delivery programme right at the heart of the city centre. Overseeing HS2 connectivity and unlocking the potential of the Learning Quarter, home to Staffordshire University and the Goods Yard development site all feature as part of our plan.

Our programme involves working with DfT and also with Homes England to ensure that we get that opportunity underway. We are an old city, a Victorian city, a world-famous city for pottery, ceramics and for engineering too; we have some incredible buildings, some of which have been unloved and underutilised that we are now really bringing back into use, like the proposal we have for Tunstall Baths and Library, which stands next to the newly refurbished historic Town Hall.

Stoke-on-Trent has the opportunity to be the blueprint and is the litmus test for the government's levelling up agenda. We are up for it, there is tremendous political will and passion in Stoke-on-Trent to transform the city. So yes, these are big jobs in and for a city with huge aspiration, with assets and a willingness to match!

Phil Cresswell is the Corporate Director of Housing Development and Growth for the City of Stoke-on-Trent.

Matt Masters Lead our Place Practice nationally. His focus is on Regeneration, Economic Development & Infrastructure appointments in Local Government and its associated agencies.

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