

**BARNSELY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL****OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE****1st OCTOBER 2013**

8. **Present:** Councillors Margaret Sheard (Chair) Doug Birkinshaw, Phil Birkinshaw, Sharron Brook, Donna Green (vice Alice Cave), John Clarke, Margaret Bruff (vice Lesley Duerden), Jeff Ennis, Robin Franklin, Paul Hand Davis, Joe Hayward, Peter Starling, Tom Sheard (vice Pauline Markham), Kath Mitchell, Margaret Morgan, Ralph Sixsmith, Harry Spence, Sarah Jane Tattersall, John Wilson, Jennifer Worton, together with co-opted members Tony Haigh and John Winter.

9. **Declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest**

Councillors Jeff Ennis, Robin Franklin and Tom Sheard declared an interest as members of the Board of Berneslai Homes. Councillor Joe Hayward declared an interest as a Trustee of Barnsley Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

10. **Minutes of the last meeting**

**IT WAS AGREED**

That the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee were a true and accurate record.

11. **Co-opted members**

The Committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal & Governance) on co-opted members to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Members had agreed at their last meeting that the Committee continue to recruit co-opted members. These should, it was felt, be drawn from those who had previously served on the former scrutiny commissions. Members had also agreed that no one would be asked to serve as a co-opted member who had already served for more than eight years as a co-opted member.

The report explained that those eligible to serve as co-opted members had been contacted and four had confirmed that they would now be prepared to do so. These were:

- (i) Caroline Makinson,
- (ii) Pauline Gould,
- (iii) Joan Whittaker,
- (iv) Mark Hooton.

The report also explained that a new selection and recruitment process to serve as a co-opted member on the Overview & Scrutiny Committee would be drawn up.

The intention was that this process should be implemented in time for the start of the 2014/15 municipal year.

**IT WAS AGREED**

That the suggested nominees be recommended to Cabinet to serve as co-opted members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of the 2013/14 municipal year. That the development of a new recruitment and selection process for co-opted members in future years be noted.

**12. Future work programme of the Committee**

Members were reminded that at their previous meeting they had agreed to scrutinise information contained in the Corporate Plan Performance Report to monitor the performance of Council services. In order to do this they had identified some of the key indicators they would like to look at. The indicators had been grouped under different themes, with the recommendation that they be scrutinised at successive meetings of the Committee:

- Growing the economy (December meeting)
- The sustainable future council' (February meeting)
- Improving people's potential and achievement (April meeting)

**IT WAS AGREED**

That the proposed work programme and timetable for the Committee be endorsed.

**13. The Task & Finish Groups - progress**

The Committee was informed that the Task & Finish Groups (TFG's) had now begun their first round of investigations. Members were reminded that these investigations focused on:

- Whether our approach to regenerating the town centre was working? What lessons have we learned from other areas about how to do this? (Task & Finish Group One)
- Why we have not had more success in persuading people not to smoke? (Task & Finish Group Two) and
- Whether we have we succeeded in getting local people more involved in caring for vulnerable people in our communities? (Task & Finish Group Three)

Members were told that the TFG's were making good progress in gathering and analysing evidence for these investigations. They had each held a series of meetings and had used these to scrutinise senior officers and others responsible for the direction and delivery of services. The general feeling was that this type of small group working had allowed members to play a far greater role in the scrutiny process and to more effectively analyse the issues than under the previous arrangements.

Each of the Task & Finish Groups, it was explained, hoped to complete their first investigations before Christmas. Their findings would then be submitted to the Committee for consideration.

The Chair thanked members for these reports and welcomed the progress that had been made.

#### **14. The Equality Scheme One Year On**

The Committee then considered the Cabinet report: 'The Equality Scheme - one year on' (Cab. 1.7.2013/6.2). The Cabinet Spokesperson for Corporate Services, Councillor Alan Gardiner, the Assistant Chief Executive for Finance, Property and Information Services, Frances Foster, Peter Francis, Head of Welfare Rights, the Assistant Chief Executive (Human Resources, Performance & Partnerships and Communications), Julia Bell, the Chief Executive of the Barnsley Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Pat Heath, the Director of Housing Management at Berneslai Homes, Mark McGee and the Equality and Diversity Manager, Julian Horsler, were welcomed to the meeting for this item.

Members were asked to pay special attention to 'Equality Priority Two', which looked at the measures taken to minimise the impact of welfare reform, especially on the most vulnerable groups in society. The report made it clear that many of those who would be worst affected by the welfare reform changes would also be the most vulnerable. It quoted research carried out by Sheffield Hallam University, which suggested that disabled people would be particularly badly hit by the changes.

The Committee was reminded that welfare reform had become a very high-profile issue, both in Barnsley and the country as a whole. Changes to the Housing Benefit system had received a significant amount of publicity and especially the introduction of the 'Spare Room Subsidy'. Fears had been raised that a significant number of people would now receive less Housing Benefit because of the change and would find it increasingly difficult to pay their rents.

During the subsequent discussion between the Committee members and the witnesses invited for this item, the following key points emerged:

(i) There has been a significant increase in the number of new enquiries relating to debt seen by the Barnsley Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) - over 9,000 new cases relating to debt. However the numbers had also been rising before the changes were introduced in April.

(ii) A survey has been carried out by the Barnsley Advice Network to help gauge the impact of the welfare changes on those using advice services. This revealed that:

- Over 80% of respondents were aware of the benefit changes;
- 82% of clients said that benefit changes had made them more worried about the future. 76% had said that the thought of these changes had made them feel more stressed and 69% said that they had made them more depressed;
- 58% of respondents said that over the past 12 months they had run out of money to pay for food at some point; and

- 57% said that they had been unable to pay utility bills at some point over the last twelve months.

(iii) There are good grounds for thinking that those suffering from mental health problems would be affected by the welfare changes. However, it was difficult to quantify this at the moment. Work is underway to try and do this, which will be presented at a conference to be held in Barnsley on the 3rd December. This conference would focus on the impact of welfare reform, recession and austerity (including reductions to local public services) and how these have affected the health and well-being of disabled people.

(iv) It is important to monitor whether the number of people in arrears with their Council Tax had increased since Council Tax benefit had been replaced by the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. The officers agreed to collate this information and make it available to members. It was explained to the Committee, however, that they could not show how many people are in arrears at any other one time. Instead, they would have to concentrate on the number of recovery activities which have been taken in order to gauge the level of non-payments from this.

(v) More flexible ways for people to pay the Council Tax had been introduced, in order to help people from falling into arrears. In particular, there was now an option to pay over the full twelve months of the year rather than over ten months.

(vi) There has been a significant increase in debt relief orders compared to the previous year.

(vii) About 300 or so families in the borough have now 'downsized' their homes since the Spare Room Subsidy was introduced. Transfers now account for around 40% of new tenancies, this is traditionally around 25%.

(viii) Berneslai Homes tries to make sure that those properties which people transfer into are brought up to an acceptable standard before they move in. However, many tenants also experience costs associated with their transfer including removals, fitting of carpets/cutains etc & decorating to their own tastes & standards. It is difficult to quantify the costs of this to either Berneslai Homes or the tenants. The exact figures will vary on a case by case basis.

(ix) Most people who have asked to transfer to smaller properties have been able to move to accommodation that is reasonably close to their original homes. However, the definition of what is a reasonable distance depends on personal choice and circumstances.

(x) A lot more people seem to be making use of 'pay day' loan companies to help make ends meet, with many taking out multiple loans and so falling into ever greater debt. Action had been taken to try and direct people to other sources of finance, for example from credit unions and removing references to pay day loan companies from libraries etc.

(xi) The vast majority of Berneslai Homes tenants do not fall into arrears deliberately (that is by refusing to pay any of their rent) but rather they seek to pay as much as

they can - even though this may be less than the full amount. Every effort is made to work with those who are seeking to pay their rents, but who are having difficulties, to help them do this (for instance by agreeing payment schedules etc).

(xii) Further changes to Housing Benefit will see benefit payments go directly to the tenants rather than to landlords. Members were informed that this could have a very serious impact on the Housing Revenue Account in terms of increased rent arrears. This figure, the Committee was told, could run into millions of pounds.

(xiii) The introduction of Universal Credit could also have a major impact on Barnsley people, especially when sanctions and conditionality are applied to a wide range of benefits for the first time. A lot of people could suffer from short term sanctions, possibly for quite minor infringements of the rules. As a consequence, they could lose access to all their benefit payments for a period. This would mean that they might not be able to buy food or meet other day to day household expenses.

(xiv) Evidence from Barnsley and other areas suggests that the number of food thefts has increased. This could get worse following the introduction of Universal Credit if people have no access to benefits because short term sanctions have been imposed on them.

(xv) There has been a growth in the use of food banks in the borough and moves are underway to improve the co-ordination of them. It was felt that food banks provide a vital source of support for those who have nowhere else to go for short term assistance.

The Chair thanked the witnesses for attending and for their contributions. She felt that the discussion had shown that benefit changes were having a big impact on the most vulnerable people in Barnsley society and that, sadly, this was likely to get even worse. She also felt that the Council and the CAB are putting a lot of effort into helping people; and that Berneslai Homes is trying to minimise the impact on those of its tenants who are attempting to pay their rents but who are falling behind because they no longer have sufficient Housing Benefit. In conclusion, she recommended to the Committee that it ought to keep a 'watching brief' on the impact of the welfare changes and to revisit the issue again in six months time.

### **IT WAS AGREED**

That the Committee revisit this issue in six months time to gauge further developments.

## **15. Berneslai Homes Performance Report, January to March 2013**

The Committee then turned its attention to the 'Berneslai Homes Performance Report, January to March 2013' (Cab.14.8.2013/9.2). The Interim Executive Director for Development, Environment and Culture (DEC), Matt Gladstone, The Group Leader Housing, Ian Prescott, ALMO Liaison Officer, Elaine Mussett, and the Director of Business & Customer Services for Berneslai Homes, Dave Fullen, along with Director of Housing Management at Berneslai Homes, Mark McGee, were welcomed to the meeting for this item.

Members were reminded that the report had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting in August. It included a wide range of information that gave a good picture of how the service is run. And in this respect a number of key indicators had been highlighted to Cabinet. In particular, that:

- Customer satisfaction had reached a record 91%;
- There had been a significant improvement in 'voids' performance, with a reduction in the void turnaround.
- Rent collection levels remained very strong, with an overall collection rate of 99%.

Members were also reminded that one of the reasons why the report was brought forward to Cabinet was to help provide assurance that Berneslai Homes was performing well and that as a consequence, the Service Agreement between the Council and the Company to manage the Barnsley MBC housing stock could be automatically renewed.

During the subsequent discussion between the Committee members and the witnesses invited for this item, the following key points emerged:

(i) Berneslai Homes used an independent company to carry out the survey which revealed a 91% customer satisfaction rate with their performance. Briefly, the independent company was provided with a full list of all tenants. From this they surveyed at random 2,500 tenants of whom about 42% had responded. Members were given the assurance that this was a large enough sample from which to draw reliable statistical conclusions.

(ii) The Committee would like the tenants of so-called 'acquired properties' (or in other words houses or flats that had previously been privately owned) to be specifically surveyed to find out their views (the survey sample had been chosen at random and without reference to specific types of tenure). These acquired properties, it was claimed, are often not of the same high quality as those properties on estates. As a consequence, it was argued, their tenants can sometimes feel neglected.

(iii) Berneslai Homes confirmed that as part of their review of service excellence they would consider carrying out specific research to find out the views of acquired property tenants.

(iv) Progress had been made towards developing the Asset Management Database. It was explained that the introduction of the database was a result of a recommendation from the Council that an integrated asset system be established. This would, it was hoped, help Berneslai Homes carry out better business plan modelling. In this way it would help deliver efficiency savings and improved services. Work was ongoing to help quantify just how great these are likely to be.

The Chair thanked the witnesses for attending and for their contributions. She made it clear that this had been another important discussion for the Committee, which had revealed some significant issues. She suggested that the Committee ought to revisit this issue in due course to ensure that performance is continuing to improve;

and in particular, that the Committee monitor progress on the new Asset Management Database and assess what impact it has had.

**IT WAS AGREED**

That the Committee review this issue at a later date.

**16. Terms of Reference of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee received a copy of the Terms of Reference for the Committee extracted from the Council's constitution. Members were reminded that under the constitution cabinet recommendations could be scrutinised before the recommendations are considered by the Full Council.

**IT WAS AGREED**

That members note the terms of reference of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.