

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Growing Barnsley Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday 31 October 2023
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Council Chamber, Barnsley Town Hall

MINUTES

Present

Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Barnard, Bellamy, Booker, Bowler, Clarke, Denton, Eastwood, Fielding, Hayward, Markham, McCarthy, Morrell, Osborne, Peace, Tattersall, A. Wray and N. Wright

11 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

Councillor Osborne declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Member of the Berneslai Homes Board

Councillor Tattersall declared a non-pecuniary interest as a Member of the Berneslai Homes Board

12 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2023 were received.

13 A Review of the Delivery of the Housing Service (Berneslai Homes)

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

- Kathy McArdle, Service Director, Regeneration & Culture, Growth & Sustainability, Barnsley Council
- Rachel Vella, ALMO Clienting Officer
- Neil Copley, Director of Finance, Core Services, Barnsley Council
- Ashley Gray, Strategic Finance Business Partner, Core Services, Barnsley Council
- Amanda Garrard, Chief Executive, Berneslai Homes
- Arturo Gulla, Executive Director of Property Services, Berneslai Homes
- Dave Fullen, Executive Director of Customer & Estate Services, Berneslai Homes
- Cllr Robin Franklin, Cabinet Member Regeneration & Culture, Barnsley Council
- Kate Gothard, Team Leader, Commercial and Property Legal, Barnsley Council

Kathy McArdle, Service Director Regeneration & Culture, Growth & Sustainability, presented Members with a brief overview of the report which covered a range of themes including:

- How Berneslai Homes as an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) delivers housing services for the Council
- The Berneslai Homes Annual Performance report for 2022/23 and for the first quarter of 2023/24
- The Tenants Satisfaction Survey 2023
- The challenges that Berneslai Homes face in the work they do to deliver housing services
- Work being undertaken on the Lettings Policy and Housing waiting list

In the ensuing discussion and in response to detailed questioning and challenge, the following matters were highlighted:-

It was recognised that a number of factors had resulted in the reduction of satisfaction following the results of the Tenants Satisfaction Survey. These included external factors such as the cost of living crisis, the pandemic and the increased media on damp, mould and condensation issues in properties. All social housing had received negative publicity over the past 18 months which had resulted in a high impact overall and similar levels of reduced satisfaction.

In order to address the low scores and improve them going forward, Berneslai Homes had undertaken a significant amount of work internally including reorganisations, efficiencies and some services had been changed and new ones introduced. One area that had particularly received a low score was around the grounds maintenance service (which is a Council-retained service). A review of the Service Level Agreement would be undertaken involving Lead Officers and the Council to reflect on what could be improved whilst also being mindful of the overall budget.

Members were assured that all services had been reviewed in terms of efficiencies and everything that could be done had. This had included bringing in new IT services and new software to make services more efficient in the future.

As part of the recent Regulatory changes following the amendments to the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, Berneslai Homes were implementing a new action plan based on conversations from customers and taking into account their feedback so it is developed by customers and what they perceive rather than officers. Part of the new act is based around working more with customers and how they can better listen to them such as when an issue is raised on something going wrong, gather that information and look into how they can do better.

Communications to tenants around repairs was being improved by proactively introducing personalised letters to individuals detailing updates and timescales around their specific repairs. A new repairs IT system was being installed in January 2024 resulting in possible savings of around £2 million per year. The investment would provide a better customer service in the future by increasing productivity by 1 job a day per person, which, across the whole year was a significant improvement.

In terms of tackling Anti-Social Behaviour, it was recognised that the Council retained responsibility for dealing with Anti-Social Behaviour and that Berneslai Homes did not have the same powers. However, Berneslai Homes were involved with low level issues such as neighbour and noise disputes and could escalate issues through the Council. Support would be provided to them by gathering evidence and supporting

the community. Following the forementioned restructure, an Anti-Social Behaviour Team had been created to undertake this work with the Council on case management. An Anti-Social behaviour app had been created to enable people to report issues 24/7 and a dedicated phone line was in operation with specialist Anti-Social Behaviour operatives. The creation of this Service had been enabled by the restructure of other services and removal of tiers and levels of Management in order to create more Community facing officers.

In response to questioning around potentially stopping people from becoming Berneslai Homes tenants who had a history of anti-social behaviour, it was noted that checks and balances before offering out a tenancy would be a difficult line to cross. As a social housing provider, they were asked to rehouse some people with challenging needs which required some intervention and management in order to benefit them out in the Community. If, however, someone is identified at the point of signing up, Housing Coaches were in place to work with new tenants to form an action plan to get them off on the right footing. If they are found to have needs after signing up, then they would be offered support, intervention and management in order to get the best outcome for the individual and the community they are living in. This is also done in collaboration with partnership agencies such as the Drugs and Alcohol Partnership, Adult Social Care and Mental Health Services.

Members were provided with a context as to why there was a significant backlog of repairs. It was noted that during the past couple of years there had been a large campaign around damp, mould and condensation which had resulted in an increase in repairs being reported to rectify this. It was recognised that the condition of some of the housing stock was low as some were more than 100 years old. Despite an investment programme of plastering, 70 to 80 year old homes were now deteriorating also. Any repairs that had an urgent health and safety risk such as damp and mould would be raised as a priority, resulting in other repairs having to wait. Work was being undertaken with Council colleagues in order to fully understand the needs of the investment programme for the forthcoming years.

60-70% of the housing stock was old and insulation in those properties was poor resulting in a build-up of moisture. Important work was being undertaken to put in ventilation as a priority to help combat damp, mould and condensation. Information was being provided to tenants around ventilation when cooking and drying clothes in the house. Berneslai Homes had created a Damp and Disrepair Team to deal with the extent of the issues around damp, mould and condensation in properties. It was reported that it had been difficult to recruit to but they were hopeful to have a full Team in operation as soon as possible.

A more efficient way of allocating work to contractors had been devised, in that works would be packaged up so contractors could deliver batches such as windows and doors in one go rather than drip feeding jobs as and when.

It was acknowledged that there was a constant flow of repair works which could never be finished but in terms of the backlog of non-priority works, it was noted that this was constantly being worked through but that it could not be guaranteed that these would be cleared by the end of the year. Remaining repairs would be carried over and addressed in the following financial year, following the account closure at

the end of the financial year. Members were informed that the Housing Revenue Account was under significant pressure, more than it had been in recent years.

Concerns were raised around the number of void properties in the Borough that were once family homes and unable to be allocated to families on the waiting list. It was reported that the number of voids were increasing as they are often houses that people had left in a state of disrepair, sometimes requiring around £10,000 worth of repairs to put right. A number of void properties would be ones where the previous tenants had turned down improvement works such as kitchens and bathrooms and these required significant work to get them up to a liveable standard.

Although recharges are raised, it was acknowledged that the main way to recover costs from people who leave houses in such disrepair would be if they tried to get back on the waiting list or if they are wanting to move to another Berneslai Homes property, then these issues would be addressed.

Members raised the recent closure of Safestyle UK warehouse in Wombwell and how to address the concerns of Berneslai Homes tenants being able to pay their rent. It was reported that if any tenant in the Borough had concerns around the ability to pay their rent and bills, to contact Berneslai Homes straight away in order for the Tenancy Support Officers and other Teams to help. It was also reported that anyone who worked there could get in touch with contract partners of Berneslai Homes in order to see if there were any job vacancies. Advice was also provided for anyone in this situation to contact the Department for Work and Pensions immediately to get them registered in the system.

Members enquired as to whether they could have any input into where tenants were placed in the Community to try and alleviate any update. They were informed that this was against the role of an elected member and there were strict governance codes and guides of how allocations are dealt with.

The waiting list for Berneslai Homes properties was substantial and members questioned what was being done to reduce it. In response members were informed that a significant amount of work had been undertaken on the Lettings Policy Review and the impact of that work had seen the numbers decreasing. Following the changes to the Lettings Policy a lot of people had withdrawn applications as realistically they would have no opportunity to be rehoused. The figure had dropped from around 10,500 to around 4,300 following this review. It was expected to drop further as further reviews are being undertaken to go live in the new year. An interactive tool had been launched to allow people to put in their brief details as to what they were looking for and their circumstances and the system is able to give a realistic indication of their chances of getting the property they would like. This provided people with a realistic insight to save them from sitting on a waiting list and not proactively looking elsewhere. The Council was investing in a programme of acquisitions and investing in new builds in order to replenish stock lost in the Right to Buy Scheme. Support was provided to people to signpost them to other housing services also.

Members questioned whether the Council was investing in enough new builds to replenish the stock. It was stated that there could never be enough to meet demand

and that the Housing Revenue Account was already under significant pressure to support existing council stock.

In terms of recruitment and retention of staff, it was reported that a number of entry level posts had been successfully recruited to but that more technically skilled job roles were struggling to be recruited to. There was a struggle to recruit Middle Managers and Heads of Services but that this was not unusual in the current climate and that most businesses and councils were also having difficulties. There was a need to look towards Barnsley 2030 to combine and tackle the issue across the Borough. There were a number of factors affecting the issue including pay, as within the sector, Housing Associations pay a significant amount more.

The schedule of adaptations to properties and any repairs to those adaptations was in a good position as they had received some capital funding to help with the backlog. Some needs required complex planning such as ramps which took longer to schedule in but a significant number of minor adaptations such as grab rails were completed on a regular basis. Berneslai Homes worked closely with SWYPFT and Occupational Health to help get through the personalised equipment and adaptations needs of tenants. It was noted that the possible needs of an ageing population was taken into account when investing in new properties to future proof the housing stock.

Members raised the importance of the close working relationship Elected Members had with Berneslai Homes and asked whether it would be possible for a Berneslai Homes representative be available to attend the Ward PACT meetings on a regular basis. It was reported that this had been requested previously and plans were in place for a Berneslai Homes Neighbourhood Team Leader to attend to work with Elected Members and the Police.

Members and Officers of the Council passed on their thanks and appreciation for the hard work and support to residents that Berneslai Homes had undertaken with regards to the recent floods in the Borough.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution and that the report be noted;
- (ii) Berneslai Homes improve communication with tenants, particularly regarding keeping them updated with progress of issues/repair needs raised;
- (iii) that Councillors encourage tenants to get in contact with Berneslai Homes if they have concerns regarding making rent payments, as they can be put in touch with teams who can provide support in various ways;
- (iv) that thanks be passed on to Berneslai Homes officers for their assistance alongside Council officers during the recent floods.

Chair