

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thriving & Vibrant Economy Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday, 1 October 2019
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Reception Room - Barnsley Town Hall

MINUTES

Present

Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Carr, Felton, Fielding, Gollick, Hayward, Hunt, W. Johnson, Lodge, McCarthy, Noble, Pickering, Richardson, Smith, Sumner, Tattersall and Wilson

1 Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives

No apologies/Apologies for absence were received in accordance with Regulation 7(6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001. It was highlighted that Ms K Morritt has resigned as a Parent Governor Representative. A recruitment process will commence shortly. Thanks were expressed to Ms Morritt for her contribution and attendance over the years.

2 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

The following Councillors declared non-pecuniary interests in Minute No. 15 as follows:

- Councillors W. Johnson and Fielding as they are landlords;
- Councillor Tattersall as she is a Berneslai Homes Board Member;
- Councillor Noble as she is a tenant of Berneslai Homes, and
- Cllr Lodge as he works for the homeless charity Centrepont and has family and friends who are Berneslai Homes tenants.

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 10th September were approved as a true and accurate record.

4 Void Council Properties

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

David Shepherd, Service Director – Economic Regeneration, Place Directorate, BMBC

Sarah Cartwright, Group Leader, Housing Growth, Place Directorate, BMBC

Steve Davis, Director of Assets, Regeneration & Construction, Berneslai Homes

Tony Griffiths, Housing Management Group Manager (East), Berneslai Homes

Cllr Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Member, Place (Regeneration & Culture), BMBC

It was highlighted that the purpose of the report is to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with context and insight into the voids management and letting processes used to manage Barnsley Council's social rented properties.

It was explained that the Decent Homes standard ensures that all properties are of an acceptable standard whereas the Void standard sets out the *minimum* acceptable standard once work has been completed on a property, taking into account routine and non-routine work, with different lengths of time to turn around the property in question.

Barnsley's performance, in terms of average void time, is favourable when compared with near neighbours who have brought their housing management back in-house. Despite a council house new build programme and investment in acquisitions and conversions, there is still an ongoing net loss to the council house stock as a result of Right to Buy sales (160 last year, around 140 this year) Homelessness issues also present a number of challenges.

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

Barnsley Homes has a comprehensive asset management database which gives detailed information about every property and its condition. This, along with proactive estate management, helps to identify signs of vulnerability along with the impact on communities in terms of nuisance etc. Regular checks of all properties are not possible and would be too intrusive. Rather, directed support is used to help tenants maintain their tenancies. Enforcement is used as a last resort when a tenant refuses and results in a severe detrimental effect on the community. Recharges are used when work has to be done on a void property that has occurred other than through fair wear and tear or contributing vulnerability factors

Open plan garden maintenance can be problematic and are often a balance between what the tenant wants and long term costs. Tenants, where it is part of their tenancy regulations to do so, are encouraged to do their own maintenance where possible and any requests for improvements are considered. Grass cutting is done on open-plan areas to an agreed schedule. Members expressed a concern that often grass is cut but not collected, which presents a Health and Safety concern. This will be fed back to Neighbourhood Services but there may be a resource implication.

One of the criteria of the Decent Homes standard is around a 'reasonable degree of thermal comfort'. Concern was expressed that new air source heat pump systems installed in Council properties were expensive to run. It was explained that no new systems had been fitted in the last 3 years and that this type of system was the only viable alternative to gas but did operate differently and tenants would need help with operating them. Air source and ground source pumps works similarly but air source systems need larger radiators. Grants are available to cover the costs of installation. It seems that there is anecdotal evidence around higher running costs, with some tenants reporting them cheaper to use. Barnsley Federation of Tenants and Residents has compiled a report on running costs, which will be shared with the Committee.

Empty property spot checks take place four times a year, with customers accompanying Berneslai Homes officers on visits to a random sample of properties which are ready to let. These are in addition to checks carried out by contractors who have carried out work to meet the standard. All properties are checked for cleanliness and mould growth and contractors check and sign properties off.

A Member expressed concern that sometimes prospective tenants may feel pressured into taking properties which are not of an acceptable standard and which require decoration. It was explained that properties are 'General Needs' properties and must be safe, clean and in a good state of repair but that decoration is a tenant's responsibility. A small decorating budget is available but only for hard to let properties. Hard to let properties may be in 'pockets' or individual types e.g. bedsits and are gradually reducing due to proactive housing management, working with tenants and partners to resolve issues and taking action when appropriate.

In the case of disputes about the condition of properties, there is a complaints process for tenants and tenants should never feel under pressure to accept an unreasonable offer. It was felt that a database of photographs would be useful to highlight the condition of properties available to let.

Mould growth is becoming more common and can have health implications for children with asthma and those who are more vulnerable. Depending on the state of the plaster, this can be sprayed down with fungicide or can sometimes become major works. Tenants are also given advice about how to treat mould themselves in their packs.

The Council manages four properties to help them fulfil their homeless responsibilities which Berneslai Homes are not involved with. Holden House has been decommissioned for homeless provision and will be brought back in to use for a different client group in the future. Some previous occupants now have their own tenancies. Members were concerned that four properties is insufficient and that there are 'hidden' homeless (such as 'sofa-surfers') who are not included within the homeless statistics. An increasing number of homelessness cases are being awarded Band 2 priority in particular but also Bands 1 and 3. This increase in numbers and a reduction in vacant properties is creating a problem, which is being considered by the Housing Options Team as a greater 'mix' of property types is needed in relation to Council bid programmes.

In terms of vulnerable people, it is not just about finding properties but also providing the right support to people at the right time through agencies such as Centrepoin and Humankind. Work is currently underway to develop a service with a specialist provider for those with mental health issues, which highlights the need to understand household needs and what tenancy support packages are available.

A Member raised concerns that 2 x 4 bed properties had been vacated pending demolition to enable access to a new-build housing estate when 275 families are on the waiting list for 4-bed properties. It was explained that this has to be done from time to time to maximise housing growth and development for the future. In this instance, additional properties will be provided as part of the development. There are currently around 8,000 people on the waiting list for a Council property.

When previous tenants vacate a property, fixtures and fittings are passed on to new tenants after they have been checked for safety. This includes carpet, intruder alarms, kitchens, cookers etc. When carpets are of poor quality they have to be removed. However, 97% of waste materials are currently recycled. Cooking facilities can be provided through the furnished tenancy scheme. When an adapted property is vacated attempts are made to re-let to a tenant with similar needs but this is not always easy.

Members were invited to a public meeting on 9th October at Priory Campus as it was acknowledged that they have an important role to play around voids and tenants – they are the eyes and ears of what is happening locally and should continue to flag up issues in their areas.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) Witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution;
- (ii) Consideration be given to defining a 'decoration standard' for our properties and should include a re-examination of the budget available for decoration, given the increasing needs of clients ;
- (iii) Consideration be given to providing a portfolio of property photographs alongside the database of properties;
- (iv) Consideration be given to increasing the number of properties set aside to prevent homelessness in the Borough;
- (v) Neighbourhood Services be asked to consider using grass cutting equipment which also collects the grass;
- (vi) Consideration be given to increasing the independent inspection of completed works to void properties, and
- (vii) Members be provided with the Barnsley Federation of Tenants and Residents report on heating systems.

Chair