

BARNSLEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL (BMBC)

This matter is not a Key Decision within the council's definition and has not been included in the relevant Forward Plan.

**Report of the Executive Director
Core Services**

**SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP (TFG) REPORT ON
SOCIAL HOUSING**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To report to Cabinet the findings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) from the investigation undertaken on its behalf by the Social Housing Task & Finish Group (TFG). This included: reviewing Social Housing provision in Barnsley and how challenges of supply and demand are being met; how tenancies and estates are managed by local social housing providers; as well as how the needs of our most vulnerable residents are being met. The TFG considered current work, future plans and highlight a number of recommendations in support of further improvement.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 **That Cabinet considers the conclusions and recommendations set out in section 6 as a result of the TFG's review of Social Housing in Barnsley.**

3. Introduction/Background

- 3.1 As part of its work programme the OSC agreed to undertake a TFG investigation into Social Housing provision in Barnsley. Both local and national media continue to highlight the challenges of meeting housing supply and demand needs; in relation to which Elected Members frequently receive queries from constituents.
- 3.2 A number of recent reviews and changes have taken place in relation to the management of housing stock in Barnsley, including management of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) being transferred to BMBC from its Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Berneslai Homes. Members also frequently interact with different local Housing Association providers (such as Yorkshire Housing Association) who manage varying numbers of tenancies across the Borough. Further to the aforementioned and the government publishing the Social Housing Green Paper, the OSC felt it was an opportune time to undertake this work.

- 3.2 The members of the TFG who undertook this investigation included the following: Councillor Gail Charlesworth (TFG Lead Member), Councillor Gill Carr, Councillor Malcolm Clements, Councillor Jeff Ennis, Councillor Joe Hayward, Councillor Sarah Tattersall, Councillor Kevin Williams and Councillor John Wilson.

4. What the Task & Finish Group (TFG) looked at

- 4.1 Initially, the TFG met to consider the scope of the investigation. This included discussing their key concerns and the queries they frequently receive from their local communities,

such as provision of housing for elderly and vulnerable residents. Also, how tenancy and estate management is undertaken by Berneslai Homes and local Housing Associations, including both provision of support services as well as enforcement action. Given the points raised, the group agreed to hold sessions to understand the strategic view of housing provision in the Borough as well as hold specific sessions to explore the issues raised.

4.2 The TFG undertook a number of 'check and challenge' sessions with officers regarding the work being carried out and future plans. This involved asking questions of them regarding their work, their involvement and partnership working with other agencies including the impact of this on Barnsley residents. This included meeting with:

- Council representatives working in Housing Growth;
- Council representatives working in Community Safety, Enforcement and Stronger Communities in relation to both the commissioning and operational management of vulnerable service users;
- Representatives from Berneslai Homes including those responsible for tenancy and estate management as well as lettings;
- The Cabinet Member and Executive Director of the Place Directorate; and
- A Neighbourhood Services Manager from Yorkshire Housing Association (YHA).

5. What the Task & Finish Group found

5.1 The TFG attended a timely All Member Information Briefing (AMIB) which provided all Elected Members with an update and oversight of the Council's plans to deliver housing growth, including its key strategic priorities:

1. To support new housing development which creates a thriving and vibrant economy;
2. To ensure the design and delivery of new high quality, desirable and sustainable homes;
3. To make best use of/improve existing housing stock in Barnsley;
4. To develop strong, resilient communities; and
5. To support younger, older and vulnerable people to live independently.

5.2 Members were advised that the Government's Social Housing Green Paper was welcome locally and provided support of our aspiration to build more properties to meet housing demand. BMBC's Housing Growth service is keen to ensure that in developing 'affordable housing' this includes people being able to maintain a decent living standard also. There is a growing population; therefore opportunities are maximised with partners to deliver homes across the borough and generate income which can be reinvested into affordable housing. This includes working with Berneslai Homes, Housing Associations and local businesses to deliver properties both for sale and for rent. Berneslai Homes' Construction Services has also branched out into delivering new build homes and provides apprenticeship opportunities for local young people. Uncertainty around Brexit continues to be of concern to local agencies and private businesses; however work is being done to continue to maximise our housing assets.

5.3 As a result of the Government's Right To Buy (RTB) Policy, a proportion of the Council's housing stock is lost every year; therefore a lot of effort is being focused to seek external funding to support new housing delivery from national bodies as well as Sheffield City Region (SCR). Berneslai Homes manage the Empty Homes England programme on behalf of the Council and continue to buy back properties to mitigate some of the RTB losses where possible. Linked with this, investment is being made to bring empty homes

back into use. A multi-faceted approach is being taken to not only buy properties, but to work with landlords to carry out and maintain improvements; however undertaking enforcement action where necessary.

- 5.4 From a strategic perspective, the Local Plan has now been published and work continues to ensure we deliver affordable housing for the borough as well as specialist properties, such as for those with disabilities. The transfer of the HRA back to the Council has enabled better alignment with strategic plans and enabled greater influence on the housing availability in the borough. Funding from Homes England is being utilised to bring schemes forward and a review will be undertaken shortly on the Council's Housing Strategy. Concerns from Members in relation to the increasing number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) across the borough were acknowledged and the TFG were advised of the measures in place to try and prevent and deal with this.
- 5.5 In relation to providing housing support for our most vulnerable residents, Members were made aware of the challenges this presents, both in obtaining properties as well as ensuring individuals live in accordance with their tenancy agreement. Due to complex issues including mental illness and substance misuse, many people have poor records in relation to rent arrears and breaking previous tenancy agreements; however if the Council doesn't help them, they are likely to end up homeless or in the unregulated private sector. This is especially true of young, single people. At least if these people are within Council properties, much more can be done to provide support services for them, as well as manage behaviour.
- 5.6 Members were also advised of work being done in partnership with Humankind, who are a charity who offer a variety of services including drugs and alcohol support as well as housing related support. As part of this, the service run training flats for young people which help them gain the necessary skills for managing a tenancy.
- 5.7 Unfortunately, both with Barnsley and around the country, there are some people, who despite several attempts to engage with them, choose to remain homeless and will not accept support from services. They collectively cost services the most money as they are often in crisis, requiring hospital and/or prison services. It is important however that all agencies acknowledge we have a shared responsibility to try and find suitable housing solutions for people who present with the greatest need.
- 5.8 Due to challenges with the supply of Council properties, it was highlighted that work increasingly needs to be done with the private sector as this is where a number of vulnerable people are housed. To support private landlords to obtain support provision for their vulnerable tenants, the Housing Options Team is pulling together a list of agencies where relevant services can be accessed. Work is also being done in partnership with Doncaster and Rotherham Councils to seek funding from Central Government to resource additional work to be done with the private housing sector.
- 5.9 In relation to tenancy and estate management, the Council has a Tenancy Strategy in line with the 2011 Localism Act; however work is currently being undertaken to review this. There is evidence of effective partnership working with Berneslai Homes, the Council's Enforcement Team and South Yorkshire Police (SYP) through the Safer Neighbourhood Service. This includes work to tackle domestic abuse as well as environmental crimes. The TFG were advised that Berneslai Homes are due to begin operating along the same boundaries as the Area Councils which will enable them to work on the same footprints as other services and commit to the ownership of particular areas and attend relevant partner briefing meetings.

- 5.10 Proactive management of tenancies and estates is undertaken to try to prevent issues occurring and escalating. This includes holding estate walkabouts as well as engaging with residents as part of 'Your Community, Your Say' meetings. Work is also undertaken to seek feedback from Berneslai Homes' tenants in relation to their satisfaction of services. The service highlighted the increase in mental health issues amongst our communities and the challenges this presents, especially with determining capacity in relation to severe mental health conditions and undertaking enforcement action. The TFG also sought reassurance in relation to policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing off staff whilst undertaking their duties, including the availability of notifications where it may not be safe for them to undertake visits alone.
- 5.11 The TFG were made aware of the work undertaken to prevent evictions and explore every possible sanction before this is pursued. It is recognised that those who are evicted often remain in the borough as they have family connections and just move elsewhere; therefore it is critical that where possible we address issues and seek eviction as a last resort.
- 5.12 With regards to the Council's Lettings Policy, which is managed by Berneslai Homes on the Council's behalf; the TFG received a specific presentation which outlined the operation of the housing waiting list, how priority banding is managed as well as the allocation of properties. The Lettings Policy had recently been revised and agreed through Full Council to ensure it is in line with the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Berneslai Homes advised of the work they are doing with partnership agencies to prevent homelessness, also to support the hospital if people have severe medical needs so delayed discharges can be avoided. Work is also done in close partnership with Housing Associations to manage access to social housing as well as with the Council's Enforcement Team in relation to the prevention and detection of fraud.
- 5.13 Berneslai Homes has good links with the Council's Housing Growth team so that intelligence regarding housing demand can be shared and addressed in future building schemes. Linked with this, the Council's Housing Growth Team act as a consultee on the Planning Regulatory Board so that they can ensure the right types of properties are built in the right areas.
- 5.14 Meeting with representatives from Yorkshire Housing Association provided the group with opportunity to better understand the work undertaken by Housing Associations. This includes the work they undertake to obtain funding and build new homes, including those done in partnership with Councils and Health Services. YHA is constituted as a charity; therefore any surplus funds are reinvested back into repairs, maintenance, tenancy support and the building of new properties. They operate strong and robust policies to deal with anti-social behaviour (ASB); however undertake work to prevent evictions whenever possible.
- 5.15 The TFG were impressed to learn of the variety of services provided by YHA to their tenants including support with wellbeing, benefits and gaining employment. This has included supporting tenants to start their own businesses and seek funding. YHA highlighted that their biggest concern is the prevalence of low level mental health issues and lack of timely support being available. This often results in issues escalating, especially as people fall through the gaps between services.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 The TFG recognises the complexities involved in the provision of social housing and ensuring the needs of all our communities are met. This is against a backdrop of austerity, as well as national policies which compound the challenges being faced by services. Whilst recognising the excellent work being undertaken, the TFG makes the following recommendations in support of the continues improvement of local services and support to local communities:
- 6.2 **Recommendation 1 ACROSS ALL TFGs: A Multi-Agency Conference is held in relation to addressing the complex needs in our communities covering Housing, Substance Misuse and Adult Mental Health**
A common feature of the OSC TFG's undertaken in 2018-19 on Social Housing, Substance Misuse and Adult Mental Health is the close, cyclical links between them. Each service area has raised challenges in relation to accessing the other services, difficulties in sharing information between them, as well as demands on services which could be avoided. It is therefore recommended that a large conference is held for those working at both a strategic and operational level in these and partner services to come together and develop an action plan to address some of these issues and monitor this on an ongoing basis.
- 6.3 **Recommendation 2: OSC Members are engaged in the upcoming review of the Council's Housing Strategy**
Due to OSC Members' knowledge and experience in communities, they would welcome the opportunity to comment on and make recommendations in relation to the Council's Housing Strategy, especially given its implications for local communities.
- 6.4 **Recommendation 3: Increasing work is done to engage with private sector landlords**
The group acknowledged the challenge this presents and the work being done in partnership with others to meet this need. This includes advising them in supporting vulnerable residents. The TFG however recognise that due to the shortage of social housing, there are increasing numbers of residents in private tenancies with vulnerabilities who need support services. This is especially prevalent within HMOs; therefore the TFG welcome additional work being undertaken to combat and manage this.
- 6.5 **Recommendation 4: OSC Members are involved in contributing to the review of the Tenancy Strategy**
Given OSC Members' knowledge and experience in communities, they would welcome the opportunity to comment on and make recommendations in relation to the development of this important strategy which is likely to greatly impact on their local communities.
- 6.6 **Recommendation 5: All Elected Members are reminded of access to the Cautionary Contacts Database and the need to report any incidents to ensure timely updates are entered on the system**
During the investigation the safety of both officers and Elected Members in undertaking visits to properties was discussed. The TFG were reminded of access to the Cautionary Contacts Database and to utilise this when undertaking their work; especially when addressing issues which may be sensitive or fractious. Members should also ensure they report any incidents to officers who can update the system.

6.7 Recommendation 6: Proactive contact is made by local Housing Association Officers, especially with Elected Members where large numbers of particular Housing Association properties are located

The Members were impressed by the work being undertaken by YHA and were unaware of the amount of services they provided to residents. During the discussion, it was evident that it would benefit both Housing Associations to be better informed in relation to community activities taking place, which they and their tenants could engage in. Also it is helpful for Elected Members to be aware of contacts of local agencies so they can better engage with them. The latest contact information for Elected Members is available on the following link: <https://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/mgMemberIndex.aspx?bcr=1>

The TFG would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who provided information, attended meetings and assisted with the TFG's investigation; it is much appreciated.

7. Implications for local people / service users

7.1 The investigation undertaken by the Social Housing TFG as well as the recommendations made are in support of improving outcomes for people in Barnsley, especially in relation to meeting their housing needs. The TFG recognises the importance of meeting housing needs across the borough and welcome the work being undertaken to ensure this is meeting the specific demands of local communities.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no specific financial implications, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the financial implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding.

9. Employee implications

9.1 There are no specific employee implications, although in responding to the recommendations in the report, the employee implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services responding.

10. Communications implications

10.1 As highlighted in the recommendations, the TFG are keen to engage in consultation and the development of local housing policies, following which they can share this knowledge in their communities. Similarly, the TFG recognise the importance of services coming together to tackle issues and share knowledge and intelligence both within their organisations and externally.

11. Consultations

11.1 Consultations have taken place with: the Social Housing TFG Members; the OSC; Councillor Roy Miller; Council Officers from Housing Growth, Community Safety, Enforcement and Stronger Communities; Berneslai Homes; YHA; and the Council's Senior Management Team.

12. The Corporate Plan and the Council's Performance Management Framework

12.1 As outlined in the Corporate Plan, the three priorities for Barnsley are: a thriving and vibrant economy, strong and resilient communities; and citizens achieving their potential. It

is essential the Council and its partner organisations work together to support these aims, which includes meeting housing needs across the borough, including support for our most vulnerable residents.

13. Promoting equality & diversity and social inclusion

13.1 The TFG is keen to ensure that all Council services and activities are accessible to all its communities. Throughout the TFG's involvement in this work they have specifically referred to making sure that services and communication materials are accessible to all Barnsley communities. This includes ensuring that access to services is available both online and in paper format for those who are unable to utilise Information Technology.

14. Tackling the impact of poverty

14.1 There are numerous information sources and academic studies which highlight the links between housing and poverty, including how housing can both mitigate as well as exacerbate the impact of poverty on people's lives. To tackle the impact of poverty it is important that efforts are made to limit rent costs, maintain good housing conditions in all tenures and monitor the impact of cuts to welfare benefits, especially for vulnerable residents.

15. Tackling Health Inequalities

15.1 There are large health inequalities between Barnsley and England and within Barnsley itself. Improving access to housing and reducing health inequalities will help local people to reach their full potential. The investigation undertaken by the TFG and recommendations made are in support of improving outcomes across the borough; with recognition that additional work is required in particular communities to help address health inequalities.

16. Risk management issues

16.1 This issue relates to the following risks currently logged on the Council's Strategic Risk Register (SRR), as follows:

- 3025 – 'Failure to Safeguard vulnerable service users'
- 3026 – 'Failure to achieve a reduction in Health inequalities within the Borough'
- 3047 – 'Failure to protect the health of the population from preventable health threats'

16.2 It is likely the recommended activities detailed in this report will contribute further to the effective mitigation of these risks, and it would be appropriate for any follow-up report to be cognisant of these risks.

17. Glossary

ALMO	Arm's Length Management Organisation
AMIB	All Member Information Briefing
ASB	Anti-Social Behaviour
BMBC	Barnsley Metropolitan borough Council
HMO	Houses in Multiple Occupation
HRA	Housing Revenue Account
OSC	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
RTB	Right To Buy

SCR	Sheffield City Region
SYP	South Yorkshire Police
TFG	Task and Finish Group
YHA	Yorkshire Housing Association

18. Background papers

- Barnsley Council Housing Strategy:
<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/services/housing/housing-strategies/housing-strategy/>
- Social Housing Green Paper: A New Deal for Social Housing:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-housing-green-paper-a-new-deal-for-social-housing>

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