

## BARNESLEY 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 Place

#### RESPONSE TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

##### 1. Purpose of report

To respond to the recommendations made to Cabinet (Cab.27.11.2019/6) from the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) Thriving & Vibrant Economy Work stream meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 in relation to Void Council Properties.

##### 2. Recommendations

###### 2.1 **That Cabinet endorse the responses to each of the recommendations as outlined in section 4 of the report.**

##### 3. Introduction/Background

3.1 On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 the Overview & Scrutiny Committee's (OSC) Thriving & Vibrant Economy Work stream meeting considered the Council's voids management and lettings processes, delivered by Berneslai Homes and partner contractors: Kier; and Berneslai Homes Construction Services.

3.2 The committee considered the governance and monitoring of voids, service performance; as well as the associated challenges. The committee acknowledged the very positive performance in relation to the issues discussed; however made a number of recommendations to enhance or further improve services.

##### 4. Specific Recommendations and Responses

4.1 From the investigation, 5 recommendations were made, each recommendation has been considered and the response included below.

###### **Recommendation 1: Consider a decoration standard for Council properties**

The committee raised a number of concerns regarding the decoration standard of some properties being let; especially given the increasing needs of clients accessing general needs provision. Decorating is currently done in special circumstances; however the committee felt there needed to be a higher basic level of acceptable decoration standard met for all properties and budget made available for this.

**RESPONSE:** This recommendation is accepted. Berneslai Homes is exploring if a limited and targeted tenant's decoration scheme should be re-introduced, particularly for properties that have a very poor decoration standard (for example where a habitual smoker had lived). Decoration schemes are widely used by Council's, ALMO's and Housing Associations and have operated in Barnsley

before. This will be in addition to the current scheme which provides decoration to voids in special circumstances.

**4.2 Recommendation 2: Consider increasing independent inspection of completed works to void properties**

Currently, random samples of properties which are considered as being ready to let are subject to spot checks. The committee, however, felt that every property should be independently checked and this could be done either by a Council/Berneslai Homes officer or by increasing the use of tenants trained as 'Service Excellence Assessors'.

**RESPONSE:** This recommendation is accepted. Berneslai Homes has agreed to seek to increase the pool of tenant volunteer Service Excellence Assessors and to increase the number of checks that they carry out on empty properties. The results of their checks will be routinely provided to the Tenants' Voice Panel for consideration and review.

**4.3 Recommendation 3: Compile pictures alongside the database of properties**

The committee recommend that alongside the database of properties, that a pictorial history is kept. Through this, clear evidence will be available as to if/when damage has occurred at a property and will also act as a quick reference for officers should they need to refer to a particular property and when maintenance may be required.

**RESPONSE:** This recommendation is accepted. Berneslai Homes will introduce this recommendation as soon as practically possible. The photographs will support their existing void checklist.

**4.4 Recommendation 4: Consider increasing the number of properties put aside to prevent the need for use of temporary B&B accommodation**

As part of the discussion, the committee recognised one of the key challenges in managing voids and lettings is the increasing demand on properties required due to homelessness. In recognition of this, the committee recommend that an increasing number are put aside for this purpose to avoid use of out of borough B&B accommodation.

**RESPONSE:** This recommendation is accepted. Following an analysis of demand over the last 18 months, Berneslai Homes is working with the Council's Housing Options Team to increase (by up to 20) the number of units of accommodation made available from the Council housing stock for temporary and emergency accommodation in order to reduce the need for Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

**4.5 Recommendation 5: Neighbourhood Services to consider machines which can collect grass as it is cut**

Linked with ensuring the quality of void properties being re-let, the committee discussed the cutting of grass in communal areas and the challenges of this. Members raised concerns from residents that given grass is now being cut less frequently, when it is done, large amounts of cut grass is left across pavements and pathways.

**RESPONSE:** The approach to grass cutting in 2019/20 was informed by the Future Council Improvement Review of Neighbourhood Services. The revised deployment

approach achieved an improvement to grass cutting standards delivering a cyclical cut frequency of 21 days compared the 25 days in previous years. This approach maximised all resources available to the service.

Neighbourhood Services would require significant investment to adopt a cut and collect approach across the borough:

- Cut and collect machinery - £560k (capital)
- Additional vehicles and staff resources to collect the grass from the cut and collect machines - £450k (revenue per annum)
- Disposal of the grass and vegetation collect £33 per tonne – anticipated £150k per annum

The service would be willing to support a cut and collect approach subject to the approval of additional investment and the development of a full business case.

## **5. Implications for local people / service users**

- 5.1 The recommendations (and the subsequent responses) in this report are in support of improving services provided to our customers.

## **6. Financial implications**

- 6.1 There are no specific financial implications in this report. In responding to the recommendations, the financial implications of these would need to be fully assessed by the appropriate services in advance of implementation.

## **7. Employee implications**

- 7.1 There are no specific employee implications in this report.

## **8. Communications implications**

- 8.1 The good work which is taking place by the Council and Berneslai Homes in relation to property management as evidenced in corporate performance reports should be shared and celebrated. It is important however that where properties do not meet acceptable standards, residents are given opportunity to express their concerns and the issues rectified as appropriate.
- 8.2 By utilising tenants trained as 'Service Excellence Assessors', this will help with communication between residents and Berneslai Homes as the managing agent. This also provides opportunities for tenants to gain knowledge of and share experiences of positive work being undertaken with residents as well as highlight concerns so that tenant feedback can be acted upon.

## **9. Consultations**

- 9.1 Consultations have taken place with: Cllr Tim Cheetham; Council Officers David Shepherd, Richard Burnham, Sarah Cartwright and Paul Castle; Berneslai Homes Officers Amanda Garrard, Steve Davis, Bob Cartwright and Tony Griffiths; and the Council's Senior Management Team.

## **10. The Corporate Plan and the Council's Performance Management Framework**

10.1 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. To contribute to achieving these, we need to ensure that good quality housing is available to residents. The recommendations and responses to them in this report contribute to improving the performance of services.

## **11. Risk management issues**

11.1 Failure to provide a good standard of Council properties not only risks damaging the health and wellbeing of tenants, but also sets a poor example to other landlords in the borough; thereby failing to support the provision of good quality housing in Barnsley. It is also recognised that by law, all Council properties should meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard.

## **12. Health, safety, and emergency resilience issues**

12.1 The provision of a home that is warm, safe and comfortable is a fundamental requirement of the Council's Decent Homes Standard; this promotes good health and wellbeing and is a fundamental component of basic human rights. The recommendations and responses in this report are in support of ensuring that housing provided by the Council is meeting these needs in support of our residents' health and wellbeing, especially our most vulnerable.

## **13. Promoting equality, diversity, and social inclusion**

13.1 The OSC highlighted that we need to ensure our customer needs are met, particularly those who are vulnerable, have disabilities and need additional support to set up a home.

## **14. Glossary**

BMBC – Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

OSC – Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## **15. Background papers**

- OSC Meeting Papers on Void Council Properties 01/10/19:  
<https://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=224&MIId=5893&Ver=4>
- OSC Meeting Minutes from 01/10/19:  
<https://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s59319/Minutes%20of%20Previous%20Meeting.pdf>
- OSC Recommendations to Cabinet further to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding Void Properties (Cab.27.11.2019/6):  
<https://barnsleymbcintranet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s59906/Recommendations%20to%20Cabinet%20further%20to%20the%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf>

Officer Contact: Richard Burnham/Sarah Cartwright Date: 6<sup>th</sup> January 2020