

# **Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council**

LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel

Key Reflections

20 August 2020



## Introduction

LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel sessions provide an opportunity for the Leader, Chief Executive and any other individuals identified by the receiving council to come together, virtually, with peers to:

- Reflect on what the Council has achieved and learnt in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Discuss with peers the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 has presented for the Council and local area.
- Consider the steps you wish to take towards recovery/renewal.

The sessions help to identify a series of steps the Council may wish to take as well as identifying further support and good practice from across the sector.

On 20 August 2020, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council undertook an LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel. Within the overarching theme of recovery and renewal the council and the panel:

1. Reflected on the Council's response to the COVID-19 crisis
2. Discussed the immediate priorities for Barnsley in the Borough's recovery and renewal and
3. Considered the impact of the crisis on the longer term aims and ambitions of the Council.

The panel discussion involved the following participants:

- Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton (Leader, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council),
- Sarah Norman (Chief Executive, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council),
- Shokat Lal (Executive Director, Core Services, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council),
- Paul Castle (Service Director, Environment and Transport, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council)
- Cllr Graham Chapman (Nottingham City Council and LGA Lead Peer for Yorkshire and the Humber),
- Kath O'Dwyer (Chief Executive, St. Helens Council)
- Ernest Opuni (Improvement Manager, LGA).
- Judith Hurcombe (Programme Manager, LGA)

### Background to the LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel offer

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the commencement of 'lockdown' in March 2020, the LGA suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work including the core offer of a Corporate Peer Challenge.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA refocused its support and adopted a new remote approach. This new approach does not replace

the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge offer and is distinct and different. This project was delivered through the LGA's offer of 'Remote Peer Support' and the Recovery and Renewal Panels are one part of that remote offer. This work is there to primarily support improvement rather than providing concrete assurance and should be treated as such. This note acts a high-level summary of the key reflections from this more detailed discussion.

## Key Reflections

Over recent months, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council has worked hard to support local communities and businesses through the COVID-19 pandemic. This has often involved going 'above and beyond' what might be expected of a council in more 'normal' times.

As part of this panel discussion, some examples of the Council's response over this period were considered.

- **Demonstration of clear and determined leadership of place.** The Council's determination to support local businesses was exemplified by the early payment of business grants and proactive advice provision through Enterprising Barnsley. This was further demonstrated via the provision of early and comprehensive support to care homes. The council can take credit for seizing the initiative in advance o& government guidelines in order to respond to a local need.
- **Effective partnership working arrangements.** Barnsley chair the South Yorkshire LRF, Sub-Regional Health and Social are Gold and South Yorkshire Transport Executive Board. The council's focus on identifying and supporting vulnerable communities was underpinned by its pre-existing neighbourhood working structure and the effective involvement of its Area Teams and as well as work with Barnsley CVS. The strong partnership with schools ensured these were opened on time in line with central government timeframes whilst focusing on managing vulnerability risks and addressing educational disadvantage by provision of laptops to support those without equipment in their homes. The council also took advantage of the crisis to collaborate more effectively with partners over data sharing which greatly reduced bureaucracy and allowed it to move quickly to identify vulnerability within its local population.
- **One Council Organisational response.** Smart working plans were accelerated at pace allowing for a speedy shift to homeworking. There was rapid movement to virtual full council, cabinet and other meetings such as regulatory, audit, scrutiny and area councils. Staff were redeployed to support vulnerable members of the community and maintain key services. This has been underpinned by a clear focus on wider staff health and wellbeing being monitored through surveys and regular Microsoft Teams events.

The council's response has been thoughtful, strategic and long term which is consistent with Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC) being a people focused organisation. There has been clear demonstration of adaptive leadership and it is heartening to see how the council has pulled together over the last 3 months.

The support provided to Members has been positive, demonstrated by the concerted effort to keeping in touch via Teams and through virtual workshops, learning from members' experiences 'on the ground'. Opportunities have been taken to revisit member development in order to maximise capacity for them to feed in on the ground issues as effectively as possible. More widely, the effective and proactive communications have been a corporate priority over the pandemic period as evidenced by a letter to residents signed jointly by the Leader, Chief Executive and Director of Public Health.

There has been good partnership working with external stakeholders such as schools, academies and businesses throughout the crisis. The foundations for these relationships pre-date Covid, meaning that the environment for effective collaboration already had strong foundations when the pandemic hit. Barnsley's leadership roles sub-regionally is clear within Local Resilience Forum arrangements and in the region more widely.

There is sound financial planning which has enabled the council's own resources to support businesses and the economy ahead of central government allocations being received. The council has achieved a balanced budget for this year and next. The council is developing internal outbreak planning within services to support business continuity.

Moving forward the council is seeing the opportunity and need to do things differently. This has been demonstrated by the diversion of £43m of planned investment through prioritisation and clear consideration of what is still relevant for the present time. The priority over the next 12-18 months is on focusing on shoring up the borough's economy and services in the short term and then driving forward a fuller, longer term recovery from this base. The council has proactively used its strong neighbourhood working model in order to support its local Covid 19 response.

The council is able to demonstrate a qualitative approach to providing support which is very much in keeping with its focus on being a 'people first' council. This has been demonstrated in the council's keen focus on the impacts of the pandemic on its staff via the council's 'Pulse' survey. There is also targeted support at young people and towards businesses via Chamber of Commerce and the Borough's Enterprising Barnsley initiative.

This council's recognises that the support required by care homes and their staff is not only practical and operational but also psychological. This approach is exemplified by the way the Council interacts with the care sector and its staff. Consequently, the council is seeking to encourage local people to enter the care profession as a career. This reflects a clear recognition of the need to support the reshaping of the local care homes sector in a strategic fashion. The council is very aware that the current picture of over-supply of care homes and paying enhanced rates for care staff may not be sustainable long term and it is likely that difficult discussions with care home-owners will be necessary in the short to medium term.

The council is keen to reassure itself about the robustness of its plans to re-open the town centre. The Council had undertaken an evidence-based retail & hospitality

impact assessment which has helped to identify the level of impact and inform recovery actions. Actions include, undertaking, a mystery shopper exercise to test the effectiveness of measures to enable the safe re-opening of Barnsley's town centre, the introduction of a customer loyalty/gift card and establishment of a dedicated Town Centre strategic management group. Furthermore, Barnsley Council is keen to ensure that any work undertaken in the Town Centre is also replicated across the Principal Towns. The council is also being very careful about understanding the wider impact on properties in the town centre through displacement, economic contraction and proposed changes in the planning approval system. The Council is therefore actively reviewing the wider Town Centre strategy with a view to understanding and responding to these challenges. It is likely that part of this thinking will include the council bringing forward an empty buildings strategy.

### **Moving forward**

As part of this panel discussion, the panel raised a number of areas to which it would encourage the Council to give further consideration.

- Through the discussion it was clear what Barnsley's strategic priorities and objectives are and how they connect. However, it is not as a clear and coherent from the wide range of documents in existence. The team feels that there would be significant value in bringing this all together as part of a simplified clear and coherent narrative supporting the post-Covid reset of the 2030 vision for Barnsley.
- How to use Covid volunteers more widely and maintain positive engagement beyond the crisis is something the council is keen to explore
- Jobs-led recovery ambitions are to be further developed. Whilst the challenge of considering 'recovery' priorities alongside a 'response' capability is significant, it will be important to manage the two in tandem if a jobs-led recovery is to secure the hoped-for traction and sustainability. The council is already very aware of the need to do this and the team would encourage the council to maintain this valuable dual focus.
- The team would encourage Barnsley Council to consider whether it is applying the modernisation opportunities afforded by the crisis comprehensively across all of the council. There is clearly a change in the way 'normal' will be defined looking into the future, but it will be important for a clear, consistent and coherent view of future arrangements to emerge which meets and manages the expectations of both members and officers.
- There would appear to be an opportunity, as part of the ongoing recovery, for Barnsley Council to use its already strong partnership with schools to develop a clear plan for tackling increased educational disadvantage resulting from lost learning during the pandemic. Barnsley is well placed because of its history of strong collaboration to make greater in-roads than many other areas in this aspect of its recovery.
- Barnsley's Area Councils and its neighbourhood working more generally are a particular strength of the Borough. There may be opportunities for further use of these structures and this route for community engagement and the mobilisation of volunteers who came forward in the pandemic to support jobs-led recovery as well as in mental health and community support.

- The Leader of the council is aware of the structural changes in the retail and office markets. However, the council needs to consider whether it is sufficiently prepared for the magnitude of the changes.

## Final thoughts and next steps

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Mark Edgell (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the council and the Local Government Association (LGA). His e-mail address is [mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk)