

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Growing Barnsley Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday, 2 November 2021
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Council Chamber, Barnsley Town Hall

MINUTES

Present

Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Cain, K. Dyson, Fielding, Gollick, Green, Hand-Davis, Hayward, Lodge, Markham, Noble, Osborne, Pickering, Smith, Stowe, Sumner, Tattersall, Wraith MBE and Wray

28 Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives

No apologies for absence were received in accordance with Regulation 7(6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001.

29 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

Councillor Tattersall declared a non-pecuniary interest in Minute No. 31 as she is a Berneslai Homes Board Member.

Councillors Noble and Lodge also declared non-pecuniary interests in Minute No. 31 as they are Berneslai Homes Tenants. In addition, Councillor Lodge is employed by a social housing provider.

30 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th October (Sustainable Barnsley Workstream) were received.

31 Berneslai Homes Annual Report 2020-21

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

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
Kathy McArdle, Service Director, Regeneration & Culture, Place Directorate, BMBC
Sarah Cartwright, Head of Strategic Housing, Sustainability & Climate Change, Place Directorate, BMBC
Cllr Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Spokesperson – Place – Regeneration & Culture, BMBC.

The Committee received a report of the Chief Executive, Berneslai Homes and the Executive Director Core Services, BMBC regarding the annual performance of Berneslai Homes for 2020-21 together with the Berneslai Homes Together with Tenants Annual Report, which provided a more detailed reflection on the

achievements and challenges faced during the year and which was developed with their Tenant Voice Panel, a group of nine tenants who meet to share their views on how the service is performing.

Kathy McArdle and Sarah Cartwright introduced this item. It was explained that a review of the Council's existing client and contract management arrangements in relation to the Berneslai Homes had been undertaken by ARUM. This was timely as social housing had changed dramatically over almost 20 years since the inception of ALMOs and also changes in legislation around Building and Fire Safety. Berneslai Homes' new contract expires in 2030, which is also an important year for the Council. The Review outlines what 'good' looks like through observation and analysis of current arrangements against best practice and tenant engagement, and puts forward a number of recommendations around Governance (including meeting arrangements and scrutiny), Performance, Plans and budget setting, the Assurance Framework and roles and responsibilities. These will be taken forward through a robust implementation plan. Amanda Garrard then gave an overview of the Annual Review 2020/21, which had been a year like no other for both staff and tenants alike. Areas for Improvement and future priorities were outlined.

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

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) is one of the hardest problems to deal with and has been identified as an area for improvement. Partnership working between Berneslai Homes, the safer Neighbourhood Teams (SNTs), Police, Probation and other agencies is crucial in tackling this issue, particularly when responsibility goes beyond Berneslai Homes and has to be escalated. It can be difficult to balance the needs of the individual and the community and can be particularly distressing when neighbours are vulnerable and/or older people. Decisions as to whether the perpetrator or the victim of ASB should move are not taken lightly, and involve social care, the Probation service, witness support, housing advice and homeless and others in order to achieve the best outcome for all. Cases are individually managed and work on behaviour change and addressing the root causes of the behaviour is undertaken rather than the ultimate sanction of people losing their home. Experience shows that tenants with problems will continue to live in Barnsley even when they are moved from their homes, which just means the problem is passed from one area in Barnsley to another. It was explained that over the last 12 months access to the Courts was suspended due to Covid restrictions so no evictions for ASB took place. Drug use by tenants does not necessarily lead to eviction. Figures from the previous year are available. There are very good working relationships and full cooperation in Barnsley with all agencies but in particular with South Yorkshire Police. The new Chief Superintendent invited Berneslai Homes to meet with him to strengthen this relationship and work towards the best solution to address ASB.

When a tenant moves into a Berneslai Homes property they are made aware of their rights and responsibilities under the tenancy agreement. Every new tenant is visited within 28 days. Where concerns are identified prior to the tenancy commencing and following a risk assessment they are allocated a Housing Coach to ensure they are adequately supported to enable them to commence and sustain their tenancy. The early signs of the impact of this service are positive. It was highlighted that sometimes perceived ASB is nothing more than lifestyle clashes, with young people living amongst elderly residents. It was explained that all properties have age

designations and under the choice-based lettings scheme, if an applicant qualifies for the property, they would be able to apply. This is also being examined as part of the lettings policy review.

Bank End in Worsbrough has been subject to high levels of ASB during the various lockdowns and the whole area has suffered as a result. It has not helped that a recent media article has stigmatised the area, referring to all residents as 'scum'. To combat the ASB pop-up Police stations have been developed with increased out of hours patrols. Berneslai Homes work closely with the Police around evidence, but some matters are the responsibility of the Police rather than the Landlord. Lamp post cameras have been erected but have not provided sufficient evidence. Injunctions have been used where appropriate. Close work with other agencies such as social care for those who need support has been developed. The situation is better than it was 12 months' ago but there are still areas for improvement. All concerned are committed to continue to work together and address these issues. There are no plans to increase the number of Housing Management Officers at the moment, although their role is being reviewed to evaluate if some of their tasks could be disseminated to others or if the current structure is still the most appropriate. The Safer Neighbourhood Service is also being reviewed in terms of staffing and structure to see if they could provide more 'out of hours' resources within the same budget envelope.

A Member was aware of the availability of funding for social housing through South Yorkshire Pensions. However, it was explained that in order to take advantage of this the Council would need to undertake more borrowing for larger scale social housing and also identify potential sites. Modular properties for vulnerable groups have been successful in other areas and are good in terms of sustainability and zero carbon, but the right sites and numbers of people have to be available, which is not the case in Barnsley. Doncaster has done some of work in this area but it is very expensive.

It was felt that with the various 'Masterplans' now coming through it is better to develop and grow housing stock linked to these sites using S106 agreements. The Council has conversations with developers when planning applications come through in order to get the best deal for Barnsley. It was explained that shared ownership schemes are not available within the HRA, but Berneslai Homes works closely with housing associations and other affordable housing providers to advertise their deals although it is not something they could deliver themselves.

Members were reassured that applications for Right to Buy on new social housing are covered by the cost floor, which means that nobody can purchase the property for 15 to 20 years. However, S106 properties can be a problem and a number of new build properties have been lost because of the discount. Last year around 100 properties were lost due to Right to Buy and this figure is expected to rise this year. Unfortunately, Right to Buy is subject to Government legislation so has to be adhered to. Tenants moving into bungalows with age designations (i.e. specifically for older people) are not covered by Right to Buy. Berneslai Homes is looking at designations of properties as part of the lettings policy review.

Satisfaction levels for Grounds Maintenance are an area for improvement, currently standing at 65%. Work is ongoing with Neighbourhood Services to see what can be

improved, looking at different options for some areas. This may include the development of wildflower meadows, mini forest work etc. with the aim of attracting wildlife, improving the general appearance and diversity of an area whilst enhancing the environment.

A Member was aware of tenants moving into properties which were of a very poor standard. Although Barnsley spends less on void properties than neighbouring Authorities, all properties let should be up to the minimum standard. In some instances, if an area will be subject to an upcoming programme -such as kitchen installations – a new tenant may have to wait for this type of work until the programme begins in the area.

A key priority for the period to April 2022 is to move away from gas heating to ground and air source heat pumps and retrofitting existing council homes. There is a need to ensure that the fabric of the property is right first before renewables are installed and lots of insulation work has been done already. Air source pumps are the favoured option as prices are coming down and systems are becoming more efficient. All Berneslai Homes new build properties will be built with air source heat pumps (with training for tenants), solar panels and battery packs. Help is available to help tenants to monitor energy efficiency, ensure they are on the right tariffs etc. £5m of grant funding for energy efficiency has been secured so far, which will be used primarily for private housing. However, there will be a huge shortfall in funding, which will need a creative solution, as is the case in the whole of the UK.

Another priority is to work with the Council to ensure communities have access to affordable broadband and can access services effectively. Lots of work has already been done within the community, supporting tenants with computers and giving them access to free Wi-Fi. Through ESF funding, 400 tenants will be supported into employment or training over the next 3 years. Barnsley is also on target for gigabit technology by 2030, working with Cityfibre and partners.

Funding bids have been submitted for the Darfield area as part of the South Yorkshire Flood Catchment Plan. This is managed by Matt Bell and is the responsibility of the Mayoral Combined Authority. Dan Jarvis has given assurances that Barnsley is a priority.

The report indicates that 7158 households are currently in rent arrears. This situation has multiple causes. Some will be due to a move to Universal Credit (and will need support in managing this transition) whilst other tenants may have been furloughed and have experienced a reduction in income. There has been a shift away from enforcement to a more understanding approach, with associated offers of help to prevent the situation escalating. £1.1m of additional benefit has been obtained over the last year through benefit maximisation and help has been offered for those in debt who are experiencing financial difficulties. Berneslai Homes funds a specialist Money Advice worker through Barnsley Citizens Advice Bureau and help is also available through Income Officer and Tenancy Support Officers. Housing Coaches are in place to identify new tenants at the beginning of their tenancy who may not have experience of managing a home, bank accounts etc. and will work with tenants to enable them to sustain their tenancies and manage their money successfully. The culture in Barnsley is predominantly that people want to pay their bills but have experienced financial difficulties and don't know what to do about it. It was reiterated

that the Courts have been closed for over a year so no evictions for arrears have taken place, although the aim is to keep eviction for rent arrears to a minimum.

The under-occupation charge (known informally as the 'bedroom tax') remains in place and is set down in benefit regulations. Discretion is always exercised for those people who may be classed as under occupying and face the bedroom tax but are looking at transferring to a more suitable property which they would not face the tax. Work with Benefits and Taxation is undertaken to try to help to alleviate the situation.

Members were aware of instances of contractor repairs carried out to poor standards of quality. It was explained that Berneslai Homes has its own workforce and aims to do most of the work itself. Quality checks are carried out on contractors and they are price checked. Members with a concern were advised to pass on any information about poor standards of work for further investigation.

There are currently 7482 people on the housing register, with 4800 in Band 4, the lowest priority. Those people in Band 1 are in, urgent housing need. Some of those in Band 4 are not actively bidding. All applicants are contacted at least once every 12 months to check they still want to be on the register. Between 125 and 150 new people join the register every week. Some may be on the list as a type of 'insurance policy'. A small number of properties are allocated on the basis of the length of time they have been waiting. This has been examined as part of the lettings policy review and will be going to Cabinet on 17th November.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) Witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution;
- (ii) Members note the report;
- (iii) Members be provided with eviction data for previous years
- (iv) The £20 charge for bins be looked at with Paul Castle and Neil Copley;
- (v) Information around flood bids for Darfield ward be provided;
- (vi) Contractor retention figures be provided;
- (vii) Members should continue to pass information about sub-standard works, voids and problem tenants on to Berneslai Homes for resolution;
- (viii) A workshop around ASB involving local councillors, Legal Services and partners be organised, and
- (ix) A copy of the Strategic Housing Needs Assessment should be made available to those Members who request a copy.

Chair