

Berneslai Homes Update

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The aim of this report is to update the Committee on the recent contract renewal and new strategic plan for Berneslai Homes. It also provides a summary of the impact of Covid 19 on service delivery and reflections of the achievements and challenges during the year. Item 4b (attached) is the new strategic plan and Item 4c (attached) is the annual report to tenants.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Berneslai Homes is the arm's length management organisation (ALMO) managing the Council's 18,400 homes in the Borough. The current contract for management expires on 31st March 2021 and in accordance with the agreement, a 6 months' notice is required for the renewal of the contract. At the Cabinet meeting on 23rd September 2020, in accordance with the renewal arrangements the contract has been extended for a further 10 years until 2031.

3.0 Current Position

New Contract and Strategic Plan

- 3.1 The new contract is supported by a new ten year strategic plan which sets out the key objectives for the next 12-18 months. The priorities for the period to April 2022 are aligned to those emerging from the Council. The longer term priorities will be developed during 2021 and linked to the new Barnsley 2030 vision.
- 3.2 Consultation has been undertaken with tenants, staff, Berneslai Homes Board and representatives from the Council. This includes Overview & Scrutiny Committee Members being invited to comment on the draft strategic plan, following which comments were shared with officers for consideration. Further broader consultation will take place during 2021.
- 3.3 The key priorities for the period to April 2022 will focus on the following areas:
- **Employment and training** – focusing on getting tenants into employment
 - **Zero Carbon** – moving from gas heating to ground and air sources heat pumps, and developing a zero carbon strategy affecting the operations of the organisation and retrofitting existing council homes
 - **Digital Inclusion** – working with the Council to ensure communities have access to affordable broadband and can access services effectively
 - **Tenant Safety** – ensuring we have effective systems to keep tenants safe and meet the requirements in the Building Safety Bill and the Housing Regulator
 - **Growth** – working with the Council on new Council homes and acquiring homes across the Borough
 - **Listening to Tenants** – linking to the outcome of the Social Housing White paper (expected Autumn 2020) and the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman, learning from complaints and improving services

Impact of Covid 19

- 3.4 The organisation responded quickly to the pandemic, reducing service delivery to minimise the spread of the virus but retaining crucial services including emergency repairs, gas servicing, assisting the Council in housing people who were homeless and providing a range of support for tenants. Safe working practices were introduced to keep staff and tenants safe. We have since restarted all services, including the choice-based lettings scheme, repairs and investment work. The repairs backlog has been addressed, though there are delays in the delivery of investment works (kitchen, bathroom replacements etc). Office staff are currently based at home and we are developing an agile working strategy changing how we use the offices in future.
- 3.5 As a result of Covid 19 we have seen increases in anti-social behaviour (ASB), though housing management teams are now back out on the estates and working with partners to resolve these issues. Arrears have been impacted, with collection rates reducing as the number of tenants claiming Universal Credit increases. This has been exacerbated due to a ban on evictions, several cases in arrears pre Covid now have significant arrears. We have also seen an increase in empty homes, though these are now being let minimising the financial impact for the Council on rental income. As we recover from the impact of Covid 19 we are using the lessons learnt to improve working arrangements and the efficiency and effectiveness of the services we provide.
- 3.6 The impact on customers has been significant, our teams are providing support on rent, employment, training, benefits advice and mental health. The impact on employment is being monitored but there have been significant increases in claims for universal credit and loss of employment.

4.0 Future Plans & Challenges

- 4.1 There are several priorities emerging from the Covid 19 situation. The Council's current lettings policy results in the allocation of council homes to those in greatest need. We are also witnessing an increase in the support needs of many of those requesting council homes. We have responded by the introduction of the Tenant First Team, though demand for support cannot be met within current resources. We will be working with the Council to review the existing lettings policy and address how the current policy impacts existing communities and how this addresses the needs of care leavers.
- 4.2 We are reviewing our current structure and developing additional support to assist tenants in sustaining their tenancy and maximising rental and council tax income.
- 4.3 Employment and training is one of the key priorities, we are working with the Council on a scheme to support tenants into work using European Social Fund. The three year scheme will assist 360 tenants into training and employment. In addition, we are using the Government's Kickstart programme to provide twelve month placements for up to 30 young people from within our communities from November 2020 until November 2022. Our overall approach to employment and training includes work placements, apprenticeships, work with schools and graduate trainees.
- 4.4 We are strengthening our governance structure with a new Chair, Sinead Butters and more independent Board members increasing the skills on the Board.

5.0 Invited Witnesses

- 5.1 The following witnesses have been invited to attend today's meeting to answer questions from the committee:

- Amanda Garrard, Chief Executive, Berneslai Homes
- Anthony Brown, Interim Director of Assets, Regeneration & Construction, Berneslai Homes
- Kat Allott-Stevens, Tenants First Service Manager, Berneslai Homes
- Matt Gladstone, Executive Director – Place, BMBC
- Richard Burnham, Head of Housing & Energy, BMBC
- Sarah Cartwright, Group Leader Housing Growth, BMBC
- Tom Smith, Head of Employment & Skills, BMBC
- Cllr Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Spokesperson – Place – Regeneration & Culture, BMBC

6.0 Possible Areas for Investigation

6.1 Members may wish to ask questions around the following areas:

- What have been the biggest challenges in responding to the Covid 19 pandemic?
- What is being done to ensure appropriate support is available to the increasing number of households who are vulnerable and have support needs?
- Further to concerns raised by OSC Members to the Council's Cabinet in November 2019 regarding the standards of properties being let, what improvements have been made and what evidence do you have of this?
- What area of work/performance is Berneslai Homes most proud of over the last 12 months and what positive impact has this had for local residents?
- What is in place to ensure you have robust tenant engagement practices and what evidence do you have of tenant involvement directly influencing service delivery?
- As a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, what do you foresee as the biggest challenges in the coming 12 months for tenants as well as Berneslai Homes as an organisation?
- What is in place to support staff both in terms of their wellbeing as well as enabling them to achieve their potential and offer them development opportunities?
- How effective is partnership working amongst Berneslai Homes and other local agencies in tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and in what ways could this be improved?
- What actions are being taken by Berneslai Homes to minimise the organisation's carbon footprint and contribute positively to the Council's Zero 40 and Zero 45 targets?
- How will Berneslai Homes contribute to the employment, education and skills agenda over the coming 12 months and beyond, in delivering a jobs-led recovery as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic?
- In relation to the Social Housing White Paper due in Autumn 2020, what do you anticipate will be the impact on Berneslai Homes as an organisation as well as tenants?
- What actions could be taken by Members to support the work of Berneslai Homes?

7.0 Background Papers and Useful Links

- Item 4b (attached) – Berneslai Homes Strategic Plan 2021-31 "Roots in the past, eyes on the future"

- Item 4c (attached) – Berneslai Homes Annual Report to Tenants 2019-20
- OSC Report to Cabinet Regarding Void Property Standards (Cab.27.11.2019/6):
<https://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s59906/Recommendations%20to%20Cabinet%20further%20to%20the%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf>
- Response Report to the OSC's Recommendations Regarding Void Property Standards (Cab.22.01.2020/6):
<https://barnsleymbc.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s62025/Response%20to%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Recommendations%20regarding%20Void%20Properties.pdf0>

8.0 Glossary

ALMO	Arm's Length Management Organisation
ASB	Anti-Social Behaviour
BMBC	Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
OSC	Overview and Scrutiny Committee

9.0 Officer Contact

Anna Marshall, Scrutiny Officer scrutiny@barnsley.gov.uk
 5th October 2020