

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thriving and Vibrant Economy Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday, 13 October 2020
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Held Virtually

MINUTES

Present

Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Bowler, Carr, Clarke, Gollick, Green, Hayward, Hunt, W. Johnson, Lodge, Mitchell, Newing, Pickering, Richardson, Smith, Sumner and Tattersall together with co-opted members and Ms. G Carter

32 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.

33 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

Members of the Committee were invited to make any declarations of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interest in connection with the items on this agenda.

The following declarations were made with respect to Minute No. 35 on the agenda:

Councillor Tattersall is a member of Berneslai Homes' Board; Councillors Lodge, Noble and Pickering are tenants of Berneslai Homes and Councillor Lodge works for a partner organisation with a connection to Berneslai Homes.

34 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 8th September 2020 were received. The minutes will be formally approved in January 2021.

35 Berneslai Homes

Members were invited to consider a report of the Chief Executive, Berneslai Homes and the Executive Director Core Services, BMBC regarding an update on Berneslai Homes including: the impact of Covid 19; the Berneslai Homes Strategic Plan and the Berneslai Homes Annual Report to Tenants.

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

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.

The Chief Executive of Berneslai Homes explained how Berneslai Homes' contract had been renewed until 2031, on a 5 plus 5 year basis, linked to the Barnsley 2030 vision. A 10-year terms enables longer term planning and provides reassurance for staff. Current responsibilities, joint working with BMBC, the new Strategic Plan, employment and training initiatives, the impact of Covid 19 together with the Annual Review were outlined in detail to Members.

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

Customer Support

The organisation is currently working with the finance team to explore the possibility of additional funding within the Tenant First Team, which had experienced an increased demand for support due to Covid-19. A holistic support model is currently used, mainly around intervention and mental health support. This has been a very successful project with good outcomes. The Tenants First Team has 6 key workers who work with 10 families at a time. There are 4 officers offering mental health advice and support to between 15 and 20 individuals. Tenant support officers can deal with a caseload of around 20 to 30 per day depending on officer capacity. There are a number of Tenants and Residents Association (TARAs) operating in the Borough. A good strong relationship has now developed with them and the customer panel works well.

Employment and Skills

It was reported that the £1.6m European Social Fund (ESF) scheme would impact 360 participants over a 3-year period, providing specialist support around employment, training and digital skills from October 2020. Other initiatives include apprenticeships, work placements, 2 x community refurbishment schemes and a Care Leavers scheme. Members were reassured that despite the UK leaving the EU in December, ESF funding has been confirmed and committed until 2023.

It was recognised that the impact of Covid 19 impact on the economy will not be seen until the current job protection scheme ends. Unemployment rates are already increasing, and Berneslai Homes officers are proactively contacting people over the telephone and using social media to offer individual and targeted advice and support. Tenant Support Officers will assist with claims for universal credit and ESF funding has been used to provide two Digital Champions to embed digital skills within the community.

Void Properties

Members expressed concern about the standards of properties recently let, highlighting individual cases they were aware of where properties were in a very poor condition but where prospective tenants felt pressured into taking a tenancy for a property which was in a poor condition for fear of being moved down the waiting list.

Reassurances were given that improvements had been made, including those which arose as a result of the recommendations to Cabinet by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that this would continue. An increased budget of £50,000 has been made available, which includes decoration allowances. Although not as many properties have been let recently due to Covid-19, decoration allowances have continued to be given out. It was acknowledged that decorating can be expensive, and many tenants are on limited incomes. Of the properties which have been turned down recently, only two of these were due to the poor standard of decoration. The decorating allowance for each tenant is calculated by the Housing Officer, based on the number of rooms to be decorated and the individual tenant's circumstances. The average is over £168 per property. However, the reality is that there is a limited budget and best use must be made of the funds available. A Member was aware of a tenant who had to move into a new tenancy very quickly and enquired if the decorating allowance could be applied for retrospectively. Such cases should be referred to the Housing officer. The Housing Officer will also look at why a property has been refused. Individual tenants have varying needs and incentives can be added when needed.

There is a minimum standard for void properties. All properties are inspected when they become empty. Any remedial works are carried out and Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) issued prior to letting. Work to voids is completed to a minimum standard. Systems and processes are in place to iron out any issues. Supervisors then check the standard of work carried out. If the work fails to meet the standard there is a process to follow. Major works shouldn't be done when the tenant is in the home unless the tenant needs to be in the property quickly. The Construction Services Team now have iPads which they use to photograph the condition of void properties. Berneslai Homes are now working with a new contractor, Wates (formerly Kier) to deliver voids. A new policy is in place and changes have been made to pre and post inspections to tighten up on the type of issues described, holding the contractors to account. Performance, turnaround time and quality are closely monitored. This is a priority and will continue to improve.

Covid-19 impact

There has been an unprecedented increase in anti-social behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic. A Berneslai Homes presence on estates makes a massive difference and anti-social behaviour is now coming steadily back under control. This will continue using safe working practices even if Barnsley moves into Tier 3. The Courts have now reopened so enforcement actions and associated evictions will recommence. Estate walkabouts are continuing.

Everything is done to ensure workforce and tenant safety during the pandemic. Risk assessments are carried out, face masks are worn by contractors and arrangements made for tenants who are isolating. The number of Covid-19 'refusals' for servicing and repair is tracked carefully. Tenants who are isolating are provided with carbon monoxide detectors until contractors can access properties for gas servicing.

Waiting list

The number of empty homes is now down to 144 from 200. Some of these need major works. Routine repairs were initially delayed due to Covid-19 but are done within 7 days. There are currently 8000 households on the waiting list. The average waiting time for a property depends on the area and how flexible the prospective

tenant can be. There are around 1300 lets per year. There were 148 Right to Buys last year, with 120 to 130 predicted this year. This is offset somewhat by acquired properties, with around 150 new affordable properties and acquisitions annually. Acquisitions are a mix of properties to meet need. Within the first 10 years Right to Buy properties can be bought back by the Council. Larger 4 bed houses and 3 bed bungalows are always in demand. The Acquisition Policy outlines the requirements when looking at buying back properties.

There is a programme of new affordable homes through private developers under S106 agreements and Berneslai Homes will also buy properties from developers but the budget for this is limited. Work is underway with Housing Associations to increase stock where possible. Berneslai Homes get 100% nomination rights on first lets through Housing Associations and 50% thereafter so it is possible to identify where Housing Association properties are and what is coming through the planning system. Some areas of the Borough have a sufficient supply of affordable provision.

The customer profile within the Strategic Plan indicates that 59% of tenants have a disability and over 32% are aged 66 years and above. All indications are that people are living longer with increasing support needs but with the desire to remain independent in their own home. It was highlighted that over £2m is spent on equipment and adaptations each year to address this demographic. Berneslai Homes are currently appointing an In-house Occupational Therapists (OTs)., Independent Living Schemes are developed with partners and a strategic housing assessment has been completed. This indicates that Barnsley has 4300 bungalows which is deemed sufficient. A balance must be achieved, and many properties can be adapted to meet the needs of those with a disability which can then be returned to housing stock when people move on. Joined up work takes place with the Fire Service who carry out fire risk assessments, provide living aids (to ensure residents can live safely) and install smoke alarms. Smoke alarms are tested as part of gas servicing and are changed if required. The in-house Occupational Therapists deliver equipment and adaptations assessments quickly, with a 7-day turnaround for minor adaptations. Major adaptations take longer but the OT will help to bring this time down once other options such as moving home have been explored.

The Lettings Policy Review will be underway within the next few months and will go through the Council's Cabinet system. Elected Members and stakeholders will be fully involved, with implementation from April next year.

Members expressed concern that sometimes tenants with problems and high levels of support needs are concentrated in one area. It was explained that often the background of a tenant is unknown until they move in. Local lettings policies are in place where issues are prevalent. For example, in Honeywell, more restrictions are to be put in place for lettings, working with the Police and the community to look at solutions.

Officers have a good working relationship with the Police, drug services and wider support organisations. Often tenants presenting with problems have underlying issues including mental health, unemployment, debt, depression etc. which need to be addressed with a holistic multi-agency package of support. Enforcement action is used as a last resort when all other opportunities are exhausted.

Green Energy

It was reported that properties are to be retro fitted with green energy systems over the next few years as part of the Zero Carbon Strategy, but this will be challenging. Proposals to be put forward include air and ground source heat pumps and correct insulation. Smaller electric vehicles have been piloted and new larger vans have just come onto the market so the fleet may be expanded. Charging points are already in place. Covid-19 has reduced the carbon footprint through staff working at home.

Members were aware of difficulties with heat source pumps sheltered housing facilities in various locations across the Borough. These are being explored and Councillors will be fully involved when looking at such systems in terms of management, minimising down time and costs and how efficiently and effectively they work. There are problems with the equipment, but older people seem to have difficulties understanding ambient heat and how to regulate it without using electricity to boost it, which is expensive.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) Witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution
- (ii) Anthony Brown to engage with Cllr Lodge regarding issues with heating sources in properties in his Ward.
- (iii) Information regarding the waiting list (to include out of authority applications) to be provided to the Committee, and
- (iv) The possibility of inviting Housing Associations to a future meeting of the Committee to be considered

Chair