

Barnet Housing Strategy - *Providing housing choices that meet the needs and aspirations of Barnet residents* **Executive Summary – December 2009**

Introduction

Barnet's Housing Strategy was last reviewed in 2006/7, when the council identified the importance of the *housing journey*, recognising the role that different housing tenures have to play in meeting housing need and aspiration at different points in peoples' lives, often starting with renting and culminating in ownership, which the majority aspire to. Whilst the housing journey is still relevant, significant change has occurred that means a new strategy is now necessary. In particular, there are three new elements that the Housing Strategy needs to address:

Firstly, a new London Mayor has been elected and he has produced a new Housing Strategy for London that the council needs to take account of in its own plans. In addition in October 2009 the Mayor launched the consultation draft replacement plan (the London Plan) which will provide a new strategic framework for planning in London when it is finalised in 2011. We are producing a new planning framework for Barnet known as the Local Development Framework (LDF) which will replace the Unitary Development Plan by 2012. An important part of the LDF evidence base is the Strategic Housing Market Assessment of housing needs and requirements in Barnet and neighbouring areas.

Secondly, there has been a fundamental change in the way that investment in the housing market will operate in future following the severe economic and housing market downturn that started in 2008 and subsequent recession. This means that the investment models that we previously expected to deliver new housing and our wider regeneration plans can no longer be relied upon to provide the best outcome. Public investment in housing is likely to be significantly reduced over the coming decade. Barnet is committed to exploring new and innovative investment models that will deliver new homes and increase the housing choices available to residents. These include joint venture vehicles, special purpose or local asset backed vehicles (LABVs) and working with institutional investors to develop new and high quality private rented housing. This approach is also expected to provide some major contributions of resources to invest in the existing housing stock and bring it up to a modern standard.

Thirdly, the council has undertaken a major review of its strategic direction called ***Future Shape***. Since 2002/3, Barnet has received amongst the lowest rate support grant settlements of any local authority in the country; in 3 of those 6 years the council has been on the 'Grant Floor' – only the government's damping mechanism preventing a negative grant settlement. At the same time the council has become a high performing council as judged by the Audit Commission, and currently receives the top possible score for its Environment, Housing Benefit, and Community Housing services. Despite this improvement, resident satisfaction has remained stubbornly static: although high, other council's have begun to catch up.

In response, the Future Shape proposals seek a new relationship with citizens based on a better understanding of their aspirations and needs, as well as to provide more seamless services combined with a relentless drive to improve efficiency across the public sector in the borough.

The Housing Service has always and continues to be at the forefront of such approaches. In 2002/3 the council accepted over 1000 households as homeless, and experienced widespread dissatisfaction in the way it let council property to housing applicants. The advent of the Housing Options approach has radically changed this landscape: in 2008/9 only 325 households became homeless but more importantly we re-housed more homeless households permanently in the private rented sector than in council or Housing Association homes. We believe this may be a first for an urban housing authority, representing an important shift away from the traditional view that social housing is the only suitable option for people in housing need, when the private rented sector can provide flexibility and choice, as well as meeting housing aspirations in many cases. Research into the housing needs of black and ethnic minorities in North London has revealed that whilst social housing may meet a need by providing a stepping stone on the housing journey, it is not what the majority of people aspire to, and that given the choice, most would rather own their home. These shifting public expectations require us to consider hard both the housing choices we facilitate for local people, and the value of our Housing Register that is open to all, regardless of housing need, as a means of managing housing demand.

Barnet the place

Covering 86.7 square km, Barnet covers a large geographical area stretching from Chipping Barnet in the North to Cricklewood in the South, and from Edgware in the West to Brunswick Park in the East. Barnet is a very attractive place to live and work, with large amounts of high quality greenbelt land, parks and open spaces, popular and high performing schools and good transport links.

Objectives

The popularity of the borough and the high demand this has created for housing presents a number of challenges, including high prices, a shortage of affordable housing and a potential threat to the qualities that make the borough attractive in the form of pressure to replace more traditional suburban houses with flatted developments. There are also other areas, particularly in the West of the borough that provide opportunities for significant transformation and regeneration without damaging successful suburban areas. The council has embraced these challenges through its regeneration agenda as expressed at a strategic level in the Three Strands Approach, which seeks to **Protect** and **Enhance** the qualities that make Barnet attractive, whilst recognising the need to accommodate **Growth** where appropriate and particularly as a means of improving less successful parts of the borough. There is potential within Barnet to deliver an additional 28,000 new homes over the next 15 years as set out in the emerging Barnet Local Development Framework Core Strategy and in line with existing London Plan targets. A key objective for the Housing Strategy is therefore:

“Increasing housing supply, including family sized homes, to improve the range of housing choices and opportunities available to residents”

Much of Barnet's housing is characteristically classic interwar suburban –with some 60% of the housing stock comprising houses, two thirds of which are detached or semi-detached. This type of housing remains extremely popular but provides challenges in terms of ensuring it meets modern standards, particularly for energy efficiency. In addition, the council provides some 11,000 properties for social rent, which have benefited from an investment of £189m since 2004 through the Decent Homes programme – these will require ongoing investment to ensure that they are maintained to a good standard and further improved to meet resident's expectations. A key objective for the strategy is therefore:

“Improving the condition and sustainability of the existing housing stock”

The tenure of choice in Barnet is owner occupation, with two thirds of households owning their home and about half of owners owning outright. The remaining third of households are divided equally between social renting and the private rented sector, with the latter playing an increasingly important role in meeting housing need in the borough. In 2008 the council secured more property for housing applicants in the private rented sector than in the combined housing association and council sectors. We believe this may be a first for an urban local authority; it has huge significance for the council and its ALMO, Barnet Homes, in terms of providing a desirable housing choice in the next decade. The council's housing strategy update 2007 recognised that the affordable housing sector would never be able to meet the housing needs identified in Barnet's 2006 Housing Needs Survey, and that anyway most people aspired to own their own home. We believe that more use needs to be made of the private rented sector to reduce the numbers of people living in temporary accommodation combined with providing wider access to social housing through a local lettings policy to promote more mixed communities - key objectives for our strategy are therefore:

“Promoting mixed communities and Maximising opportunities available for those wishing to own their home”

Barnet is generally a prosperous place but there are significant vulnerable and disadvantaged groups particularly located in the west of the borough, and potentially increasing pressures associated with the growth that is taking place. Our Local Area Agreement identifies ***Tackling Disadvantage*** as a priority and the council's Corporate Plan includes an objective of ***Promoting Independence***. The number of older people living in the borough is expected to increase at a much greater rate than the rest of the population, and we have developed proposals to modernise the housing related support available to older residents. In addition, whilst the number of people becoming homeless has reduced, this has not been the case with young people under 25 years old. Whilst Barnet has historically enjoyed relatively low levels of unemployment, the recession has seen increases in numbers claiming benefits, and young people not working and not in education. Unemployment is much higher amongst council and housing association tenants, and we will work with our partners to address this complicated issue. A key objective for our strategy is therefore:

“Providing housing related support options that maximise the independence of residents”

The council is directly responsible for providing services to people in the borough who need housing advice or are homeless, and households in the private sector who need adaptations. In addition, Barnet Homes have been appointed to manage the council's housing stock comprising 11,000 tenants and 4,000 leaseholders. It is important that the services we provide represent excellent value for money, meet high standards and the expectations of residents. We also want to ensure that we work closely with partners such as private landlords and housing associations to ensure that the best possible services are delivered in the borough. A key objective for our strategy is therefore:

“Providing excellent value services that exceed residents expectations”

For further information please contact Paul shipway:

Tel: 0208 3594924

Email: paul.shipway@barnet.gov.uk