

# Citizens' Panel Newsletter

Spring 2014



## Introduction

### Welcome to Barnet Citizens' Panel spring newsletter.

This newsletter provides feedback on what you have told us and how we are using the results of all the Citizens' Panel consultations you have taken part in since summer 2013. We would like to start by thanking you all for the overwhelming response to the recent consultations. Getting the views of residents is vital to Barnet's commitment to consulting and involving local people in decisions. In the current economic climate and beyond, your opinions really do matter and can make a real difference.

Over the last six months we have been asking for your views on council business and how we operate. However, in the coming months we plan to consult with you much more on local issues and local services.

Your feedback will continue to contribute to the delivery of more efficient and customer focused services in Barnet. We look forward to your continued support.

**In this issue –  
your views,  
and the council's  
response, to  
consultations on:**

Changes to the  
Governance system

Budget consultation

Priorities to inform  
the council's future  
spending plans

# Results of recent consultations and how we are acting on the results

**In this issue we have included detailed results of consultations you have been involved in since last summer, and how we are now using and acting on these results.**

In particular, we have included the results of the following consultations:

- Consultation on proposed changes in the system of Governance
- Business Planning and Budget 2014/15 – 2015/16 general consultation
- Priorities to inform the council's future spending plans.

You will notice that with many of our panel surveys we also make them available on Barnet Online ([www.barnet.gov.uk](http://www.barnet.gov.uk)) to give all of our residents an opportunity to give their views. However, we really value the views of the Citizens' Panel, as it is profiled to be representative of Barnet's adult population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and housing tenure, and therefore gives the council a true reflection of Barnet residents' views as a whole.

## Consultation on proposed changes in the system of Governance

In September 2013 we asked for your views on the proposed changes to our Governance arrangements.

### Background

The council is currently operating an Executive System of governance. Under this system, the majority of decisions in the council are taken by the single-party Executive (or Cabinet) either in the Cabinet meeting or by individual Cabinet Members. The Executive are held to account for their policies and decisions by cross-party Overview and Scrutiny Committees. This system was imposed on the vast majority of councils with the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000. However, recent changes in the law mean that councils can change their governance

arrangements. This means that local authorities have the opportunity to review how they make decisions and the procedures that they follow to meet the challenges facing their communities.

The new legislation (The Localism Act 2011) allows local authorities to choose which governance system they operate from the following options:

- a. executive arrangements (such as an elected mayor and Cabinet or a Leader and Cabinet)
- b. a committee system; or
- c. alternative arrangements (as prescribed by the Secretary of State).

The council is proposing to change its governance system to option b. a committee system of governance. This would mean the abolition of the Executive (Cabinet) and Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Decisions would instead be taken in thematic cross-party politically-proportioned committees.

### Why we asked for your views

As well as consulting on this change, this also presented an excellent opportunity for the council to:

- assess the effectiveness of its current arrangements
- explore how it can ensure that the new system is informed by public opinion
- ensure it reflects and responds to the needs of local people
- that the proposed changes are transparent and accountable.

As such, we asked for your views on the new proposed Committee system, plus the new guiding principles and the different features for the new structure that aim to make sure the future structure meets local needs.

Even if you had never attended a council meeting, it was important to hear why, to help us to understand how we can make council meetings more accessible in the future. In addition, if you had attended any council meetings in the last year, we wanted to know about your experiences to help us develop our proposals.

The council also made the survey available on Barnet Online to give anyone else who was interested an opportunity to take part.

### What you told us

A total of 504 returns were received from the Citizens' Panel, and 71 residents responded to the survey on Barnet Online.

The majority of both samples had not recently attended a council meeting. In the case of the Citizens' Panel, not knowing where and when they were held was a major barrier. Barnet Online was the most common form of communication used by both samples.

The Citizens' Panel sample showed higher satisfaction levels than the Barnet Online sample. Panel members were most concerned about action not being taken because of their participation; Barnet Online respondents were more concerned about the perceived 'political' elements of the system.

Across both samples, the most common issues that people expected to see determined through a new system were finance and budgeting, planning, education, safety, housing and environmental issues.

In relation to understanding the existing governance arrangements, 32 per cent of the Citizens' Panel respondents and 81 per cent of the Barnet Online respondents understood the current arrangements fully or partly. 80 per cent of online respondents and 32 per cent of the Citizens' Panel knew who their ward members were. Email was the most popular method of communication, followed by face-to-face contact.

When questioned what would make the decision-making process easier to understand, Barnet Online respondents suggested that the biggest areas that needed addressing were to make processes clearer to the public and removing barriers to participation. The Citizens' Panel had a strong emphasis on better communication to inform and explain to residents.

All respondents ranked the principles highly, with transparency and accountability featuring as the most important principles.

The majority of respondents did not have comments to make on the practical issues. For Barnet Online respondents who did comment, their main themes were facilitating public participation and engagement and retaining elements of scrutiny. For Citizens' Panel respondents, the top practical issues were engaging with the electorate and retaining some elements of scrutiny.

### How we used the results?

In January 2013, the council passed a resolution to change the system of governance from an Executive (Cabinet) system to a Committee system. The council is now in the final stages of refining the details of the Committee system and further proposals are due to be discussed at the April Council meeting. It is essential that this form of governance is acceptable to our residents, community and voluntary groups, businesses, other organisations in the borough and those that the council works in partnership with. The feedback from the consultation has been used to inform the design of the new Committee system. This new system will commence from the council's Annual Meeting in June 2014. A communications plan is being developed and details of the changes and how people can get involved in meetings will be communicated to the public via the council website, notice boards and social media.



# Business Planning and Budget 2014/15-2015/6 general consultation

**We asked for your views on our Business Planning and Budget for 2014/15 - 2015/16. We gave detailed background information about the council budget and the challenges the council faces.**

As part of this we also asked for your views on the budget we have proposed in terms of the savings we are proposing for 2014/15, the priorities we have identified within each service area, and the council's proposal to cut Council Tax.

The council also consulted with the wider population through:

- a survey published on Barnet Online
- paper copies placed in all council buildings.

The consultation was widely promoted, and letters were also sent out to all the council's business rate payers (National Non Domestic Rate payers, NNDR) inviting them to take part in the consultation.

## Residents' Perception Survey

In addition to this specific consultation on the council's budget, we conducted a Residents' Perception Survey in autumn 2013 with 1,600 residents from across the borough, which was also used to help inform our Business Planning and Budget for 2014/15 – 2015/16.

The council conducts this particular survey twice a year, in order to monitor residents' views and concerns about their local areas, track performance of the services we provide, and performance on other key indicators included in our customer driven performance management system.

The reasons why we do not conduct this survey with the Citizens' Panel are that:

- the questions are the same in each wave, and as such it would be unfair to keep asking you to answer the same questions every six months
- some questions are about awareness of council services, and therefore if we repeated these particular questions with the panel it would give us an untrue picture of awareness, as you would have already been made aware from the previous tracking survey.

Hence, twice a year we commission ORS, an independent market research company, to select a fresh representative sample of Barnet residents to conduct this performance-tracking survey. However, over the coming year we plan to use the panel much more to explore residents' views in depth about their local area and services.

## What you told us

A total of 443 surveys were received from the Citizens' Panel, and 54 residents responded to the survey on Barnet Online.

The majority of Citizens' Panel members agree that the council has got the balance right in terms of efficiency savings, increased revenue and reductions to services, with just over three-fifths agreeing (63 per cent). Conversely, those responding to the Barnet Online survey were much less likely to agree with the council's approach, with just under two fifths (39 per cent, 21 out of 54 respondents) agreeing that the council has got the right balance.

The vast majority of panel members also welcome a cut in Council Tax next year, with nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) agreeing with the cut. Of those responding to the Barnet Online survey, just under half of the respondents (49 per cent, 24 out of 49 respondents) agreed with the proposal to cut Council Tax by one per cent next year. Around four-fifths of panel respondents also agreed with most of the priorities the delivery units have identified for 2014/15.

In terms of service priorities, the theme of protecting the vulnerable was clearly evident in the responses to both samples, with the highest level of agreement experienced for those priorities within Adults and Communities and the Children's Service, which seek to protect the vulnerable.

## What the Residents' Perception Survey told us?

In terms of the Residents' Perception Survey, the vast majority of residents (86 per cent) told us they were satisfied with their local area as a place to live. Residents told us their top three concerns were:



- condition of roads and pavements
- level of crime
- and lack of affordable housing.

Residents' satisfaction with the majority of local services has also improved. Ten local services saw significant increases in satisfaction compared to 2012. The majority of these out performed London, the only exception were Leisure Services and the Parking Service, which remain significantly below the London average.

### How we used the results

As a result of the consultations, the following amendments have been made to the council's budget for 2014/15 -2015/16:

- a cut to Council Tax by one per cent next year
- delivery units are using the results of the Residents' Perception Survey to monitor performance and inform where they need to make service improvements
- investment of £1m is being allocated to fund priority projects to tackle key concerns from the Residents' Perception Survey.



# Priorities to inform the council's future long term spending plans

**Between October and December last year, we invited a cross section of the panel to attend three area-based workshops to help inform the council's future priorities and long-term spending plans.**

We wish to thank all of you who took part in the workshops and shared your views so readily. Participants were patient in listening to detailed background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

## Background information

Over the current decade, Barnet Council will lose around half of its spending power. This means it will be an enormous challenge for the council to continue to provide the services our residents need and to keep Barnet a successful and attractive place to live and work.

The council has already made budget savings - 77 per cent of these savings have come through greater efficiency – doing the same for less.

However, although the UK economy is now growing, the country still has a budget deficit – the gap between the total amount collected through tax and the total amount spent on services – of over £80 billion and all three major political parties are talking of further cuts in public spending after the next election. It is clear we are now in the middle of a decade of austerity with no likelihood of a major increase in council spending at the end of the decade.

During the coming year the council will review its priorities and spending across all services and as such we were keen to hear residents' views from a cross section of Barnet residents.

The council commissioned the Office for Public Management (OPM), an independent market

research company, to conduct the consultation on the council's behalf.

The Citizens' Panel workshops enabled us to hear the views of a reflective sample of the local population. In order to hear the views of those residents deemed most vulnerable and most in need of our services, OPM also ran a series of focus groups with service users and protected characteristics<sup>1</sup>. In addition, they held focus groups with local businesses.

## We Asked

We wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of your priorities and how you would want the council to approach its priorities and spending plans over the next five years. In particular, the consultation aimed to:

- understand your views and priorities for your local area
- identify what you value most about your local area
- determine what you think the service priorities should be for your local area and community
- understand service users' priorities
- identify where you would like the council to focus its investment to meet needs and demand
- explore what you feel the priorities should be for the vulnerable in times of austerity
- obtain ideas on how local people can be empowered to make savings
- identify where there are opportunities and how we can support individuals getting more involved in their area e.g. mentoring, skills development, looking after their area, and other volunteering.

<sup>1</sup> Protected characteristics is the term used in the Equality Act 2010 to define those demographics the public sector has a duty to pay due regard to and the grounds upon which discrimination may be unlawful.



## What you told us

The findings provided a rich evidence base of residents' priorities, what residents value most, ideas for generating income, and how local people can work together.

The key themes that have been identified as a result of the consultation are:

**A Responsible Barnet:** Participants were supportive of local people taking on more of a role. There was a sense that residents need to start not only stepping in because of the financial constraints that the council has, but also because people should have a sense of responsibility for their local area.

**A Good Quality of Life for All:** Participants had a high appreciation of place and affection for the green and leafy borough, especially the parks.

**A Fair Barnet:** Participants valued the support the council provides to the most vulnerable and there is a belief that the council has to do all it can to support everyone in enjoying the advantages of life in Barnet.

### **An Entrepreneurial and Enterprising Barnet:**

There was clear support for the council doing all it can to help business.

**An Open and Transparent Barnet:** While most people knew that the council like other parts of the public sector has to make savings, they were mostly surprised at the scale of savings required. There is a need to be even clearer about the challenges facing the council.

**An Efficient and Effective Council and a more collaborative public sector:** Residents said they wanted the council to be more entrepreneurial and market our services more widely to generate more income. There was agreement that Barnet needs to be smarter with using its resources.

## What happens next?

Based on the themes coming out of this consultation, the council will review its priorities and spending across all services over the coming year, ensuring that its services best meet the needs and priorities of local residents.

It is clear we need to do things differently. Residents have said that they could see a case for communities, businesses and individuals playing a bigger part in keeping Barnet 'Barnet', and taking more responsibility for meeting the challenges. We are now engaging with community organisations, residents' groups, businesses and individuals to find out how the borough can develop in the coming decade, and how everyone can contribute to life in the borough. While the financial challenge will obviously play a key part in shaping public services in Barnet, we want to make sure that we are meeting the widest needs of the borough and that services are being provided by those best able to do so.



### More information about the Citizens' Panel

If you would like more information about the Citizens' Panel please visit [www.barnet.gov.uk](http://www.barnet.gov.uk) or contact Rosie Evangelou on 020 8359 7016 or [rosie.evangelou@barnet.gov.uk](mailto:rosie.evangelou@barnet.gov.uk)

### Complete your surveys online

We are keen for as many of you as possible to opt for receiving your survey electronically rather than by post as this has cost savings and also helps us to use less paper. If you have recently got access to the internet please consider receiving your survey electronically. If you do opt to receive your survey electronically, we will send your survey to your personal email address rather than posting it to you. You will not have to print the survey off; all that is required is to give your responses and then once you have completed the survey press the submit button and it will be automatically sent back to the company who does the data entry for our surveys.

If you would like to receive your survey electronically, please email: [rosie.evangelou@barnet.gov.uk](mailto:rosie.evangelou@barnet.gov.uk)

### Thanks again for your support

Thanks again to all those who have participated in consultations – we greatly appreciate your involvement and hope that you will continue to enjoy being a member of the Citizens' Panel.

### Have your details changed?

If you are planning to move home, change your name or any other details, please let us know so that we can still contact you.

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