

Citizens' Panel Newsletter

Summer 2013

Introduction

Welcome to Barnet Citizens' Panel newsletter. We hope you had a good summer enjoying the unusually good weather.

This newsletter aims to keep you informed about the work of the council and is full of consultation updates from the various consultation events, group discussions and surveys we have conducted over the course of the year. We would like to start by thanking you all for the overwhelming response to the range of consultation initiatives we have undertaken. Getting the views of residents is vital to Barnet's commitment to inform, consult and involve local people in decisions. In the current economic climate and beyond, your opinions really do matter and can make a real difference. 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:**

Housing Allocations
Scheme and
Placements Policy

Council Tax Support

Tenancy Strategy

Corporate Plan and
Finance Plan consultation

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

In this issue we have included detailed results of consultations you were involved in during 2012/13 and how we are now using and acting on these results.

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

- Housing Allocations scheme and Placements Policy
- Council Tax Support
- Tenancy Strategy
- Corporate Plan and Finance Plan Consultation.

Housing Allocations Scheme and Placements Policy

The council's housing allocations scheme is used to determine which households are offered housing assistance. The current scheme, introduced in April 2011, saw the end of an open waiting list and the introduction of four simple bands to replace a complicated points system. The scheme also recognises the community contributions from people also in housing need, such as applicants who work, volunteer, are training for employment, foster caring or former service personnel.

In July 2013 the council proposed to make further changes which included:

- making applicants only one offer of accommodation, instead of two
- operating a placements policy assessing suitability of accommodation, including its location and affordability
- making placements into private rented sector housing outside of Barnet.

Citizens' Panel members, as well as current housing applicants, were invited to attend independently facilitated focus groups to give their views on the proposals.

For each of the proposed changes, participants were asked:

- was the proposal reasonable?
- if not, what else should the council do?
- if yes, how should the council communicate why this is the policy?

- if it is introduced, what information should people be given to help them achieve the best outcome?

What you told us

Participants without an immediate housing need felt that the lack of social housing and affordable homes in the private rented sector were compelling reasons for the introduction of a 'one offer for all' policy and the introduction of a placements policy. Participants who are housing applicants did not share this view, and felt that more should be done by the council to build more social housing or make better use of empty homes.

All participants felt the council's proposal to calculate affordability was reasonable, provided that this took individual household needs into consideration. They also felt information about the cost of living in a property should be made available to enable households to understand whether they could afford to live there.

All participants felt that applicants should be provided with good information to assist them in making decisions, ranging from detailed information about the property on offer and the local amenities (e.g. local doctor, employment opportunities, etc). Viewing the property – as happens now – was felt by participants to be essential. There was also felt to be a need to more clearly communicate the applicant's right to review around suitability.

What happens next?

The final decision on the amended housing allocations scheme and introduction of a placements policy will be made by the Cabinet in September 2013 and we will be feeding back how we have acted on the results in the next newsletter.

Council Tax Support Scheme consultation

The Government abolished the national Council Tax Benefit scheme and all councils were asked to design a replacement local Council Tax Support scheme that would start on 1st April 2013.

The new scheme had to protect pensioners and councils were told that they would have a 10% reduction in government funding compared with the level of Council Tax Benefit subsidy they received in 2012. So in autumn 2012 we consulted with residents on how we could design a scheme that spreads the burden of this cut as fairly as possible and is in line with the needs of Barnet residents. We were keen to give everyone – regardless of whether they currently claim benefit or not – the opportunity to have their say on our proposals before our scheme is finalised.

As part of this the council conducted a comprehensive consultation which included:

- a survey open to all residents on Barnet Online
- a survey sent to a representative sample of the Citizens' Panel
- paper copies sent out to all our Council Tax Benefit recipients
- paper copies placed in all council buildings
- a series of focus groups with those residents who were most likely to be affected by the changes.

We really valued the survey results from our Citizens' Panel, as the panel is profiled to be representative of Barnet's adult population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and housing tenure, and therefore forms an important part of the data set in ensuring that we hear the views of a representative sample of Barnet residents.

What you told us

A total of 2,910 returns were received and nine focus groups were undertaken with residents who were most likely to be affected by the changes.

We asked if you agreed with the principles and features.

We asked who if anyone should be protected.

We asked how we could incentivise work.

On 24th October the Government offered additional money if we restricted the minimum contribution to 8.5% and did not operate a band cap. In view of the fact that 35% of the people responding thought the minimum contribution should be 10% or less, your reservations, changes to the capital limits and the possible effects of a band cap, we decided to

accept the Government additional funding. This meant we could keep the minimum contribution as low as possible, we would not reduce the capital limit and we would not have a band cap. This did mean however we could not afford to protect the disabled and families although we decided to protect war pensioners.

How we used the results

After consultation with residents, the council approved its own local Council Tax Support scheme, which commenced in April 2013. The key changes from the existing Council Tax Benefit scheme are:

- Pensioners will continue to be treated as they are under the current Council Tax Benefit scheme and will generally not pay any more than at present.
- Everyone of working age will have to pay a minimum contribution of 8.5% of their Council Tax liability unless they are in a protected group (War pensioners, war widow(er)s and people who receive Armed Forces compensation scheme payments are protected and will not have to pay the minimum contribution).
- Non-dependent charges for working age customers will be increased slightly and there will be fewer bands.
- Second Adult Rebates will be abolished for working age customers. This was a form of Council Tax Benefit designed to help taxpayers who lost the single person discount because someone (not their partner or a lodger) was living with them but the second adult's income was low. The income and savings of the taxpayer were not taken into account.



Tenancy Strategy

In response to a requirement of the Localism Act, the council was required to produce a local Tenancy Strategy. Local authorities were empowered to make use of fixed term tenancies for social housing, moving away from the current system whereby all council tenancies are granted on a secure basis and are effectively for life as long as the rent is paid and conditions of tenancy are observed.

In early 2012 we carried out an eight-week consultation which included an online survey and two focus groups; one with members of the public drawn from the Citizens' Panel and one with households registered with Barnet for rehousing.

We Asked

Who should get a council tenancy for life? Who should get a council tenancy for a fixed period of time?

What you told us

Some people felt that all council tenants should be able to live in their home for as long as they want but most people agreed that it is a good idea to review tenancies to see if the home is, for example, still the right size for a grown up family, or if a tenant might now earn enough money to find alternative housing. You wanted clarification on the term "disability" as this is one of the circumstances when a secure lifetime tenancy might be granted.

How we used the results

As a result of the consultation we made significant changes to the Strategy:

- The earnings threshold has been changed to take into account household composition.
- The Strategy now reflects that age is not the only criteria to be used when establishing, as part of the housing assessment, the suitability of a young person of 25 or under for a two year tenancy. Other single people over the age of 25 could be offered two year tenancies rather than five depending on their vulnerability and the outcome of the housing assessment.
- The criteria used to establish disability have been based on entitlement to Disability Living Allowance awarded by the Department for Works & Pensions and additional financial or other benefits which take into account the degree of disability that a person has.



Corporate Plan & Finance and Business Plan consultation

During the process of formulating the council's budget and Corporate Plan proposals for 2013/14 we undertook an extensive consultation programme to ascertain residents' priorities and views on our proposed budget and Corporate plan.

The consultation took place in three phases:

- **Phase One** (October 2012 – November 2012): Residents' Perception telephone survey
- **Phase Two** (November 2012 – January 2013): Corporate Plan consultation
- **Phase Three:** Finance and business planning (including proposed budget) consultation (October 2012 – January 2013).

As part of this consultation programme in January 2013 we held a Citizens' Panel event, Youth Board¹ members were also invited. The event was designed to explore what is driving residents' priorities, explore residents' views on the council's Corporate Plan priorities and understand where residents would be prepared to accept further savings.



¹ The Barnet Youth Board is made up of representatives aged 13-19 (up to 25 years old for young people with a disability) across all Barnet's state schools as well as community groups/clubs aiming to give young people a voice. www.barnet.gov.uk/info/930324/youth_and_democracy/458/youth_and_democracy

What you told us

We first asked you what were your top concerns in the borough

Participants identified a wide range of concerns, but there were four in particular which received attention. These were: 'quality of health service', 'not enough being done for young people', 'crime', and 'lack of affordable housing'.

Working with local health partners, better police visibility, and more activities for teenagers, and housing suited to local demographics were positive actions that participants felt could tackle these concerns. There was a consensus that dirty streets, and the state of roads and pavements needed effective intervention from the council, alongside better behaviour from residents.

We then presented you with the results of our 2012 Residents' Perception Survey (a representative survey of 2000 Barnet residents) and asked you what you felt was driving these concerns

Crime – top concern in the Residents' Perception Survey

Participants felt this was mainly driven by concern for burglaries, followed by assault, muggings, stabbings, and also teenagers hanging around the streets.

Participants made a number of suggestions of actions which could be taken to address this. The top priority for these was greater police visibility on the streets, followed by more CCTV in high crime areas (though CCTV should not replace active Police presence); 'naming and shaming' petty criminals in the local media, encouraging a more organised role for neighbourhood watch groups, ensuring criminals pay back to the community via full fines and community service, improving street lighting where it is too dim. There was a feeling that some areas were neglected, for example Burnt Oak.

Conditions of roads and pavements - second top concern in the Residents' Perception Survey

Potholes received the most attention, with participants on one table agreeing that the North Circular Road was one of the worst areas. Participants reported that there were good repair rates for potholes but that they were not of good quality and damage soon re-appeared. It was suggested that better follow-up and checks on quality of contractors were needed. Uneven pavements were a concern for older people. Supply of grit was also seen as a driver for concern of conditions of roads and pavements and it was felt that more grit supplies should be provided by the council so that they are accessible for all properties. With regard to the parking system there was a suggestion for a more convenient 'tap and park' system, like the Oyster card system, where parkers are able tap in and tap out.

Concern for level of Council Tax – third top concern in Residents' Perception Survey

Participants from the Citizens' Panel event were generally opposed to raising Council Tax explaining their concern with reference to the wider economic context; as salaries are frozen and the cost of living is going up a freeze seems like an increase in real terms. However, some questioned the freeze while seeing services cut but would only accept an increase in Council Tax if the council could demonstrate services were performing or had driven savings down. It was suggested that it was better to increase income from other sources (e.g. Planning Services) than increasing Council Tax.

Your views on our Corporate Plan

Participants were asked to rank and comment on the council's corporate priorities emerging from the draft Corporate Plan and top three strategic objectives. All priorities were felt to be positive, and there was some trouble in understanding and ranking them. Participants recognised the importance of the preventative aspect of some priorities, especially 'To create better life chances, starting from pregnancy, for children and young people across the borough' and 'To maintain the right environment for a strong and diverse local economy'.

Your views on the council's efficiency savings, ideas for generating revenue, and where it might be acceptable to see a reduction in council services

Participants explored three ways in which the council could make savings or generate income; efficiency savings; increasing revenue or better use of assets; or reduction to services. Plenty of ideas of how to generate revenue were offered, and charges to businesses for planning or environmental services were uniformly popular.

Participants felt that council assets, including libraries, could be used more effectively to generate income. In terms of reduction to services it was felt that some could be merged with other boroughs, but that services for the most vulnerable should be protected.

Other issues that participants brought up at the event

Two concerning issues which arose amongst participants independently of consultation questions were mental health and the standard of schools in the borough.

How we are using the results

After considering all the findings from the different consultations that took place as part of the **Corporate Plan and Finance and Business Plan consultation** and other factors, the following amendments have been made to the budget proposals and Corporate Plan:

- A two year Council Tax freeze is proposed for the years 2013/14 and 2014/15.
- Further investment of £4m will be allocated to fund priority projects to tackle key concerns from the Residents' Perception Survey. This will be funded from additional, one off, savings from the New Support and Customer Organisation contract in 2013/14.
- Additional funding has been added into the capital programme for additional school places across the borough.
- The responses relating to wording of priorities will be used to inform the development of next year's Corporate Plan.



More information about the Citizens' Panel

If you would like more information about the Citizens' Panel please visit www.barnet.gov.uk or contact Rosie Evangelou on 020 8359 7016 or Rosie.Evangelou@barnet.gov.uk

Complete your surveys online

The last two surveys on Council Tax Support Scheme and Governance have been posted to you as we wanted you to have easy access to the consultation documents that accompanied them. However we are keen for as many of you as possible to opt for receiving surveys, that don't have accompanying consultation documents, electronically rather than by post as this has cost savings and also helps us to use less paper. If you do opt to receive your survey electronically we will send most surveys 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 of our surveys.

If you would like to receive your survey electronically please email: fiona.w@qfrs.co.uk

Retirement

The complete panel is designed to be representative of the borough. In order to keep the panel fresh, residents are given a three-year membership, and therefore a third of the panel is replaced each year. We are afraid that some members are coming to the end of their three-year membership and we will be retiring you shortly to give other residents an opportunity to participate on the panel.

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, or change your name/any other details, please let us know so that we can still contact you.

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