



LB OF BARNET CONSULTATION ON CAPITA

RESPONSE BY THE BARNET SOCIETY

15 February 2019

Responses/comments to the online questionnaire

Q1 *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the three aims [high-quality services, value for money, Council's strategic control]?*

Deliver high-quality services – **Strongly agree**

Secure best VFM – **Strongly agree**

Strengthen Council's strategic control– **Strongly agree**

To what extent do you agree/disagree that these aims should be the basis for assessment?
– **Neither agree nor disagree**

Q2 *If you disagree with any, please state why.*

While the Barnet Society supports the principle of value for money, the basic quality of services is essential. We believe that those provided by Capita/Re have often fallen short of an acceptable minimum standard.

We are not familiar with their contractual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), so note that the faults may not always lie with Capita/Re. It would have been helpful to have had information about the KPIs and an indication of Capita/Re's performance against them.

Q3 *Any additional aims?*

None

Q4 *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed order of services being prioritised?*

Phase 1 (Finance & HR) – **Tend to agree**

Phase 2 (Highways & Regeneration) – **Tend to agree**

Phase 3 (Barnet-based incl. Council land & buildings, planning policy, major developments, infrastructure planning, heritage services) – **Neither agree nor disagree**

Phase 4 (Transactional services incl. planning applications, planning enforcement, building control) – **Neither agree nor disagree**

Overall, to what extent do you agree/disagree with the order of the proposed phases? To what extent do you agree/disagree – **Neither agree nor disagree**

Q5 *If you disagree please state which services should be given higher or lower priority.*

It would have helped if the implications of the Council's proposed sequence could have been explained.

However, we believe it essential for the local delivery of planning services, particularly applications and enforcement, to receive proper scrutiny as part of Phase 3.

Q6 If you have had direct experience of any of the following services, please rate their quality.

Finance – **Not used**
Invoicing – **Not used**
Estates – **Poor**
HR – **Not used**
H&S – **Not used**
Payroll – **Not used**
Pensions – **Not used**
IT – **Not used**
Procurement – **Very poor**
Strategic planning – **Poor**
Regeneration – **Very poor**

Q7 If you have had direct experience of any of the following services, please rate their quality.

Revenues – **Not used**
Customer services – **Very poor**
Social care – **Not used**
Development control – **Poor**
Planning enforcement – **Very poor**
Highways – **Very poor**
Cemeteries – **Not used**
Building control – **Don't know/not sure**
Land charges – **Don't know/not sure**
Trading standards – **Not used**
Licensing – **Poor**
Environmental health – **Poor**

Q8 If you rated any services 'poor' or 'very poor' please state which and why.

- 1. Environmental health, and in particular greening and its effect on air quality, general health and wellbeing, are of great interest to our Society, although we believe these are sadly neglected in Barnet. We would like to encourage far more greenery as it improves air quality, lifts our spirits, encourages birds and insects, and importantly, enriches the urban environment, whilst colourful planting is a great stress reliever.**

Although budgets have been much reduced, we understand that the Mayor of London will continue to fund tree planting. We are not aware that best advantage has been taken of this, and certainly not in High Barnet or New Barnet, where pollution is high and greening along main streets is sparse.

- 2. Environmental improvements to High Streets, such as wider pavements, trees and attractive street furniture, have long been recognised as one of the keys to their regeneration, yet Capita's, and especially Highways', responses to**

initiatives of the Chipping Barnet Town Team (CBTT) has been grudging at almost every stage. For example:

- a. It took over two years to achieve modest landscape improvements to St John the Baptist's Churchyard – though the work was funded by the Mayor of London Outer London Fund.
 - b. The bulk of funding for pedestrian improvements to the High Street was also granted by the Mayor of London nearly three years ago, but these have yet to materialise. A public consultation last June produced a clear majority in favour of them, but it has taken Highways six months to deal with one objection to a minor detail of the scheme. The CBTT has yet to be consulted on critical details such as tree species, bench location and signage, though we asked at the outset to be involved in these. Since the planting season will shortly be over, the works now seem likely to be delayed until the autumn.
 - c. Some ten years ago, under a Section 106 agreement as part of planning permission for their new campus, Barnet College made a financial contribution to upgrading of the High Street/Wood Street junction to improve pedestrian safety and de-clutter the streetscape in front of St John the Baptist's Church. Despite the CBTT's continual prompting, nothing has been done apart from removing railings.
3. Planning enforcement is very poor and inconsistently followed up by officers. This weakens the planning regime overall and is especially problematic in the Conservation Areas, where few enforcement cases are pursued and, as a consequence, the level of compliance is poor.
 4. The customer services provided to the public are often totally inadequate as experienced by Society members when trying to access Council services by telephone. All too often a caller is taken on a loop of options with a string of recorded options, none of which offer the chance to leave a message with the relevant officer. This means that services are not accessible to residents without access to the internet and this has to be improved going forward.
 5. The licensing services has been marked as 'Poor' on account of the fact that the organisers of the Barnet Medieval Festival were given wrong advice on three occasions when applying for a licence for the event. This suggests that the front-line staff are not properly trained in their roles and that the quality – as well as accessibility – of customer service needs to be improved.

Q9 To what extent do you support or oppose this approach [a mix of private, voluntary/community, public or in-house]?

Tend to support

Q10 If you have any views or preferences on how services should be provided, please say.

We have a strong preference for in-house services because of their continuity and more direct accountability. They must be subject, however, to delivering sustainable medium and longer-term value.

However, in specialised cases we recognise that others can be more appropriate and provide better quality.

Q11 *Are there any comments you wish to make about the review?*

- 1. We hope that this review is not just a box-ticking exercise: follow-through and co-ordinated departmental delivery is essential. In addition, greater transparency about the KPIs expected of Capita & Re would be of wide public interest.**
- 2. We are concerned about the conflicts of interest inherent in Capita's & Re's relationship with regard to building projects. They are responsible not only for identifying development opportunities (for which we understand they are paid a bonus) but also for drawing up plans, and then for adjudicating on the resulting planning applications. In Conservation Areas, advice is also sought from their own heritage specialists. All these players have the same employer (Capita/Re), which exposes them to suspicions of collusion and abuse of authority despite 'Chinese walls' ostensibly separating these functions.**

Such close, unscrutinised processes also open up opportunities for financial fraud, whether by rogue employees (as recently demonstrated) or at corporate level.

Examples in our area include the conversion of No.85 High Street (formerly Lloyds Bank) and the Moxon Street/Tapster Street development, both of which involved mixed residential and retail premises. In neither case were the processes transparent, and the lack of independent professional advice called in question the design choices made. Ironically, the Capita/Re model has not even delivered more speedily: after several years, the former has yet to open fully, and the latter has yet to start on site.

- 3. To date we have been extremely disappointed that local initiatives rarely get off the ground. Our Society is a member of the CBTT, the most effective and active Town Team within the Borough. In addition to the St John's Churchyard and High Street improvements already mentioned (under Q8), we have established a monthly Teenage Market, sponsored a Treasure Trails booklet for Chipping Barnet (www.treasuretrails.co.uk), and have other ideas in the pipeline. The new Premier Inn and relocated Barnet Market could further boost the local economy.**

We provide an important community voice yet constantly struggle to achieve any satisfactory outcomes, due largely to little or no will by, or coordination between, Capita/Re officers and Council. We, as well as other Town Teams, need far more harmonised effort from both. Until recently we had just one excellent town centre officer who struggled to take care of each of the seven town centres within the Borough of Barnet. That officer we understand is due to be replaced by two new officers. However we must question why Barnet is not doing the same as Brent, which has seven officers, or Islington which has a huge team of supportive officers.

Although outside the terms of this review, as a remedy we would like to suggest a Joint Forum and wonder whether the Council's Public Realm Forum could be developed into this. The panel would have representation from each relevant department – environment, planning and highways, plus someone from each of the Borough Town Teams. Should Capita/Re be retained following

this review, of course, their willing and proactive involvement would be essential.

- 4. Barnet's new Local Plan will (or should) be proposing areas for growth. High Barnet & New Barnet may not have large plots of land (unlike the west of the Borough), but we have two significant transport hubs that could support substantial development, and there may be other ways we can look to regenerate.**

Council planning strategy must also allow for the possibility of a small new town being built just to the north of Barnet in the Green Belt south of Potters Bar. (Hertsmere's initial plans were open for public consultation until December 2018 and are currently being reviewed.) If it proceeds, that town would bring both opportunities and threats. Barnet could capitalise on it by investing in retail and business opportunities in High & New Barnet, together with better public transport links. By the same token, we do not want Hertsmere to drain off our jobs. Either way, Barnet cannot afford to ignore it.

- 5. There is much that could be done, and joint stakeholder community groups that are willing to help drive ideas forward must be encouraged and well supported so that any future strategies will actually be delivered. You asked if we had any other comments to make about this review. We hope that we have provided some meat to the bones. Our enthusiasm for better town centres and neighbourhoods across the Borough needs to be matched by committed and effective services – whichever combination of organisations provides them.**