



LB OF BARNET CONSULTATION ON ITS DRAFT HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS/ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGIES

RESPONSE BY THE BARNET SOCIETY

4 February 2019

The comments that follow supplement the online questionnaires

HOUSING STRATEGY

Question 4 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the five overarching priorities?*

Although we are in broad agreement with the priorities, the term 'affordability' is contentious. For market sale, presumably the strategy is using the government's NPPF definition (houses sold at a discount of at least 20% below local market value), but that should be stated.

However, we believe such a definition of 'affordability' is inadequate in Barnet's current market situation, and that even the Council's rent policy of 65% of market rent should be reviewed.

Question 6 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the private rented sector priorities?*

Although selective licensing would be a useful initial measure, we would prefer licensing to be extended across the whole Borough. This would prevent a postcode lottery in the allocation of decent landlord services.

Question 8 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities for delivering more homes that people can afford?*

There is no question that the pressures for new – and especially genuinely affordable – housing are great, but both annual and long-term targets must be rigorously substantiated. There are significant disparities between the Government Standard Methodology, the GLA Strategic Housing Market Assessment and the Council's projections. We also have doubts about future projections of housing need in the South-East, especially post-Brexit given the likely consequent economic slow-down and departure of EU citizens.

Increasing the supply of housing should be done in conjunction with the Council's other objectives, and not seen as crude targets to be achieved.

Use of brownfield sites and converting existing buildings must be considered before green land is used. We would like to see surplus TfL and NHS land, for example, used for affordable and social housing. Those bodies should have nomination rights so they can be used for their key workers who are currently being priced out of London.

We generally support much higher densities close to existing (or proposed) public transport hubs – though not the 800-metre radius proposed by the Mayor of London’s draft London Plan. We also oppose the Mayor’s advocacy of housing development on back gardens except in special circumstances.

It is not Barnet Council’s duty to house – at any cost – anyone wishing to be housed in the Borough. To this end, the prioritising of housing for those already resident in the Borough is a good thing.

Question 9 Is there anything further the Council should consider to make sure residents feel safe and secure in their homes?

Yes:

- Better policing, including wider patrolling and more follow-up of crimes and abuse.
- Greater continuity in management of both private and Council blocks and estates.
- More consistent – and enforced – building control, not just at the completion of the original building works, but also whenever subsequent changes are made to building fabric and evacuation procedures.
- Fixed-term tenancies for private renters should be scrapped and replaced by mandatory open-ended agreements to end the so-called ‘no fault’ evictions. This would prevent landlords evicting tenants within first three years of the tenancy, which would give tenants a sense of security.

Question 11 Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities for promoting independence?

Those with mental health problems need to be given the opportunity to live independently, but with back-up help and assistance if needed – and continuity of support. The same applies to those guilty of drug abuse, subject to other factors such as criminal convictions.

Question 12 Do you have any other comments or alternative suggestions on the draft Housing Strategy in general?

We are concerned about the extent or appropriateness of re-locating individuals and families outside the Borough, especially when it detaches them from their existing social and support networks. We see that this can be a sensible long-term solution for some, but for others it exacerbates their problems. We are also concerned about the value for money of investing heavily in acquisition, improvement and management of properties at a considerable distance from Barnet.

We would like more discussion of alternative types of housing:

- Student
- HMOs
- Co-housing and co-living
- Special and supported homes
- Other forms of social housing and shared ownership.

All these have a useful contribution to make, provided that they are properly planned, regulated and monitored.

Under-occupation should also be addressed. In Barnet there are many elderly people living in family-sized accommodation, and under-occupiers should be encouraged to let spare bedrooms to students or low-earners at below-market rents in return for the latter providing some home help. There should also be incentives to encourage them to downsize. This

would require building smaller properties, sheltered housing, providing 1- & 2-bedroom flats, and perhaps abolishing stamp duty or providing a scheme to assist with conveyancing to make it easier for older people to move.

We would also like to see Council commitment to high design standards of new buildings and places, and to design review as an integral – and early – stage of planning. The vital importance of sustainable development should be stated. We also support increasing use of modern methods of construction such as off-site manufacture – but only subject to the design standards mentioned above.

HOMELESSNESS & ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY

Question 4 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the four priorities?*

No.

Question 6 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities to prevent homelessness?*

We are not convinced that Barnet Homes would necessarily be the best source of specialist advice and support for people threatened by loss of their homes. Barnet Homes' past performance has been variable, and we would want solid evidence of its competence and capacity before adding to its already considerable responsibilities.

Question 8 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities for reducing the number of household's temporary accommodation?*

Although moving more households from short-term to long-term accommodation is a good objective, we question whether expanding the remit of Barnet Homes is the right way to do this. Other organisations may be better placed to take on this role.

We do not oppose use of the private rented sector, but priority should be given to long-term housing solutions.

Again, we question the usefulness of the word 'affordable'. In addition, should Barnet Council be offering 'affordable' housing to anyone who wants to live in the Borough without qualifying criteria?

Use of surplus land should be qualified in that brownfield should be used before resorting to greenfield sites.

Question 12 *Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities to establish effective partnerships, working arrangements and support?*

In relation to Question 9 (the Council's plan to establish a Homelessness Forum), we strongly support a multi-agency approach to homelessness, crime prevention and other social challenges. But we are unclear exactly how the proposed Forum would be funded and how it would work.

Regarding Question 10 (how well the Council works with different partner groups), Barnet Homes' performance in the past has been variable, and we would welcome evidence of its improvement.

Question 15 *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the existing support services*

offered to rough sleepers? + Do you have any further comments or suggestions on the priorities for supporting rough sleepers to address their housing and other needs?

Our experience in High Barnet is that the existing support services are insufficient. We appreciate that they are doing their best, and that other parts of Barnet have a greater claim on them, but our situation is worsening to an unacceptable degree.

Moving the rough sleepers who simply refuse any support but do not qualify as an alcoholic or drug addict from one place to another does not address the problem as they simply return, bringing with them health and safety issues such as using shops frontages as public toilets, adding to the deterioration of the town centre. There needs to be a clear directive on best practice.

There should be a clear distinction between homelessness and begging. Not all beggars are homeless and not all homeless people beg. Services need to be tailored to individuals' specific needs and a 'one size fits all' approach will not work.

Question 16 *Do you have any other comments or alternative suggestions on the Strategy?*

We are surprised to find no mention of issues specific to ex-service men and women.

We suspect that data collection in relation to types of individual and their needs could be improved.

We are concerned about the extent or appropriateness of re-locating individuals and families outside the Borough, especially when it detaches them from their existing social and support networks. We see that this can be a sensible long-term solution for some, but are aware that for others it exacerbates their problems. We are also concerned about the value for money of investing heavily in acquisition, improvement and management of properties at a considerable distance from Barnet.