Research Report

bmg research

Brent Council housing allocation focus group findings - Residents

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Date: March 2019

Produced by BMG Research

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and methodology

In February 2019 Brent Council commissioned BMG Research to carry out two focus groups into proposed changes to the Council's housing allocation policy. This report summarises the findings from a session carried out with Brent residents; the other, with a group of housing association representatives, is covered in a separate report. These groups form part of a wider consultation whereby Brent Council is asking for views from a range of stakeholders, such as Adult Social Care and Children and Young People, local councillors, probation services, and people who are on the Housing Register.

The group was carried out on 12th March 2019, and was moderated by BMG Research staff. An officer from Brent Council was also present to explain the proposals and to deal with any questions on the detail of the proposals.

BMG recruited ten participants. All were Brent residents and aged 16 or over. Recruitment criteria were set to ensure the group was representative of the Borough in terms of gender, age group, and ethnicity. An incentive of £50 in cash was paid to all attending.

1.2 Note on interpretation of qualitative research and data

It is important to note that findings refer solely to those attending the group, and should not therefore be taken as representative of Brent residents as a whole. Quotations have also been included in the report (in italics, or else in quotation marks where they are incorporated in a body of commentary) to provide evidence for the views and experiences reported (both those that were more common, and minority views). Quotations were selected for inclusion in this report on the basis that they met the following criteria:

- where a quote explains an issue more succinctly than could be otherwise described in the body text; and
- where a quote highlights a key issue discussed by participant in a succinct and clear manner.

For each of the proposals, after discussion a brief 'vote' was held on who was in favour / against the proposal. The findings from the 'vote' are given for each proposal in this report; again, it should be noted that these findings should not be assumed to be representative of all Brent residents.

2   Perceived issues with housing allocations

As a warm-up exercise and to get participants thinking about the many competing priorities in housing allocations, participants were shown a simplified list of the criteria the Council uses. They were asked to consider these and then select the three criteria they consider most important, and the three least important, before discussing their choices as one group.

2.1   Top priorities

In terms of top priorities, whilst a range of criteria were chosen the most-selected criteria were homelessness and fear of violence. One participant explained their selection of homelessness in these terms:

> *I just thought that if there's nowhere for someone, or a person or family to go, then they're in desperate times so they need some kind of help.*

Other participants explained their selection of fear of violence as follows:

> *There is no support for the people to come out about it. So, I think violence from me, I think that's one of the top ones.*

> *We want our children to be safe so we don't want the violence on the streets, it's not safe for the other people. That's the reason you are barring those people.*

2.2   Least important priorities

In terms of least important priorities, whilst a range of criteria were chosen the most-selected criteria were a recommendation from the Probation Service and Young people in employment / apprenticeships. More than one participant commented on the difficulty of selecting these criteria, and none stated that their chosen groups were undeserving.

Participants selecting Probation Service referrals spoke in these terms:

> *I don't know anyone's individual circumstances so can't judge but I just feel like if there were people above them, either people who are in fear of violence or their child or something, I just feel like they have more and greater need than somebody who might have come out of jail or something.*

> *If somebody's done a crime and served their sentence, then they shouldn't be punished by making them more disadvantaged when they come into the housing. However, there are just higher needs than maybe that. So, if you can make it a hierarchical stay on who gets what, they would come down to the bottom.*

Participants selecting Young people in employment / apprenticeships spoke in these terms:

> *It's really difficult because we'd like them all to be at the top, but I think there are people that should be getting it before them. They could still be staying at home with their parents.*

> *They are in employment and they are earning the money that they can afford. They are the young people so they have a life to live. So, they're going to earn. They're going to work longer.*

3 Proposal 1: Allow households moved from Band C to Band D to retain the time spent waiting in Bands C / D if they move up to Band C again

3.1 Proposal

The first proposal considered was:

To allow households moved from Band C to Band D to retain the time spent waiting in Bands C / D if they move up to Band C again [currently on moving back up to Band C, their registration date is the date on which they are re-accepted into Band C].

Before the start of discussion, as well as explaining the proposal, context was also provided on the Council's change in policy following the Localism Act, where a large number of households were moved down from Band C to Band D. These households retained the time spent waiting in Band C when moving down a band, and would therefore be affected by the proposal if they moved back up to Band C.

3.2 Summary of opinion

Seven of the participants were in favour of this proposal whilst two were opposed and one undecided.

The reason most cited for favouring the proposal was fairness. Two participants in particular made the point that the change in policy mentioned above was a Council decision rather than any change in individual households' actions or circumstances – one stating that the Council had 'moved the goalposts'. These participants therefore considered that it would be fair for affected households not to lose accrued time as a result.

An opposing view was expressed by one participant who considered that the proposal might encourage households to make themselves homeless in order to move into Band C. Another participant accepted this as a possibility but still favoured the proposal:

> *I think even if there are the odd people that abuse the system, I think on the whole I would be in favour of that, because you keep the years. I mean, there's people abusing every system.*

Another participant believed the proposal would be unfair to those already in Band C.

4 Proposal 2: Giving priority to households who need a transfer to bid for newly-built accommodation that becomes available on their current estate

4.1 Proposal

The second proposal considered was:

Giving priority to households who need a transfer to bid for newly-built accommodation that becomes available on their current estate.

Before the start of discussion, it was explained that this proposal relates to newly-built infill accommodation; and that the proposal could mean greater buy-in from residents on the estate and thereby increase the chance of the development taking place. Example cases where households might need a transfer were given – where a growing family needs an extra bedroom or where older residents can no longer manage the stairs in their property.

4.2 Summary of opinion

Seven participants were in favour of the proposal whilst three were opposed.

Support for the proposal was mainly based on the perceived benefits in terms of community cohesion. (By contrast, no participant commented on the impact of the proposal on resident ballot outcomes). One participant described the proposal as 'a fabulous idea', going on to elaborate:

> *If you've been on an estate for years, it's your community. It's your home. Your doctor's there, your school's there, your pub's there… Why should you move out somewhere else, a distant far-away borough, when you live there and your kids go to school there. Hospital's there, doctor's there. It makes sense to me that you should be moved to a larger or smaller flat within that estate.*

Another participant agreed for similar reasons, referring to the need to avoid disruption to children's schooling and for older people not to lose touch with friends. A further participant referred to the need for older people to keep their existing GP.

Conversely, one participant, whilst in favour of infill housing, opposed the proposal because giving existing households the opportunity to upsize to properties with more bedrooms on the same estate would restrict opportunities for other households not living on the estate. On a similar theme, another participant stated that overcrowding should not necessarily make households a priority and that households should consider their circumstances before getting to the point of overcrowding. (This participant also stated that keeping communities together would in fact be a negative outcome in cases where gangs live in close proximity on the estate).

However, another participant argued that the reverse might also be the case under this proposal, with some residents wishing to downsize and thereby freeing up larger properties.

5 Proposal 3: Give priority to accepted homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation on an estate that is being regenerated, for an allocation of social housing that becomes available on the same estate

5.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

Giving priority to accepted homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation on an estate that is being regenerated, for an allocation of social housing that becomes available on the same estate.

Before the start of discussion, the proposal was explained, with work in South Kilburn cited as an example of the kind of regeneration work covered by this proposal. It was explained that in many cases such homeless households would already have been living on the estate for years and be eligible to vote in the regeneration ballot. Again, it was pointed out that the proposal might mean greater resident buy-in to the proposals. It was also pointed out that regeneration gives the opportunity to make better use of the existing space and hence create more homes.

5.2 Summary of opinion

Eight participants were in favour of the proposal, one was opposed, and one was unsure.

Some participants favoured the proposal because they considered it would increase the amount of housing, although again without explicitly linking this to any impact of the proposal on ballot outcomes. One also stated that it would relieve the pressure on supply of temporary accommodation.

The other main category of support for the proposal centred on the benefits for those in temporary accommodation. Two participants believed that the prospect of permanent accommodation would bring stability and structure for tenants of temporary accommodation. Another participant believed the proposal would be fair because tenants of temporary accommodation should get something back having had their home demolished.

The participant opposing this proposal stated that it would be unfair to households who were in temporary accommodation but not lucky enough to be living on an estate where regeneration activity was to take place.

6 Proposal 4: Introduce a new nominations agreement with Registered Providers

6.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

To introduce a new nominations agreement with Registered Providers (also known as the reasonable rent scheme).

In summary, the Council leases temporary accommodation from private landlords to help meet its homelessness duty. However, the supply of such accommodation is dwindling, as private landlords are increasingly unwilling to renew leases given the rent caps involved. The proposal would enable the Council to lease properties from private landlords as permanent homes, enabling the landlord to obtain a higher rental income. (Such properties would be managed by RPs, as is the case currently for most of the temporary accommodation referred to above).

This context, and the possible benefits of the scheme, was explained to participants.

6.2 Summary of opinion

Six participants favoured the proposal, two were opposed, and two were unsure.

Of those giving specific feedback, two participants favoured the proposal as it offered a better deal for private landlords, in terms of higher rental income and a longer lease. One stated that he could see the benefits to landlords of having their property managed by a housing association for a long period:

> *I've been gone away for five years and forget about it. I've got X amount coming in and the maintenance, which comes to, like, a lot of money every year. The water, the heating, the gas, everything. That's all taken care of.*

A further participant opposed the proposal because they saw it as 'a short-term solution, not a permanent solution'; on the basis that the landlord can still decide not to renew the lease. This lack of certainty was also cited as a disadvantage for the housing association and the Council.

One participant was sceptical of the benefits to private landlords of leasing their property to the Council, having heard of an instance locally 'quite a few years ago' where Brent Council had failed to support one of their landlords whose tenants had stopped paying their rent and the process of eviction lasted two years.

7 Proposal 5: Revising the quota system

7.1 Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

To revise the quota system.

It was explained that currently quotas are in place whereby different services have direct access to a capped number of homes for their clients. These services are: Brent Social Services (who have one quota for children leaving care and another quota for other child welfare-related cases); the Probation Service; Adult Social Care; the voluntary sector; and young people in employment or apprenticeships. Under the new proposal, the caps would be removed and nominations considered on a case-by-case basis.

Before discussion started, information was provided on how the new system would work, with a panel assessing cases on the basis referred to above. By way of context, it was explained that the current system, by offering the possibility of a 'golden ticket' to social housing, encourages individuals to stay in their supported housing rather than moving on into the private sector. This clogs up the system and exacerbates the shortage of supported accommodation in Brent.

7.2 Summary of opinion

Nine participants were in favour of the proposal whilst one was opposed.

Of those giving specific feedback, two participants liked the idea of a panel considering nominations on a case by case basis. (One of these participants felt that cases should be reviewed annually to check that there is still a need for social housing).

One participant opposed the proposal. Referring to the 'golden ticket' argument above, they felt that the chance of getting a home under the current quota system was so remote that it was unlikely to function as an incentive to remain in supported housing.

8   Proposal 6: Prioritise unaffordability

8.1   Proposal

The next proposal considered was:

That residents who have no reason to be on the Housing Register other than low income or being dependent on benefits are now allowed to bid for social housing in Brent.

Before discussion began, context was provided on the high rents residents on low income / dependent on benefits have to pay in the private sector; and on the fact that the proposal would mean an additional 20,000 households could be added to an already crowded Housing Register as a result of the proposal.

8.2   Summary of opinion

Two participants were in favour of the proposal whilst eight were opposed.

As indicated above, this proposal attracted the most negative reaction of all the proposals under consideration. Of those giving specific feedback, four stated they believed that they believed it would be ill-advised to add further households to the Housing Register, for example:

> *I just feel that there are so many people waiting to go on, you know, for a council house or social housing. To add another band of residents just seems a bit crazy.*

> *I think figures are already so high as it is… there are people that need it more, I think.*

Linked to this view, another participant felt the proposal was too wide, and that the Council should focus on giving essential workers access to the Housing Register instead (referring to the NHS and the armed forces).

Another participant opposed the proposal because:

> *I felt that it could possibly encourage those on low incomes and benefits not to want to improve their circumstances.*

Conversely, another participant favoured the proposal on the basis that it would provide encouragement to low-income households to work rather than be unemployed and reliant on benefits.

Appendix: Statement of Terms

Compliance with International Standards

BMG complies with the International Standard for Quality Management Systems requirements (ISO 9001:2015) and the International Standard for Market, opinion and social research service requirements (ISO 20252:2012) and The International Standard for Information Security Management (ISO 27001:2013).

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The interpretation of the results as reported in this document pertain to the research problem and are supported by the empirical findings of this research project and, where applicable, by other data. These interpretations and recommendations are based on empirical findings and are distinguishable from personal views and opinions.

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