



BERNIA

**Community
Investment Strategy**
Impact and Outcomes
2024



“Fruity Wednesday” as part of healthy lifestyle activities at a school in Sunderland



Jenny Allinson
Director of Corporate Governance

The year in focus

Our Community Investment Strategy (CIS) activities for the past year have been delivered against a backdrop of ongoing cost of living challenges.

In this period of rising costs and wider demands upon our resources, we are proud to have continued to find ways to support our communities and embed them in our daily activities. In an environment of rising private sector rents and low availability, we are building new affordable homes where they are most needed and have accelerated our investment in homes to increase their fuel efficiency. As we demonstrate in this report, the commitment and enthusiasm of our teams has ensured that residents also receive services beyond the provision of quality affordable homes. And we have developed our tenant engagement programme to help us get a better understanding of their needs and views.

This work is more important than ever as social housing tenants and the communities in which they live are disproportionately affected by the current economic climate.

A higher than average number have low incomes and work in sectors where job stability and wage growth is less reliable. These are the communities most affected by the costs of accessing work and services, with travel to work a particular challenge this year.

NHS services are stretched, with more people waiting for treatment and care. This too has a greater impact for our residents. A higher percentage of people with health issues live in social housing and the surrounding communities.

The need for our services in helping people to lift themselves out of poverty, access opportunities and live healthy lives has never been more apparent.

We look forward to the coming year with the opportunity to help more people. The introduction of the new North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NECA) will shape education, housing, regeneration, transport and culture across our region. It has already increased partnership working amongst housing associations and agencies. We have been at the heart of many of these partnerships and we see this as an essential part of our strategy for Housing People, Helping People.



What We've Tried to Address

Our CIS sets out our determination to address the related issues of economic and social inclusion. This year has seen a continuation of our theme in supporting people to live well in their homes and communities, whilst able to access opportunities.

Many of these activities are now long established and have become ingrained in how colleagues deliver services. We have developed a culture of seeking to help customers at every turn. Now that we're taking steps to know our customers even better, we hope this will develop even further.

The success of our profit for purpose company Kingston enables us to do many of these things, either by directly funding programmes like The Bernicia Foundation or freeing up funds to deliver these services.



Partnerships and Making our Tenants Voice Heard

Our outward looking approach means we work collaboratively with a range of partners and agencies. As an anchor institution with a voice at several tables we are able to add our experience and viewpoint to a wide range of debates which affect our communities – from business, to healthcare, skills provision and now, with North East Combined Authority, housing and transport. Alongside other local social landlords, we have recently formed the North East Housing Partnership to provide a collective approach to these issues, making sure the views and needs of social housing tenants are heard and considered.

We've joined forces with Housing Associations across the region to work together to boost employability in our communities. Together we've been successful in winning funding to deliver skills training and employment support in communities where it is most needed.

Economic Inclusion

Our primary economic inclusion purpose is to address poverty by helping people into work through aspiration, skills and jobs.

Aspiration

This year, our established schools programme – delivering mentor sessions, interview workshops, jobs fairs and as enterprise advisors – connected more closely with our other employability activities. The young people we interacted with in schools were able to access additional follow-on services. We ran a course for disengaged school leavers, focused on the construction industry. We also offered internships, where trainees gained experience in various aspects of our business.

Once again, we offered an expanded apprenticeship programme with course and internship attendees gaining interviews. One of the interns was successful in gaining an apprenticeship. Other apprentices have talked about how they became aware of opportunities in Bernicia because of our school activities. Our outward looking approach and joined-up delivery is turning aspiration into jobs.

NEET Focus

The rise of young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET) continues to be a concern. We engaged specialist youth work organisations to deliver a range of training, often linked to guaranteed job interviews with local companies. Throughout the year we have been part of a multi-agency clinic supporting care leavers. We have been able to access opportunities for several of these young people and are now delivering the first stage of an employability programme which will prepare them for the world of work. We've also signed the Care Leavers Covenant, cementing our commitment to helping them access services and live independently.



Skills

Over the years, our Learning Hives have provided excellent opportunities for people to engage in learning and access the workplace. Now, with our Employability Team in place, we are able to link those learners to other programmes that we deliver and the job interviews they offer. A recent example is a link with an employability course we provided via an external organisation with guaranteed interviews in logistics and call centre businesses.

We have funded several skills projects across the region, recognising that skills for work are not limited to academic or vocational qualifications.

An outreach organisation in Blyth is working with people further from the job market. It addresses barriers which prevent them from accessing training or work. Several other projects incorporate work on confidence, communication and resilience.

Not all the projects achieve the full range of outcomes we'd hoped and we are using this learning to better direct our projects. North Northumberland is proving to be a challenging market and we continue to work hard to find ways in which people in rural locations can access work opportunities and rural businesses can access skilled employees.

Meanwhile, we are building our ability to connect our relationships and opportunities. Our tie up with Ashington Football Club means we have been able to link young people to our project being delivered by the Newcastle United Foundation in the heart of Ashington. A tenant at our Ashkirk homeless project attended a skills programme we ran in conjunction with Sunderland Football Club's Foundation of Light.

Using our networks to collaborate is benefitting our communities.



Jobs

Once again, we have expanded the number of apprentices we recruit into our business. As well as providing a first step on the ladder for the apprentices, it is proving a useful way to recruit loyal workers at a time when recruitment is challenging.

It is a significant investment for us. The number of apprentices we recruit is, to an extent, constrained by the capacity of the business, especially in having mentors available for support.

A good apprentice will only thrive with a good mentor and we are introducing a mentoring programme to make sure our investment and our apprentices have the best chance of success. Another key feature is the wraparound pastoral support we provide and the past two years has demonstrated the importance of this as we still see the effects of Covid disruption on schooling and skills. The benefits though are evident.

Our apprentice retention rate is significantly higher than the national average. Furthermore, we have consistently seen our apprentices progress into jobs in the business and this year that progression has expanded faster than normal due to some very high calibre trainees joining the scheme.



During the year we have once again funded projects to help people overcome barriers in accessing work. As well as our focus on NEET's these include projects for long term unemployed, veterans (which supports our Armed Forces Covenant), care leavers (which supports our Care Leavers Covenant) and those with addictions.

We make available properties on estates for our Learning Hives to provide much needed pre-employment skills and support which leads people into jobs. Funding for Berwick Community Trust provides similar access to work help for their centre users, alongside advice and foodbank services.



Lewis is officially the Durham City Freemen Plumbing and Gas Apprentice of the Year. Pictured here with his mentor, Jeff.

Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Bernicia funded YMCA Newcastle to deliver a supported employability programme to NEET young people with barriers to entering the job market. "B" was referred to YMCA Newcastle by a council's Children & Families Directorate, being in the care of a relative. Aged 17, she has severe PTSD, anxiety and depression and other major mental health conditions. She did not sit GCSE exams, having not attended school since year nine. "B" had been reluctant to engage with support services due to her severe anxiety but was referred for careers advice and guidance.

She did not attend an initial meeting, citing ill health so it was agreed a home visit might be more suitable. This proved more successful and YMCA were able to discuss the supported Bernicia Employability programme that YMCA could offer. She felt her lack of qualifications were a significant barrier and that she has massively missed out on socialising with people of her own age. She was reluctant to travel and visit new places independently due to her anxiety.

"B" was hoping to study Health & Social Care but the college course required qualifications. YMCA visited her regularly, helping build her CV through online awards and courses such as Mental Health Awareness, Autism Awareness and GDPR, all completed in her own time at home without pressure. The sessions also discussed socialising opportunities at various youth groups and she finally agreed to attend with her cousin of the same age. As her confidence grew, she agreed to attend a specialist Maths and English functional skills training provider in a location which required one bus journey to an area she was familiar with. YMCA accompanied her on an initial visit as she did not have the confidence to attend the meeting or travel alone. They also helped her prepare for an upcoming induction day. They took her to the induction and afterwards she made the step of travelling home on the bus herself. She is now regularly attending the course on her own and with the skills she has acquired is looking forward to a career in health and social care in the near future.



Last year's successful pilot project with Akzo Nobel helped people access work with the company that would not ordinarily have been employed and they have made promotional videos telling how much of a difference this has made to their lives. It is being circulated as an example of good practice in the local business community. We have now delivered a second course, where 10 people attended training and work experience, with 4 progressing into roles with the company. We'd like to replicate this with more companies in the year ahead.

We see how this approach to removing barriers and linking projects has a positive effect on aspiration, with many people progressing into work or further training. There is also a ripple effect on friends and family. One person who had decided to return to the workplace after several years told us:

"I know first hand the need to have a purpose in life and achieve your goals. Working not only is good for financial stability, it's good for mental stability. I have seen first hand the impact Bernicia employment support has when my partner was supported into employment. The difference it has made is beyond words and I hope to help others achieve this."



Poverty

Our goal in delivering employability opportunities is to address the key cause of poverty – low income.

There are times too when we need to directly respond to the immediate needs of people living in poverty. So we support projects which address this. We have provided support to several foodbanks and subsidise community projects which offer low cost food or spaces to stay warm. Our hardship fund provides emergency aid at the time it is most needed.

Social Inclusion

Living Well in the Community

Our approach to social inclusion has the related aims of helping people to live well in their communities whilst also tackling isolation. It complements and blends with our economic inclusion aims and our Environmental Policy.

Creating a pleasant environment is proven to encourage people to participate in their community and to improve their wellbeing. Arranging social activities for those who might not otherwise be able to access them, also tackles economic isolation and social isolation. Improving the affordable warmth of our homes through environmental works addresses both economic and social wellbeing issues.

Social inclusion activities are taking place right across our organisation, all year round. They are embedded in our services. We see a connectivity with actions that we take in one area of our business with consequential improvements in another, demonstrating how community investment is engrained in what we do.

An example is the approach of our Estates team. Many tenants, when they leave our properties, leave behind unwanted belongings. We recycle these, delivering furniture, household items, clothing and much more to local charities. Sometimes new tenants can make use of these too. It's an example of social inclusion meets economic inclusion, meets environmental aims.

We work closely with our contractors too. Several have been involved in sprucing up properties as part of their social value commitment to us. As the Procurement Act places increasing focus on the social value that can be created from contracts, we are developing ways in which we can work closer with our contractors to achieve social value outcomes for our communities.



Our combined housing and environmental initiative in Sunderland saw us working with school children to develop a forest club, linked to wellbeing. Youngsters are helping plant their own secret garden, taking learning outdoors into a classroom of fruit trees, wildflowers and adventure.

Over the next few months a fire pit, outdoor library, Viking longboat, bug houses, reading tree and zip wire historical time line will transform the area into a magical place for children to learn. It is funded in partnership with our renewable energy contractor 0800 Repair and is an example of how we use social value commitments in procurement to benefit our communities.



The Bernicia Foundation, our charitable subsidiary, has supported a number of projects delivered by the voluntary sector, to enable access to services and opportunities. It has supported people living with barriers to join in with social activities and access opportunities, as well as tackling economic inclusion issues. Our separate Bernicia Foundation report has more details. It is complemented by our Community Investment grant which supports localised activities such as activities for children and advice services for residents. It also supports many smaller scale events like community outings or Christmas dinners for lonely people, tackling social isolation too.

“I was so thankful for the invite. It stopped me feeling lonely on Christmas Day and made me feel part of something...I thoroughly enjoyed sharing the day with everyone”

We recognise the benefits of these community spaces and this year we've supported Ashington Community Woodland Parkrun to encourage healthy lifestyles and use of the outdoor space. The impact of good community spaces cuts right across the generations. We work closely with our residents on these issues and so when we heard about a plan to create more woodland, this time in Berwick, we stepped in to help.

93-year-old artist and former teacher Sue Handol's dream to plant trees for future generations to enjoy is now a reality. Sue completed plans for

a green area outside her Berwick home, to be planted with crab apple, cherry, pink and white flowering hawthorn, hazel, silver birch and rowan trees. She said "The trees I've picked are all flowering trees, except for the silver birch, and were deliberately picked as they won't need pruning.

Bernicia stepped in to buy and plant the trees. The ten saplings should be in flower in early spring – and are the first of 3,000 trees we aim to plant on estates we manage over the next three years.

Frances Povey, Northumberland County Council area countryside officer, said:

“Great community engagement is very important and allows the residents to come forward with ideas for improving their environment.”

Access to good quality spaces is important. So too is access to services when they're needed. We've seen the benefit of emergency first aid in the community and have supported the siting of several defibrillators on properties across the region. The most recent is at our Hatchmeadows location in the heart of Ashington



Living well in the community means living well in your own home. We continue to provide a range of aids and adaptations to enable people to live independently and are monitoring developments in these areas as technology progresses. Our telecare facility provides reassurance to tenants and their families as an emergency point of access or first alert service for a range of safety events.

Living well in your own home depends upon a range of factors, not least having a place to call home and our Ashkirk project continues to support people at risk of homelessness with the wide range of help they need to access and sustain a tenancy. We've also started to make links with our employability programmes to help residents engage in work related training, while our Foundation has funded a charity which has provided them with basic needs equipment such as baby clothes and accessories.



Emma's Story

"Really, I had nothing when I went to Ashkirk. Ashkirk was like my safety blanket," said Emma.

"When I was there I knew I was safe. I was always on somebody's radar – somebody was always going to be looking out for me. "It wasn't even about the big stuff for me, it was the little stuff where we could have a coffee together and chat about nowt. It gave me that degree of normality back. It was gated and I knew it would be safe for my kids. I looked at it as somewhere to live and somewhere to start again."

"It was priceless, absolutely priceless because I couldn't do it myself. It was more than just getting a house for me because I genuinely needed the support.

"I probably wouldn't have been here without them. When I was ill, I just felt so alone at times.

"It didn't happen overnight because I was so ill. But they never gave up. There were times I thought they would be sick of me, 'something's happened again', but they never gave up and were always patient."

"I've got a family life now," said Emma.

"When I moved in here it was an accomplishment to get my family home again, something that I never thought I'd have again when I was at the lowest points in my life."



In a similar vein, our Intensive Housing Management team support those tenants who are at risk of losing their tenancy.

They help with issues such as anti-social behaviour, addiction, mental health, finance or simply the challenge of coming to terms with managing a home for the first time. As a result of their intervention we have been able to sustain 78% of the tenancies they work with and in the process have opened access to £472,000 of additional income for those in need. We work closely with a range of agencies and support organisations and our own safeguarding team works to protect the people we come into contact with.

Living well extends beyond our tenants and residents. We work hard to make sure our colleagues feel supported too.

We have established our Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) colleagues group which also focuses on wellbeing. During the year we've run a range of activities and advice campaigns covering women's and men's health, healthy eating, health checkups and flu jabs. Several colleagues have shared their wellbeing stories whilst we've also celebrated events and milestones, invested in training, and continued our rewards programme to help colleagues access discounts while shopping. This year too we created a reflection area in the grounds of our Head Office for anyone who wants to use this quiet space.

Tackling Isolation

It is clear that our living well activities also tackle isolation. Our grants for day trips or floral displays make a difference.

An invite to a Christmas lunch is very important to someone who is lonely. We continue to make regular calls to our sheltered scheme tenants and often this is the only person they speak to that day.

We've mentioned how we provide properties or fund projects for community organisations to encourage people to come together. Our community centres too are fantastic meeting facilities for clubs and support groups. Access to good quality indoor spaces is as important as outdoor spaces.

Our Pelaw View centre aims to be a focal point for local community cohesion. Mother and baby groups, Halloween events, and support programmes all encourage people to come along and join in. We take advantage of this community resource to provide employability services for local people.





Conclusion

**There is a clear theme that emerges from our report.
Community investment is embedded in everything we do.**

Right across our business, our teams instinctively deliver support for our tenants and communities. Every day while we're providing homes for people, we're delivering it in a way that helps them. We're using the facilities, resources and networks that we have to tackle economic and social inclusion issues. By leveraging these resources and networks, we're delivering joined-up services and working towards an increasingly effective way of Housing People, Helping People.

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