

Resident Scrutiny Panel

Spot Check Review 12

**TO REVIEW HOW WELL BVT MANAGED AND
RESPONDED TO THE COVID PANDEMIC OF
2020**

SEPTEMBER 2020

MEMBERS:

Member	Role
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Paul Chilton	Chair
Emma Dempsey	
John Dolan	
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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** During the Spring/Summer lockdown of 2020, Scrutiny Panel completed the report of its review of BVT's Customer Services. It felt important to take stock before choosing the next full review.
- 1.2** In light of the changed circumstances of 2020, members decided to carry out a spot check review looking at how BVT has managed its response to the Covid crisis, finding out what worked well, and what the organisation has learnt from this experience for future crisis events.

2. WHAT DID SCRUTINY PANEL WANT TO KNOW?

2.1 The main range of things members wanted to know were:

2.1.1 How well prepared was BVT for such a situation, before the Covid crisis?

2.1.2 What processes and steps did BVT take at the start of, and during, the crisis?

2.1.3 What changes will BVT make, moving forward through and beyond the Covid crisis?

2.2 The National Housing Federation (NHF) was also collecting evidence across the housing sector about the national response to Covid. Scrutiny Panel decided to adopt the same four key areas of concern that were used in the NHF investigation:

- a. Keeping residents safe**
- b. Protecting residents' incomes**
- c. Keeping vital services running**
- d. Supporting communities and recovery**

2.3 Scrutiny Panel also bore in mind the range of people affected by BVT's response:

- a. Tenants**
- b. Homeowners**
- c. Commercial tenants**
- d. Community facilities/halls**
- e. Involved residents**
- f. Wider communities both inside and outside BVT**
- g. BVT staff**

3. WHAT DID SCRUTINY PANEL DO?

- 3.1** All Panel members were asked to provide questions for BVT under the above four main headings. These were collated and sent to Pete Richmond, CEO. Detailed responses were supplied covering a wide range of detailed questions.
- 3.2** In addition, Pete Richmond attended Scrutiny Panel's January 2021 online meeting and each Panel member asked him a question on a topic that was of particular interest to them, relating to the Covid response. He gave Panel members an open and honest overview of some of the strategic thinking behind BVT's actions.

4. WHAT DID SCRUTINY PANEL FIND OUT?

4.1 Keeping Residents and Staff Safe:

- 4.1.1 At the beginning of the pandemic, BVT set up a Response Team specifically to deal with the crisis on a day-to-day basis. The team included senior managers and key staff. The team made strategic decisions and agreed how to communicate these to residents and staff.
- a. They determined early on in the pandemic that older residents living alone were most at risk and, using CRM data, all residents, both tenants and homeowners, over 70 were contacted by phone. BVT offered a befriending service; this was staffed by BVT colleagues across the organisation. It was widely promoted on all BVT platforms including newsletters, website, community networks and social media.
 - b. Access to food was a major concern at the beginning of the crisis and BVT worked closely with local foodbanks and community groups to get food out to those most in need.
 - c. BVT provided a welfare service, offering debt and benefits advice, and signposting to food and other wellbeing services. This was also available to many outside BVT. Support has continued during the subsequent lockdowns and is now offered through partner agencies like Age UK's Silver Line service. A new BVT 'Well Winter' campaign offered support to working adults hit hard financially by the pandemic and has provided food and fuel vouchers to struggling families and individuals. This support has been offered to all BVT communities including Bournville, Nechells and Telford.
- 4.1.2 With frontline services, BVT's first priority was to ensure that homes were safe, with particular regard to asbestos, legionella, gas and electricity checks. If residents were nervous about letting operatives in for the annual gas check, some flexibility was allowed and they were advised to install Carbon Monoxide detectors. Emergency repairs continued to be carried out to keep people safe, but only if residents were willing to allow entry to their houses. BVT ensured that PPE was made available and that social distancing was practiced. Other routine repairs were not undertaken until the summer, when government restrictions were eased.
- 4.1.3 The Customer Services call centre operated at all times and frequent updates were issued to customers through social media and local community networks. Booklets with detailed information about where to go for help were sent to all customers.
- 4.1.4 BVT's Response Team decided which services and which staff could not realistically work from home and whether those staff could be redeployed. Boiler replacement and Bournville Village Landscapes (BVL) work was initially curtailed; Selly Manor staff, and some Bournville Propertycare Services (BPS) and BVL staff were furloughed. Staff who lived with someone who was shielding and could not work from home were furloughed to keep them and their families safe. Staff who could work from home did, and many continue to do so. Full PPE was available for staff who were still working on the frontline, particularly those in BVT's Selly Wood House Nursing Home. Community Halls and facilities (e.g. Rowheath where there are

changing rooms, toilets and cafe etc.) were closed as part of the safety measures and those managing the Community Halls were supported.

- 4.1.5 To ensure continued safety of staff and residents, BVT managers were briefed first, and staff received daily dedicated communications. For residents, the BVT website became an important source for information with lots of advice on where to go for help. A letter with useful and important information was posted to all residents who were not online, and social media platforms were updated frequently.

4.2 Protecting Income:

- 4.2.1 To support commercial tenants who were losing income, BVT's commercial team offered advice and information, particularly on how to access the government furlough and grants schemes.
- 4.2.2 There is a frontline financial inclusion team at BVT offering advice on debt and income issues. This was promoted in a number of ways to ensure the message reached as far as possible, including non-BVT residents. Social media as well as the BVT website and newsletters helped to promote this service.
- 4.2.3 Support was given to organisations running community facilities. BVT's Community Development Team gave support by sharing best practice around maintaining Covid measures and the updated guidance available.
- 4.2.4 The government's furlough scheme provided 80% of staff's income; BVT topped this up to 100%.

4.3 Keeping Services Running:

- 4.3.1 Initially, BVT looked at services that could be maintained by staff working remotely and the IT Team managed to connect most staff so they could operate at home within a week.
- 4.3.2 Following government guidelines, those services which had to be delivered face-to-face were carefully reviewed. It was agreed that the routine repairs service be curtailed and only an emergency repairs service was continued.
- 4.3.3 Some services were furloughed and they included the Selly Manor Museum Team and some BVL and BPS staff. All boiler replacements were put on hold.
- 4.3.4 Staff redeployment was organised proactively. Firstly, BVT looked at transferable skills and discussed what was achievable, with training, to operate in other areas of the business. Staff were able to put themselves forward for roles such as the befriending service. Other staff were furloughed.
- 4.3.5 By July 2020, the repairs service was again being delivered fully, having been reinstated owing to the easing of restrictions. There was an outstanding backlog of repairs, and it was decided to manage this without the support of additional temporary workers to ensure the quality of the jobs remained at the current standard.

4.3.6 CST staff covered phones and enquiry emails at all times during the pandemic. This was one of the successes of remote working. It was noted that there were some issues with peaks in demand and some residents were kept waiting on the phone. BVT is looking into recruiting for some vacant positions and resolving any backlog caused by these peaks in demand.

4.3.7 Voids continued to be repaired but there were delays caused by difficulties in supply of materials. Virtual viewings were put in place but the number of voids dropped owing to the apprehension of many people around moving during the pandemic. It was confirmed that there was £150,000 loss in rent.

4.4 Supporting Communities and Recovery:

4.4.1 Support provided to and within the community may be considered from two perspectives:

- a. Directly from BVT, and
- b. Collaboratively with local groups and partners

Some of what follows is a recap of facts from other sections.

4.4.2 Directly:

- a. Financial help and advice was offered widely within the BVT community and to others in nearby areas. For the recovery phase, over £17,000 of grants have been offered to local groups offering immense support to the community.
- b. Practical support was given to local foodbanks using BVT van drivers to deliver food parcels and through the availability of Weoley Village Hall.
- c. Information sharing was provided through weekly Village Voices bulletins, including ideas for supporting local businesses. BVT was also involved in other information sharing opportunities via local networks and organisations. The BVT website was updated frequently with relevant information.
- d. To ensure the wellbeing of more vulnerable residents, a befriending scheme was set up along with wellbeing calls. In addition, information on wellbeing was included in Village Voices.
- e. To consolidate all of the above, a 'Well Winter' campaign was established by BVT, along with a dedicated section for this on the BVT website. This gave direct links to opportunities for various types of support.

4.4.3 Collaboratively:

- a. In the initial stages of the Covid crisis, things moved quite fast and local organisations stepped in, along with new local communication networks which were established quite quickly.
- b. BVT helped to coordinate a 'Bournville Call' to pool resources, information and effort from a wide range of organisations. This included the local Ward Councillors, local agencies and local community groups.
- c. BVT was also part of other network groups, such as the Northfield Stakeholders Group, bringing together local organisations and working together to support residents during the pandemic.

- d. In essence, BVT worked collaboratively (sometimes leading, sometimes participating) across all its communities, helping to communicate and coordinate local resources and programmes and making sure local people had the right access to the right help.
- e. A positive to take away from the above is that these systems and approaches are now set up and available to be used at any time in the future.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS / FOR CONSIDERATION, AND EXECUTIVE TEAM RESPONSE

5.1 BVT should consider adopting these recommendations as a result of its experience of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, as highlighted by this Review.

Recommendation 1

In light of the fact that the Covid issue will continue in some form for some time, BVT should update the business continuity plan and emergency response accordingly, to include:

- a. The use of community organisations and networks.
- b. A regular review process in anticipation of future emergencies every three months.

Executive Team Response: The business continuity plan was reviewed in 2020 and took account of the learning from Covid-19. Further reference will be made to the contribution that local community organisations are able to make in dealing with similar disasters that affect both the organization and the wider community. The frequency for reviewing and testing is annually and we feel this is the right frequency for testing the policy.

Recommendation 2

BVT should take the findings of this report and these recommendations and, within the next six months, produce an evaluation report reflecting on lessons learnt after the first year of Covid. This to be shared with residents and wider public.

Executive Team Response: When the review was carried out, we had hoped that we would be into the recovery period of the pandemic but there was then the third lockdown in January 2021. We will therefore postpone an evaluation of our approach until the end of 2021 as we hope that by then we will be back to operating without the pandemic being our overriding influence.

Recommendation 3

BVT should build on the community networks and communication systems that have been developed across BVT's local areas in response to the lockdowns.

Executive Team Response: The pandemic coincided with the launch of the Corporate Plan that sets out BVT's ambitions for renewing and developing our community building and championing people activities. The partnership work with local people and communities during the pandemic meant this was accelerated rapidly and will certainly build on the learning over the past 12 months. There are three key projects: Community Places, Community Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy that will set out our long-term approaches to this work.

Recommendation 4

BVT should ensure staff are trained and developed to be able to adapt in times of emergency.

Executive Team Response: BVT colleagues really stepped up to the challenge of the pandemic and demonstrated many of the new values we had identified as important to us. We have produced a new Organisational Development Strategy, which sets out our

approach to developing colleagues based on our values. This will include how they can work through various situations, including the crisis of the pandemic. We feel this is the right approach to build capacity generally within the workforce at BVT.

Recommendation 5

BVT should continue to adopt the agile-working model for staff, encouraging good life/work balance as well as serving the needs of the business and the community.

Executive Team Response: We are currently reviewing what we have learnt from the new ways of working over the past 12 months. We will use this learning to help us identify a new model for working post-pandemic.

Recommendation 6

BVT should continue to endorse staff using transferable skills, being flexible and adaptable, supporting areas of the business and the local community in times of emergency.

Executive Team Response: Our priorities around community building and championing people, together with the values based around colleague development, will ensure that we develop the skills and capacity to work in partnership with local stakeholders and the community. This is core to our future working.

Recommendation 7

BVT should consider continuance of the services offering advice and signposting for anyone in debt or experiencing job loss.

Executive Team Response: We have committed financial resources to ensure that we continue with the advice and support services provided during the pandemic. Again this forms part of our Corporate Plan aims around championing people and will be a long-term approach at BVT.

Recommendation 8

BVT should anticipate what the Government might do to mitigate economic scarring as a result of Covid. This should be integral to medium and long-term business planning.

Executive Team Response: Again, this will be a key element of our community building and championing people aims. We are currently developing community plans that will identify the range of issues faced by local communities. This will include employment, education and health indices. This will help BVT to target resources for direct delivery and for partnership working with other agencies where it is needed the most.