



Barnet UNISON

Response to Barnet Homes ASSIST Proposals

17/01/22

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Background

Barnet Homes Assist was originally a London Borough of Barnet Service which was TUPE'd into Barnet Homes along with all other Council run Housing Services in 2004 when the Barnet Homes Arm's Length Management Organisation [ALMO] was set up.

Assist remains part of Barnet Homes, which is a subsidiary of 'The Barnet Group' a Local Authority Trading Company [LATC] which was set up in 2012 and that is owned and funded by Barnet Council.

Barnet Homes Assist is a telecare service that supports around 4,700 individual clients, living in either their own homes (dispersed clients), in sheltered housing or in housing provided by Housing Associations (RSLs).

Assist operates a call-centre and provides the following services:

- 24/7 call-handling dealing with medical and other emergencies and requests for telecare repairs or replacements.
- 24/7 emergency mobile response service to some but not all clients.
- 24/7 key-holding services for all Barnet Homes' properties for the gas repairs team.
- Programming, installation, repairs, and maintenance of assistive technology.
- Fire alarm monitoring for the sheltered, alarm assisted blocks and hostels.

These services are a vital lifeline for the most vulnerable in our community.

Elderly service users rely heavily on the Assist contact centre.

Barnet Group and London Borough of Barnet have underfunded the Assist Service since the establishment of the Barnet Group.

We believe the Service has consequently suffered from poor leadership and chronic neglect, which has led to the inevitable predicament now facing the Service.

This detrimental approach has prevented the Service from being able to evolve or expand. Investment in New Technology has been nonexistent which means that Barnet Homes Assist has been unable to 'bid' for contracts that would have allowed the business to grow and secure a sustainable margin of profit.

London Borough of Barnet & ARGENTI

Barnet Council decided to privatise the most lucrative part of the Assist Service by awarding the Telecare Contract for Social Care Clients to ARGENTI in 2017.

'We were providing an excellent service to our Social Care clients and were very efficient in keeping up with the referrals we were receiving. We were very shocked when we heard the Service was being put out to tender.' (Assist worker)

Although successful in the bid process for these services ARGENTI did not have the basic infrastructure in place to deliver the service and is even now, completely reliant on other sub-contractors and Barnet Homes Assist to provide the service to vulnerable clients.

- ARGENTI holds the contract for LBB Funded Social Care clients

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- RED ALERT performs installs of Telecare equipment for Social Care clients
 - APELLO is one of the call centres for ARGENTI/RED ALERT LBB funded Social Care clients. In addition, ARGENTI also uses an AXA call centre.
 - Barnet Homes Assist-continues to deliver the Mobile Response for LBB funded Social Care clients.

Barnet Group Proposals on the future of Assist

Option 1

Outsourcing of 24-hour operator service but retention of the Assist brand and contract monitoring function, plus retention of the mobile response service

Option 2

Outsourcing (transfer) of the 24-hour operator service and retention of the mobile response service only

Option 3

Full Closure of Assist – transfer of the 24-hour operator service and the mobile response service

The Barnet Group and Barnet Council are under severe pressure in the current climate to 'cut costs' – but to do so by privatising an essential front-line service that is vital to so many vulnerable clients is foolhardy . It will further fragment the services and increase the risk of miscommunication with the possible outcome of failing to respond to critical calls by service users.

The Barnet Group and the Council are jeopardising the safety of vulnerable clients and the 'peace of mind' factor that clients of Assist currently enjoy would be shattered.

'How can they do this? It's not right – the Assist staff are wonderful; they care about us and it shows.' (Barnet Homes Sheltered Housing Tenant).

During the pandemic Barnet Group management referred to Assist as '**The 4th Emergency Service**' because, for many elderly vulnerable clients in our community, the Assist call centre was and continues to be their only accessible means of support and contact with the outside world.

Risks:

1. Avoidable deaths or serious harm
2. Fragmented service delivery

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3. Loss of reputation to the Barnet Group and Barnet Council
 4. Exacerbating vulnerable clients' anxieties during a pandemic
 5. Destroying 'trust' clients have in Assist staff
 6. Loss of local knowledge, personalised service
 7. Possible loss of staff before any handover is completed
 8. Industrial action

Recommendations

1. Barnet Council to fully fund Assist and retain full control of the services provided [this may necessitate the Assist Service being 'brought back in house']
2. ARGENTI contract to be cancelled and Social Care Clients to return to Assist
3. Invest in Assist to allow the service to 'bid' on other contracts
4. Expand and develop Assist which will allow the service to become self-funding and ultimately may deliver a profit for the Council/Barnet Group

Conclusion

The future for frontline Council services is not to privatise and fragment further the delivery of essential front-line services. The decision to do so will increase the risk of tragic events and shatter the trust between vulnerable clients, their families and the Council which provide the service.

Essential services to the Public must have a coordinated approach that ensures the Council maintains control of the services provided.

The only way forward is for Assist to receive the investment it needs to survive and thrive in an ever-expanding market, particularly in Barnet, and have a coordinated approach to essential services that must be provided by the Council. This will not only deliver a secure future for Barnet's vulnerable residents, but would enable the Assist service to grow and, ultimately, be self-funding and deliver a profit to the Council.