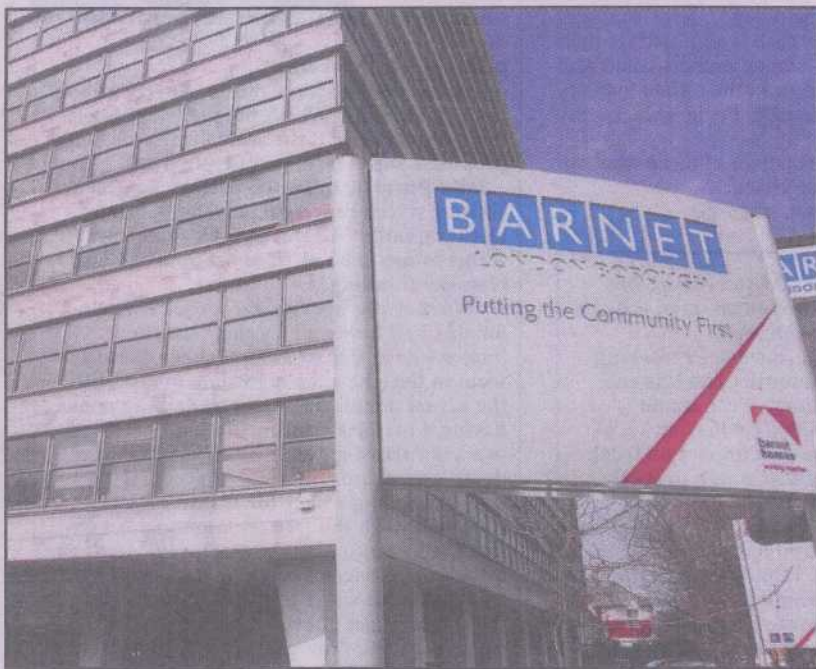


# easyCouncil's BUMPY RIDE

It has been dubbed 'easyCouncil' – Barnet Council's attempt to provide services as cheaply as possible. With jobs put at risk and mounting concerns voiced by political and union leaders, we look at what it could mean for you



By Nick Griffin

A FUNDAMENTAL change in the way Barnet Council will be run in years to come is facing mounting criticism from union officials and opposition leaders.

Last Wednesday night, council chiefs voted unanimously to drive through radical plans to completely revamp how services are delivered to residents over the next three years.

The plans – dubbed "easy-Council" – could see services farmed out to private companies, numbers of back-office staff cut, residents given more say in how money is spent and for the council to become a possible one-stop-shop for traditional council, health and higher education services.

Implementation of the plans, officially entitled the Future Shape Of The Council, will be watched closely by the government and other local authorities as a possible model for

local government. But on Tuesday, Barnet Labour group leader Alison Moore called in last week's decision in a bid to delay the plans and allow more time for greater scrutiny.

The plans are drawing increasingly intense criticism from union leaders who have expressed fears over what the move will mean for thousands of public sector workers across the borough.

But council leader Mike Freer said that dwindling grants from

central government and the expected public sector finance cuts following the next election meant the authority had to act now. He has outlined a "relentless drive" for efficiency, inspired by "no frills" airlines, to cut the number of back-office staff at the council.

As part of the plans, officials are to explore the possibility of fundamentally changing the set-up of entire departments, including proposals to cut duplication

Continued on page 2



**WEMBLEY WINDOWS**

'North London's Leading Window Company'

- uPVC & Aluminium windows, doors, conservatories and porches
- Family run business
- 30 years experience
- Internally beaded
- High security shootbolt locking systems
- Free quotation - No obligation
- 10 year insurance backed guarantee
- Repair & maintenance service

CALL FREE

**0800 833 574**

www.wembleywindows.co.uk



# Lack of detail in the plans causes concern among politicians, unions and residents

Unison leader: John Burgess



**COUNCIL** leader Mike Freer has become the driving force behind the Future Shape Of The Council and still believes the move is the only way to deal with expected cuts in public sector finance.

He said: "This is really about a relentless drive for efficiency and finding a better way of doing things. This might have been radical in normal times but, after the next general election, for whoever is in No 10 the money just isn't going to be there.

"We have quite a short time window on this. The state spends a fortune in Barnet so we are looking at whether the council, NHS Barnet and so on all need to have a separate HR department, for example. Should we not be sharing facilities?"

"The other aspect to this is about getting residents involved in decision-making, how money is spent and stop making residents fit in with our processes.

"We spend millions on disadvantaged people and it doesn't make a difference, so what we are saying is there has to be a better way of doing things."

**VICKI MORRIS** heads Barnet Community Campaign, which voices residents' concerns about Future Shape.

She said: "Our group was set up because we have concerns about what this will mean for the residents and how they will be given a say in it.

"There seems to be all this talk of working groups being set up, but where is the engagement with actual residents?"

"The idea of one Barnet, and sharing their back office is just one part of it – the other part is that those living in Barnet will just go to one place for a range of services.

"I think people will want to know exactly how it is going to work. I'm not sure that people will want one organisation knowing all their business. This scheme needs a lot more explaining.

"It started life as a project in mass outsourcing and over the summer it seemed to be repackaged as this 'easyCouncil' idea. Things such as fast-tracking people through the planning process if they are willing to pay more – people may find that quite offensive. The council should not be like a budget airline."

□ **Continued from front**

of services between organisations. One example could be that payroll departments of Barnet Council, NHS Barnet, Middlesex University and Barnet College are centralised. And under the "One Barnet" approach residents would have a single point of contact, theoretically cutting bureaucracy.

Senior officials from a range of public bodies are expected to begin discussions with Barnet Council within the next six months, with changes to some services being implemented as early as next year.

It is hoped residents will be given more say in how money is spent, including elderly residents having an input as to how cash is allocated for their care. Barnet Council's planning process could also see other ideas borrowed from the airline industry with residents controversially being able to pay extra to skip the queue.

Here we talk to representatives of those who will be directly affected by the changes.

□ See Mike Freer column, page 20

**LABOUR** group leader Alison Moore has questioned whether the controversial scheme has been properly thought out.

She said: "The Tories have been working on this project for 18 months and it is still largely theoretical. There's little sound evidence for the predicted savings and it's far from clear that the real impact on local people has been thought through properly.

"There are real risks to a project this size and serious questions need to be asked about its financial viability and long-term sustainability. What's clear is they

are still planning to privatise many crucial services as early as next year, while paying lip-service to looking at one public sector.

The budget airline model means they are still planning to charge residents twice for services they currently receive as taxpayers."

Liberal Democrat leader Jack Cohen said he felt the project was simply a smoke-screen for a cost-cutting exercise.

He added: "It's very short of detail: we have all these grandiose ideas but I'm not sure what they want to do."



**THE** controversial plans have drawn intense criticism from union leaders amid fears over how the move could affect thousands of public sector workers.

Representatives have raised concerns about both the speed at which the plans are likely to be implemented, the scale of what is being proposed and a lack of concrete detail.

John Burgess, branch secretary for Barnet Unison, which represents 2,000 council workers, said: "All this easyCouncil stuff seems to me to be all about soundbites and blue-sky thinking.

"What really worries me is the timetable for this and how quickly they want to implement it. For us as staff there doesn't seem to have been enough time to establish the actual detail of this. We're talking about having a massive transformation in services in a very short space of time, and that just doesn't stack up.

"This is a big worry for members, especially with the way the economy is now, and it's going to affect morale and with it the quality of services. Over the past six years we have made something like £70million in savings and lost about 25 per cent of our workforce. They are already working flat-out.

"If we go down the route of outsourcing and losing everything we run, I predict it's going to be a nightmare for staff and it won't be good for residents either.

"They're talking about the idea of one Barnet and there might be something in that. But if we are talking about having no duplication of departments across the college and university etc, by my reckoning we are talking about something that will affect 20,000 or 30,000 staff.

"I think these organisations are just now starting to wake up to this and get involved, but I'm not sure that everyone has truly grasped what this could mean."

Second home and travel expenses could be snatched