



BERNIA

**Community
Investment Strategy**
Impact and Outcomes
2024/25



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Director of Corporate Governance



Executive Summary

The social housing sector has a key role to play in meeting ambitious development targets and quality standards. The Government's target to build 1.5m new homes will make more affordable homes available to people who need them. The accelerated net-zero targets make our homes more efficient, fire safety rules help make them safer, and using our data effectively will support us to deliver a better service for our customers. We are making sure we have a good understanding of the people who live in our properties, and that they can live well in their homes, whilst having a greater say in how service delivery can meet their needs.

At the same time, we continue to operate in a tough economic climate. Costs continue to rise, and the full impact of emerging requirements such as Awaab's Law, Competency and Conduct Standards and Decent Homes Standards 2 remains to be fully understood. This means that Board Members have difficult choices to make about how and where housing providers invest.

It would be easy for us, in this context, to focus on what is often termed our core delivery – letting and maintaining homes. However, we have consistently seen our core activity as being wider, and this is now reflected in the revised consumer standards. Our track record in this area means that we are well placed to meet regulatory expectations.

The activities we deliver in fulfilling the aims of our Community Investment Strategy (CIS) help us engage with people in many productive ways that fit their needs. It helps us better understand their needs, the barriers they face and the services they can access.

This year CIS activities have once again supported economic and social inclusion. Economic inclusion actions address the underlying causes of poverty by helping people access work and by easing hardship where we can. Social inclusion outcomes have tackled isolation, helping people take part in their neighbourhood, and improving individual and community wellbeing.

We believe that a good home makes lots of other things possible. By delivering our wider community investment activities along with great homes, we achieve wider social, environmental and economic outcomes. Our community investment strategy plays a key role in helping us meet our increased regulatory obligations. More importantly, it supports our mission to help local people and their communities.

Looking forward to next year, we see a further period of change which indicates the need for us to continue this approach. Our new combined authority is starting to deliver its aim of a coordinated partnership approach to housing, skills, and poverty across the region. Our current activity means that we are well placed to support this along with partner agencies in local authorities, education services, the NHS, and the voluntary sector (VCSE). Partners are also experiencing financial stresses, and whilst devolution provides many opportunities for us to work together, working effectively in partnership will also be essential to achieve the best outcomes for the communities we all serve. Our community investment activities will help us understand and respond to the impact these changes will have on our tenants and their communities.

They are a fundamental part of Housing People, Helping People.

Bernicia in the Community

Bernicia is a housing association, managing over 14,000 homes and properties. Our mission, “Investing in homes, services and people to make a positive impact on the communities of the North East”, drives everything we do and how we do it. It informs the type of homes we build, where we build them and how we provide services for the people who live there.

We are referred to as an anchor institution because we are rooted in our communities and focused on their well-being. For us, delivering housing-related services to a wide range of people, many of whom are vulnerable or who sometimes need help to thrive, is about more than bricks and mortar.

That’s why we developed our Community Investment Strategy (CIS). It sets out how we’ll help people in our communities to thrive. At the same time, this helps us engage directly with our customers, better understand their needs and deliver better services.

The strategy identifies two significant issues disproportionately affecting social housing tenants: economic inclusion and social inclusion. So, we have focused on addressing these. The main driver affecting economic inclusion is poverty. The primary way in which we aim to help this is by supporting access to good work. To support social inclusion, we seek to help people live well in their homes and communities.

Our report sets out many of our CIS activities during the year. However, we can’t capture everything because supporting and helping people is the bedrock of everything we do, in every part of our business.

Every day, we’re Housing People, Helping People.



Economic Inclusion

Our approach to tackling poverty is to help people access good work. Many are at different stages of readiness. Some need help understanding what work options are available to them, and we support them to work towards those options.

Others need new skills, which might not necessarily be qualifications. Meanwhile, some need help accessing the job market, especially those who might not have worked for some time, or who have specific barriers that make finding work difficult.

Our Employability Team works across these three areas to help people towards employment. They work in schools and colleges, as well as with local businesses, VCSE and community hubs to address barriers to work. This year, they have partnered with other housing providers to deliver targeted programmes on behalf of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) aimed primarily at social housing tenants.

Aspiration

An important part of encouraging people into work is making it appear accessible, attainable and attractive. Many young people in our communities have not necessarily had role models to demonstrate the importance and benefits of good work. Others don't have a clear picture of the opportunities available to them, whatever their own circumstances.

We work as Enterprise Advisors in local schools to demonstrate the range of roles available in Bernicia and often bring along colleagues who can share their journey to employment. Over 1,500 young people have attended interview workshops, insight days, career fairs, and mentoring sessions. The team also offers bespoke employability support such as work experience, placements, internships and apprenticeships.



This has been an important route in attracting people to our apprenticeship programme. This year, we have continued our recent trend of recruiting a greater number of young people, especially in trade roles, where recruitment and retention are an industry challenge. We have a very high completion and retention rate, well above national averages. A major factor is the high level of pastoral support provided by Bernicia. Over 70 of our former apprentices remain employed in roles within Bernicia since the scheme commenced in 2012, making up a significant percentage of Bernicia's overall colleague numbers. Apprentices have proven to be a key part of our skills pipeline and we take the opportunity to be apprenticeship advocates, spreading this message in the business forums we attend.

Some people need a wider range of tailored interventions to get them ready for and maintain employment. Social housing tenants fall disproportionately into this group. They tend to be poorer, have fewer opportunities to develop skills, and are more likely to be economically inactive due to poor connectivity with employment areas. On a wellbeing level, we see many who experience health problems and loneliness. We have funded a number of programmes, often delivered by VCSE organisations who can engage via outreach services, helping many into work or training. We are especially pleased to see Hirst Centre, a community facility in the heart of Ashington, being used as an employability hub following a programme we supported there.



Skills

A's story.

"When I first started coming to the Hive, I didn't have a clue about computers. I couldn't even log onto my Universal Credit account, never mind apply for jobs. It felt like everything had moved on without me, and I was stuck, not knowing where to begin.

Catherine has been so patient with me, sitting with me every week and helping me step by step. Thanks to her support, I can now log into my Universal Credit account by myself, and for the first time in years, I've started applying for jobs again. It's given me a little bit of hope, and I even feel excited about the possibilities ahead.

I've also enrolled in an Introduction to Health and Social Care course - something I would never have had the confidence to do before. Coming to the Hive has made such a difference, and I finally feel like I'm moving forward.

I feel much more emotionally resilient now. For a long time, I thought I had nothing to offer because of the gap in my employment. I spent years looking after my elderly parents and my granddaughter, who is autistic, and I didn't think any of that counted as real experience. Catherine has helped me see that I do have skills -important ones. She's made me realise that what I've been doing all these years is valuable, and that has given me a new sense of confidence.

For the first time in a long while, I feel excited about what's ahead. Just knowing that someone believes in me has made such a difference. I feel happier, more hopeful, and less alone."



A consistent feature of our community approach over recent years has been supporting a local charity, Northern Learning Trust, to operate Learning Hive community hubs on two of our most populated estates – Newbiggin and Bedlington. Available as drop-in centres, the Hive seeks to gradually engage those furthest from the job market, helping them to gain skills and then apply for work. It's consistently proven its worth in engaging the community, and one which impressed Mayor Kim McGuinness as an example of good practice when she visited recently.

Other hubs such as Pelaw View in Durham have been used as bases for skills events by VCSE groups and we enable community ventures to operate from some of our premises on supportive terms. In turn, they provide community facilities, volunteering opportunities and spaces for local support groups to meet. We will continue to maximise our resources and profile to attract people from our communities and, where possible, help the community to deliver services itself.

“Having a regular job has given me the confidence, financial independence, and experience of working within a team again! I have renewed self-esteem and a real sense of purpose. Being part of this project has given me a real sense of pride and I have acquired new skills”

Oswin project – helping people with prior convictions into work.

Jobs

This year, we have worked with the HENNE partnership of 13 housing providers to deliver combined training and job placement programmes funded by NECA. The programmes have been so successful we have been asked to extend delivery throughout 2025/26. The ability to attract external funding and the delivery of these programmes was only made possible because of our CIS investment in an established employability programme that had existing skills and networks in place.

B's story.

“I heard about (Bernicia's) Green Start programme. I knew they had a good reputation and they had helped my partner secure a good permanent job. I needed something for me... my partner would come back from work with stories of what had happened, and I wanted this for me. I needed a purpose and a focus. I signed up to a one-week 'understanding retrofit' course. Bernicia put me at ease and I really enjoyed the week. It helped me get back into the swing of things. I got a qualification and met some really good people.”

On getting a Green Start 6-month placement: “I really started to enjoy it. It felt like the role fitted me. I got so much out of it; the social aspect, and I really enjoyed the responsibility that I was given. I owned my role and it was something just for me. If it wasn't for the project, I wouldn't have ever got my foot in the door in the company. Six months later, I've got a permanent full-time role and I can see progression in the future. Building up my skills and enjoying life.

The impact of getting into work has been so positive, not just the financial side, but I feel happier, which means my family feels happier.”



Fatima Whitbread and Elaine Hardington supporting Fatima's campaign for Care Leavers.

One reason for the success was that we were able to tailor our own employability programmes, operated with local VCSE's such as Silx, Walking with the Wounded and Newcastle United Foundation, to link to the HENNE projects, so that they complemented each other and offered progression routes for the learners.

Walking With the Wounded was a programme which successfully helped former armed forces personnel into work. Bernicia is a signatory to the Armed Forces Covenant and this was an important demonstration that we deliver on the commitments we make. Alongside this, we work with the Career Transition Partnership to establish a tailored employment pathway for service leavers who apply for roles with Bernicia.

We also made a commitment to care-experienced young people by signing the national Care Leaver Covenant. The covenant is a promise to provide support to care-experienced individuals aged 16-25, helping them live independently by offering additional support to those who rent from us and helping those who are seeking work.

We delivered on this commitment too. We have helped a number of care leavers into housing, work experience and apprenticeships. Our employability programme, based on pastoral support, provides a wraparound service at a time of great change in their lives and when many do not have the support networks around them to help. We've helped some through financial difficulties with food shopping and our hardship grant. Some are provided with counselling sessions to help tackle the trauma they have experienced. We are currently supporting nine care leavers with their additional needs whilst helping them progress into work and more independent living situations.

We have rolled out care leaver training to colleagues and are recognised as a trailblazer in this field, leading the HENNE partnership's approach and being asked to talk to other organisations. We expect to tailor some of our employability activities in 2025 to programmes which combine to maximise outcomes in this area.

Tackling Hardship

We recognise that helping people towards good work will not always alleviate hardship. At those times of extreme need, we continue to provide emergency support.



Hardship grants of almost £90,000 have helped 196 tenants pay for food, utilities and essential items.

We are able to provide furniture packs and decorating vouchers so people can live more comfortably. Our estates team have linked up with our house clearance contractor to recycle furniture left behind by outgoing tenants. We've been able to redistribute these via local charities, including CDFHS, Bethany House Day Care Centre, Stray Aid, RSPCA, Salvation Army, Barnardo's, British Red Cross and Durham Food Bank. Bernicia Foundation has funded several charities that tackle hardship.

We also signpost people to support agencies, and this year established a partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau. The partnership makes it easier for tenants to access good quality advice, especially regarding financial issues. Our link with Northumberland Community Bank has seen them deliver money management classes in schools, helping young people learn essential skills from an early age.

For those tenants who are struggling to sustain their tenancy, our Intensive Housing Management (IHM) team has an impressive track record of providing practical and meaningful support. IHM typically help secure over £400,000 of financial gains each year for our tenants by working with them to review their finances and entitlements. This can have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of those who are struggling to get by, not to mention helping to sustain their tenancy.



At Pelaw View community hub, we host the Bread and Butter Thing. This weekly service helps people access low-cost fresh, healthy food and store cupboard staples. It is sourced from partners such as Amazon and Morrisons. They donate food which is misshapen, has damaged packaging, or is reaching its best before date. The project ensures surplus food goes to the people who need it the most, whilst reducing food waste.

Social Inclusion

Our social inclusion aims have two related goals; we seek to tackle isolation, and we help people live well in their community, which includes living well in their own home.

Living well in the community

Since 1994, Ashkirk homeless shelter in Sunderland has welcomed nearly 600 families into the safety and security of our community of properties. Here our Care and Support Team provide life-changing support to help them get back on their feet and find a permanent home.

Families often arrive in crisis, many fleeing domestic violence that leaves parents and children with nowhere to go. Ashkirk offers a home where they are supported by our dedicated team and our partners, to give them the skills and confidence to find a permanent home and rebuild their lives.



A small but important part of our support to those families in need at Ashkirk is our Christmas present appeal. Colleagues and suppliers rally around to provide gifts for the young residents who otherwise might not receive anything at Christmas. Here's Santa arriving in his "traditional" fire engine to distribute the presents.



To tackle the shortage of quality accommodation in the region, our investment in new energy-efficient homes is meeting demand in key areas of need, with 65 new homes in South East Northumberland and 56 in Berwick amongst the more than 300 new developments this year. That's backed up by our ongoing programme to help tenants stay warm in a period of rising fuel costs. We're investing £9.5m in retrofit programmes to improve insulation and use more energy-efficient fuels in over 1300 properties. It's part of our commitment to support our tenants and achieve a 'SAP C' energy rating for at least 90% of our homes by 2025/26, five years earlier than the Government requirements.



Independence and safety are important factors in living well. Last year we fitted almost 6,000 aids and adaptations to help tenants move around safely in their homes, avoiding slips trips and falls. Our telecare service provides peace of mind for over 2,500 tenants and their families, knowing that if they have an accident or emergency, we're there for them to call upon. These are small touches which can help tenants stay safe and well in their own home for longer.

To support this, together our Building Safety and Bernicia Living teams visited all 26 Bernicia Living locations. They talked to our tenants about how they can keep safe at home and how we can help. This is backed up with a comprehensive package of safety measures that we're implementing at our Bernicia Living locations.

Physical safety is one aspect of wellbeing. For those in our supported accommodation, we're helping with mental wellbeing too. We make regular check-in calls to make sure everything is OK. This offers reassurance for the tenants and gives them the chance to interact with someone on a regular basis, which can be important in tackling loneliness and isolation.

For tenants who don't live independently, we arrange regular group events to boost mental and physical wellbeing. Group events for our wider community are funded by our Community Investment Grant and our charity, Bernicia Foundation (we have a separate complementary report which outlines the excellent work that is supported by the Foundation across the region.) We use our hubs and community centres to host mother and toddler groups, support group meetings, and art classes, as well as number of holiday and special occasion activities.





Our tenants also tell us how important it is to have access to good environments and green spaces. On a wider scale, we're progressing in our determination to plant 3,000 trees, helping people enjoy their spaces whilst meeting our commitment to improve biodiversity.

At a very local level, tenants at Greendale Court, Wooler, chatted with their Housing Officer and had the idea of bringing colour to the location with new flowers. Our Estate Services Team was only too happy to help, brightening the day and putting beautiful whisky barrel planters into the area.



Keeping local areas accessible and attractive is important for encouraging communities to use them. We've organised several estate tidy days, including the provision of skips to allow tenants to get rid of rubbish from their homes and streets.

A Batman and Deadpool litter pick with children on Durham's Sherburn Road estate – superheroes leading the effort to keep the streets clean and tidy. Not all heroes wear capes!



Colleagues from our Estate Services and Housing teams, as well as our Environmental Champions, have been working together to help clear the beach of any litter as part of a national Plastic-Free campaign. They were joined by volunteers from the Newbiggin Learning Hive, Ashington and Newbiggin Litter Pickers, RNLI and Newbiggin by the Sea Town Council.



This partnership approach extends to the work we do to help tenants feel safe where they live. Our new Safer Communities Team has been set up to reinforce the message that we're here to listen and help. We've attended engagement and advice events across the region and joined forces with local agencies to answer listener questions on local radio.

During last year's period of civil unrest, we received high praise from partner agencies for the teams' proactive approach and supporting police action. The teams' visibility on our estates where rioting took place was welcomed by customers and offered them reassurance at a time when community tensions were high.

In Ashington, we arranged an event to engage the local community and tackle anti-social behaviour. Bernicia, along with our partners at Northumbria Police, acted on the concerns of local people affected by motorbikes and e-scooters.

As our tenant Joanne said:

“All I did was phone the normal Bernicia number and spoke to a very nice lady and then Nigel called me back. And from that day on, me and Nigel have been working to make things better. You’ll find it hard to find another social housing company that care about their tenants like Bernicia”

We’re also helping people affected by hate crime or hate-related incidents. A Bernicia customer who is experiencing racial abuse at her home thanked the team for ‘listening’ and ‘being there’. This customer initially didn’t want to speak out, but with support and encouragement, the officers have built up a relationship of trust, and action is now underway.





Tackling loneliness and isolation

We've seen how helping people live well in their community can also tackle loneliness and isolation, which are growing problems across age ranges and social groups. We're helping with complex issues as well as providing simple solutions. Our Community Grant has funded a men's mental health project in Berwick, whilst a simple pool table for the residents at Elsdon Mews helps them to socialise.

A grant towards a themed music therapy group helped locals in Wooler who are at various stages of memory decline. Glendale Gateway Trust who ran the project told us; "They enjoy making friends and look forward to meeting each other at the next sessions. The group is key to tackling isolation which many of them suffer from. Being in a remote rural area only makes the feeling of isolation more profound for dementia sufferers and their carers. This group, through funding from Bernicia, has made a significant difference to the lives of many people living with dementia."

Involving young people in a sports project has provided us with lots of feedback on how it is helping them to socialise. Newcastle United Foundation gave us this example from the Berwick Kicks project we've funded.

C's story.



"C interacts very well with all the staff but lacks confidence to interact with the young people at the sessions. This is something our coaches are working on; to make him feel more confident and a part of the group so he can interact with everyone at the sessions."

"Kicks gives C an opportunity to play football for a team which he might not have had elsewhere. He can come along and play football for an hour or two without having any worries or stresses."

His mother told us "C is not a sporty child and has been coming along to kicks since he was 8. Kicks is a way of getting him to do sports. We see it as an hour run-around for him out of the bedroom. It's boosted his confidence; he can take part in football without any pressure.

In C's words, as long as he has fun that's all that matters."



Coming together for fun activities is a feature at Pelaw View Centre in Durham too. We're constantly providing events for the local community. These include Monday lunch clubs, Cream Tea & crafts, as well as Easter, Halloween and Christmas parties.



Isolation can be caused by many different factors. On many occasions, we have seen how important our Employability Programmes have been in tackling isolation. One client told us; "Working as part of a team in a safe space has massively reduced my anxiety. I feel the skills I am learning here, and the structure of a job, will enable me to take the next step into employment elsewhere"

The range of projects and the number of ways in which we engage with our tenants and communities may not be designed to address isolation, but that communication and involvement, no matter how small, can make a big difference to people who feel lonely and isolated.

Conclusion

We have a long track record of delivering for our communities. We're continuing to provide new and better homes for our tenants, whilst helping them live independently and stay involved in their communities.

We're still out in neighbourhoods, helping people access outdoor spaces, or supporting them to join together at indoor venues. We're working with established partnerships to help people feel safer in their area, and we are tackling some of the issues they face caused by hardship, living circumstances, and health.

Locally accessible skills and job support, delivered by us, or through community organisations, help residents to access brighter futures. Where we have made commitments to support specific needs, we have delivered on those commitments. Grant programmes also help us reach a wide range of organisations and in turn, support people in so many different ways.

Once again, our established approach to supporting communities has helped us deliver our commitments of Housing People, Helping People.





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