

Council: 6 November 2007

Administration Policy Item: Cllr. Mike Freer

Barnet's Missing Population

Introduction

Accurate population information is essential for local authorities. It allows them to allocate resources effectively and continue to provide first class services to local residents.

Many Government grants, particularly the Formula Grant, are reliant on this data, as it is used to estimate how much money is needed to fund services relative to the Borough's size.

Recent Problems

As a result of increasing levels of immigration, many local authorities have become concerned that official figures (ONS Mid-Year estimates), may be inaccurate, undercounting the population.

This has been investigated at length, notably by Westminster CC and Slough BC. Westminster's research showed that as many as 11,000 migrants may be "hidden" from official estimates at any one time. The City believes that undercounting may result from a number of factors, including language barriers, wariness of becoming known to public authorities, and difficulties in defining "households."

In 2004, nearly 9,000 National Insurance Numbers were issued to non-British nationals in Slough, yet ONS only estimated 300 international migrants settling in the area.

Costs of Undercounting

As Grants are distributed on the basis of population estimates, any shortfall in the census count is likely to cause acute strain on the finances or the services offered by the authority, or both.

For example, Slough BC believes that by the time the Census figures have been updated in 2011, undercounting will have cost it £15 million since 2004. Westminster City Council believes it is being "short-changed" in the region of £18 million each and every year.

Implications for Barnet

In 2006, Barnet's population is estimated to be 328,600, up from 326,100 (an increase of 2,500 or 0.8%). Though the Borough's 2007 population is projected to be 338,600, ONS have hinted this will be revised downwards. ONS shows Barnet's population as having increased steadily since 1997.

However, as of June 2006 447,000 migrants had registered on the WRS scheme, 62,000 of whom are in London. The Government also estimates that migration from elsewhere in the European Union may be as high as 13,000 in recent years. Barnet has been cited as being particularly popular for migrants, particularly from Eastern Europe, yet the Census estimates do not appear to demonstrate any particular surge.

Of particular note, the census estimates show decreasing numbers of children aged 5-9 in Barnet, whereas school rolls are increasing, which suggests a discrepancy. This would have particular implications for Children's services, as their funding allocations could be reduced, while, conversely, demand would be rising.

As stated, the Formula Grant makes up the largest proportion of Council income, and therefore it is vital Barnet receives the correct amount relative to its population so that services are adequately funded. However, we are deeply concerned that under-enumeration in the population estimates, is stripping Barnet of money, putting a strain on Council services and finances, as well as wider potential implications for Community Cohesion.

Accordingly, Council requests that Cabinet:

- 1) Investigates the likely level of under-counting in the Census estimates for Barnet.
- 2) Supports Westminster City Council's campaign to press for more robust and accurate means of enumeration than those used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) at present.
- 3) Calls on the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Treasury to recognise the flaws in the current ONS estimates and lobbies for specific grants to be made available to areas with short-term migration (such as Barnet), until a more accurate method can be found to measure population and migration within all local authorities.