

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD**

**7 January 2008**

**Report of the Director of Health and Housing**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Information**

**1 HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING REGISTER SERVICES**

**Summary**

**This report updates Members on progress in preparing for the return in-house of the homelessness and housing register services (currently provided under contract by Russet Homes).**

**1.1 Background**

1.1.1 Since the Council transferred its housing stock in 1991, the way in which homelessness and housing register services are delivered nationally has become focussed on homelessness prevention and offering rehousing options. By mutual agreement the Council intends to bring these services back in-house no later than 31 March 2008, which is the date on which the contract with Russet Homes ends.

1.1.2 The background to the transfer of services was provided within the Strategic Housing Advisory Board Report of 21 May 2007. A further Report of 8 October 2007 gave details of the current arrangements with Russet Homes, and set out the proposed future arrangements for the delivery of these services in-house, including details of:

- the process for applying for affordable housing, including proposed changes to the housing allocations scheme;
- the procedures for nominating applicants to housing association vacancies; and
- how homelessness prevention will be achieved.

**1.2 Proposed Staffing Levels**

1.2.1 Changes to the Housing Needs Team endorsed by Members at the Strategic Housing Advisory Board Report of 8 October 2007 were reported to the General Purposes Committee of 27 November 2007 and at full Council on 8 December 2007.

1.2.2 Following approval from the General Purposes Committee, the recruitment process commenced and it is anticipated that all posts will be filled before the end of March 2008. Two of the new posts, the Senior Housing Options Officer and the Accommodation Officer have been widely advertised, and interviews will take place on 8 and 14 January 2008. Recruitment to the remaining Housing Options Officer post(s), and the two new posts of Housing Register Assistant will commence in January 2008.

### **1.3 Housing register, housing advice and homelessness IT system**

1.3.1 There have been some technical delays in implementing the first phase of the proposed two phase strategy reported to Members in October. However, it is anticipated that the current problems with accessing the Civica Universal Housing Management system used by Russet Homes will be resolved shortly.

1.3.2 The costs for the first phase have been agreed with Russet Homes, and are confirmed as:

- £2K development and implementation; and
- £5K per annum for maintenance and support.

1.3.3 Russet Homes has agreed to carry out a review of all registered applicants during January, which will ensure that the database is updated prior to the return to the Council.

### **1.4 Communication strategy**

1.4.1 In order to ensure a seamless service to the public during and after the return of services, a joint communication strategy has been agreed with Russet Homes. This will ensure that all interested parties including current and potential housing applicants, housing associations, health and social services and advice agencies are informed of the new arrangements. Information will be conveyed by:

- letters to all registered housing applicants, including homeless households;
- newsletters, including Here and Now, Russet News, and Invicta Support Newsletter;
- press releases;
- the Council's and Russet Homes' websites; and
- posters and information leaflets.

### **1.5 Housing Allocations scheme**

1.5.1 The consultation period for the draft housing allocations scheme ends on 7 January 2008. All responses will be considered, and any amendments made as a

result will be reported to SHAB in February 2008 for final approval. It is anticipated the revised allocations scheme will be adopted from 1 April 2008.

## **1.6 Progress**

- 1.6.1 Members are requested to note progress to date on the preparations for the return of the homelessness and housing register services. Future updates will be presented to the Board.

## **1.7 Legal Implications**

- 1.7.1 The Council has a legal duty to determine housing need in the borough, and to produce an allocations scheme which explains how affordable housing is allocated to those in housing need. The housing register is the means of holding a list of those seeking rehousing and for recording their priority under the allocations scheme.
- 1.7.2 The Council is required to provide an advice and information service about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness to anyone in the borough, free of charge. The Council is also under a legal obligation to make enquiries into the circumstances of people who approach as homeless or threatened with homelessness, and to determine whether a duty to accommodate exists.

## **1.8 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.8.1 None.

## **1.9 Risk Assessment**

- 1.9.1 Failure to properly assess housing need and homelessness would leave the Council open to legal challenge.

Background papers:

Held with Housing Services

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