

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

12 February 2008

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 RETURN OF HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING REGISTER SERVICE

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 focused 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.

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 and were subsequently endorsed by General Purposes Committee on 27 November 2007 and at full Council on 8 December 2007.

1.2.2 I am pleased to report that we have now successfully recruited to three of the new positions. The post of Housing Options Officer will be filled by an existing member of staff and two new staff have been appointed to fill the Senior Housing Options Officer and Accommodation Officer posts. The two new members of staff will take up their posts on 3 March 2008. Recruitment to the two new posts of Housing Register Assistant is underway, with interviews scheduled for 5 and 6 February 2008. It is anticipated that the successful applicants will commence by mid to end March 2008.

1.3 Housing register, housing advice and homelessness IT system

- 1.3.1 Since I last reported to the Board I can now confirm that the Council's Housing Needs team has access to the Civica Universal Housing Management system used by Russet Homes. Russet Homes staff have also been providing training in the use of the system - ie. maintaining the housing register and making nominations. Although a number of minor functionality problems have arisen, it is hoped these will be resolved shortly.
- 1.3.2 Russet Homes has agreed to carry out a review of all registered applicants during January 2008 which will ensure that the database is updated prior to the return to the Council.
- 1.3.3 The Council's Housing Assessment form has been redrafted to reflect the data inputting sequence onto the housing management system, and will be available for customers to download from the Council's Website from 1 April 2008.
- 1.3.4 Councils are legally required to take into account any medical/welfare needs in assessing an application for housing. The Medical and Welfare Assessment form has therefore been redrafted to capture more detailed information from applicants. Medical and welfare assessments will be awarded priority on the basis of how the medical or welfare need is affected by the current housing rather than the severity of the medical or welfare need per se. Applicants who may have a chronic or disabling condition but are adequately housed will not usually receive any priority. Priority would only be awarded when a move to somewhere more suitable to an applicant's medical, disability or welfare needs would either:
- improve their medical condition; or
 - substantially improve their quality of life.
- 1.3.5 From 1 April 2008 the medical and welfare assessment process will be amended to an officer panel assessment for most cases. Training has been arranged for members of the panel, which will enable the panel to identify more complex cases, which will be referred to an independent medical adviser (NowMedical) for assessment. NowMedical was established in 1995, and provides medical and psychiatric advice to over 100 housing organisations throughout the UK including the housing departments of local authorities, housing associations and trusts, on matters such as medical priority for allocations and transfers, vulnerability for priority need, and special housing needs.
- 1.3.6 Members should be assured that such assessments and the information obtained is kept in the strictest confidence.

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. To be sent out during the week commencing 18 February 2008;
- newsletters, including Here and Now (Spring edition) delivered to residents of Tonbridge and Malling between 3 and 14 March 2008, Russet News and Invicta Support Newsletter delivered to tenants and service users in January 2008 and subsequent editions;
- press releases to local media on 26 February 2008;
- the Council's and Russet Homes' websites from 26 February 2008; and
- posters and information leaflets at key points throughout the borough from 3 March 2008 onwards.

1.5 Legal Implications

1.5.1 The Council has a legal duty to determine housing need in the borough, and to produce an Allocation 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 Allocation Scheme.

1.5.2 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.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.6.1 None

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 Failure to properly assess housing need and homelessness would leave vulnerable households at risk of homelessness and the Council open to legal challenge.

Background papers:

Nil

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