

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

19 May 2008

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 RETURN OF SERVICES UPDATE

Summary

This report updates Members following the return in-house on 17 March 2008 of the homelessness and housing register services (previously provided under contract by Russet Homes).

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The joint communication strategy agreed with Russet Homes was very successful in informing all interested parties of the new arrangements including current and potential housing applicants, housing associations, health and social services and advice agencies. Information was conveyed by letter to all registered housing applicants; 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 at key points throughout the borough.

1.1.2 Following the letter to applicants and immediately after 17 March, we received a very high volume of calls from customers regarding their applications, mostly seeking confirmation of their position. A number of the letters were returned as undelivered as the applicant was no longer at the address from which they had applied on the housing register.

1.2 Housing Register

1.2.1 At the return of services, the number of applicants registered on the housing register was in excess of 2,700. Applicants identified as having moved away from their registered address following our mailshot were cancelled. The number of applicants registered on the Housing Register on 31 March 2008 was reduced to 2,340. During April, we received 78 new applications to join the housing register, and 73 existing applications were cancelled. The total number of applicants on the housing register on 30 April 2008 was 2,385.

- 1.2.2 During April, we carried out a sample reconciliation of housing register applicants, to verify that the information held on the paper files correlated with that held on the Universal Housing database. Analysis of the sample revealed that a large proportion of applications had not received an annual review, and as a result, there were errors in the database records, including changes in circumstances that had not been recorded accurately. In addition, a number of cases were identified where the applicant had moved away or otherwise no longer required rehousing, and whose applications were subsequently removed from the housing register.
- 1.2.3 To improve the quality of the data, and ensure that housing needs are correctly identified, we have commenced a thorough cleansing of the housing register. Two temporary members of staff have been employed, and it is anticipated that this task will be completed by the end of May 2008.

1.3 Medical Assessments

- 1.3.1 From 1 April 2008 the medical assessment process for housing register applicants has been undertaken by an officer panel assessment for most cases. All members of the panel, which includes Housing Options Officers, Housing Register Assistants, Environmental Health Officers and Housing Needs and Private Sector Housing Managers, have received detailed training and ongoing support from an independent medical adviser (NowMedical). During April, the panel assessed 33 applications for medical priority.
- 1.3.2 Councils are legally required to take into account any medical or welfare needs in assessing an application for housing. The Medical and Welfare Assessment form has been redrafted to capture more detailed information from applicants to ensure that a comprehensive assessment can be undertaken. In some cases, it has been necessary to contact the applicant's GP, Occupational Therapist or support worker for more information prior to the conclusion of the assessment. 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. Consequently, applicants who may have a chronic or disabling condition but are nonetheless adequately housed will not always receive any additional priority.

1.4 Housing options and prevention of homelessness

- 1.4.1 The number of outstanding homeless cases, where we have taken a homeless application but not yet reached a decision as to whether a rehousing duty is owed, on 31 March 2008 was 11. The figure for 30 April 2008 had reduced to six. During April 2008, we received eight new homeless applications, and completed the necessary enquiries and reached a decision on eight homeless applications. In six (75 per cent) of these cases, the Council accepted that it had a statutory duty to rehouse the applicant as a result of their homelessness. The remaining two cases

were given appropriate advice and assistance on the options available to them to resolve their housing need.

- 1.4.2 During April 2008, we dealt with 123 new approaches to the Housing Options team, focussing on homelessness prevention and alternative rehousing options in the private sector. Of these approaches, approximately one third of customers were given detailed advice over the telephone during their initial call and did not need to make any further contact. A number of new cases had their housing need resolved either by casework, including negotiations with landlords and checking entitlement to welfare benefits, or by assistance into suitable privately rented accommodation. Other cases are ongoing and are continuing to receive advice and assistance.
- 1.4.3 For example, during April the housing options team successfully negotiated with parents of three teenagers, all young women aged either 16 or 17 years old. After speaking to their parents and explaining the housing options available, all have been able to remain at home whilst alternative accommodation is found for them. Two of the teenagers are now waiting for a place in supported accommodation after referrals were made by the housing options team. The third young person is about to move into a privately rented flat near her mother, where she can receive support from her. The Council will also be putting tenancy support in place to ensure she can sustain her tenancy.
- 1.4.4 Another example of a successful housing options outcome was that of a family – parents with two children living in a privately rented property who were facing homelessness after struggling to afford their rent. One of the adults was working but was on a very low wage. They had been unaware that they could claim local housing allowance, arrears had built up and their landlady had served Notice. The housing options officer was able to negotiate with the landlady – the arrears were cleared by the Council and the landlady withdrew the Notice. The payment made by the Council will be repaid by the family over a suitable period of time. Support has been given to assist the family in claiming local housing allowance and they have been referred to the CAB for further help in claiming other welfare benefits.

1.5 Managing customers expectations

- 1.5.1 The appointment system has been streamlined to ensure that customers receive the most appropriate advice and assistance. Appointments can be made at either the Kings Hill or Tonbridge Castle offices, but before an appointment is arranged, an Housing Options Officer will contact the customer to check whether their housing problem can be resolved by giving appropriate advice and assistance over the telephone. If an appointment is necessary, the customer will benefit from knowing in advance the likely outcomes for them, and can ensure that they bring all of the relevant documents to the interview which will help to speed up the process.

- 1.5.2 From 17 March, the volume of telephone calls to the Housing Needs team has increased significantly and in order to manage this, we are exploring how the service can integrate with the Council's CRM system. This will ensure that customers are directed to the most appropriate team within the housing needs service at the point of first contact, and enable officers to deal with all calls more efficiently. Many calls generate follow up work, or will require detailed notes to be made of the advice given, and using the CRM system will ensure that individual officers are able to fully deal with each call before answering the next.
- 1.5.3 The Rent Deposit scheme assisted seven households at risk of homelessness into alternative accommodation during April. Of these, one was accepted as a 'qualifying offer' where the Council's duty to rehouse a homeless household was discharged by a suitable offer of privately rented accommodation.

1.6 Out of Hours Service

- 1.6.1 The out of hours service was managed by Russet Homes until 31 March 2008. Since 1 April the existing out of hours service within EHHS has been extended to incorporate responding to homelessness. Telephone calls made to the Council when our offices are closed are transferred to a control centre currently provided by Invicta Telecare, who also deal with out of hours calls for Russet Homes. During April, the Council received 64 calls out of hours, of which four were related to homelessness. Prior to return of service Invicta Telecare advised they received one or two calls per month.
- 1.6.2 An annual charge for call handling of £2,000 has been invoiced to the Council by Invicta Telecare.

1.7 Temporary Accommodation

- 1.7.1 The Council is committed to reducing the number of households placed into temporary accommodation, including the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, as a result of becoming homeless. The numbers of applicants in temporary accommodation is now a national indicator which is recorded on a monthly basis.
- 1.7.2 As well as bed and breakfast accommodation, which is only used in an emergency, Russet Homes and Moat Housing Group provide up to 70 units from their permanent housing stock, which is offered as temporary accommodation. These units are offered on an assured shorthold tenancy basis, and are self contained general needs properties. In other boroughs, only hard to let accommodation would generally be offered as temporary accommodation, but in Tonbridge and Malling applicants benefit from the high quality housing stock available, which perversely, can create a disincentive to move on.
- 1.7.3 Over the past 12 months there has been some difficulties in moving applicants on from temporary accommodation. This is in part due to Russet Homes' policy of not rehousing applicants with rent arrears, as many of the applicants in temporary

accommodation have accrued arrears either in their current or previous tenancy. We are addressing this with Russet Homes, and intend to make contact with all applicants in temporary accommodation to ensure that a move on plan is in place.

- 1.7.4 On 31 March there were eight homeless households accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation, with a further 70 households in longer term temporary accommodation with RSLs within the borough. On 30 April there were 10 homeless households accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation, with a further 68 households in longer term temporary accommodation

1.8 Nominations and offers of accommodation

- 1.8.1 Since 17 March 2008 we have been responsible for identifying applicants to nominate to vacant properties with Russet Homes and other RSLs with housing stock in the borough. Suitable applicants for each nomination are selected from the housing register according to their relative points priority. It is intended to nominate the three highest priority cases to Russet Homes in priority order for each vacancy, except in cases where an urgent need to move a homeless applicant is identified. After receiving the nominations, Russet Homes then carry out a home visit and independent verification checks before selecting a suitable tenant. In April 2008 we received 34 nominations to Russet Homes and four nominations to other RSLs as follows:

20 x one bedroomed properties, of which 18 (Russet Homes) and two (Other RSLs)

14 x two bedroomed properties: of which 12 (Russet Homes) and two (Other RSLs)

4 x three bedroomed properties: of which all are Russet Homes

- 1.8.2 The Accommodation Officer has been liaising with private sector landlords to increase the pool of suitable accommodation available for those households who are at risk of homelessness. During April, we provided advice and assistance to approximately 70 customers, to enable them to explore the privately rented sector to resolve their housing need.

1.9 Exceptional circumstances

- 1.9.1 Within the revised Allocations Scheme there is a provision to consider urgent or exceptional cases outside of the points scheme on a discretionary basis. For example, it would be appropriate in some exceptional cases where homelessness can be prevented by a timely offer of accommodation from the housing register. Such cases will be considered for rehousing outside of the points scheme on an individual basis. I would propose to exercise discretion based upon the individual circumstances of each case.

1.9.2 Although the scheme has not yet been formally adopted, Members are requested to endorse this provision in advance of the amended scheme in order to secure suitable accommodation can be provided for those in urgent housing need or in other exceptional circumstances.

1.10 Summary

1.10.1 After a very busy transition period, the housing needs team will be moving the service forward in the following key areas:

- telephony – the Housing Needs team will explore how the service can be integrated into the Council's CRM system to improve service delivery;
- temporary accommodation – a review of all applicants currently in temporary accommodation will be carried out, and options to reduce the use of temporary accommodation in the future will be explored;
- housing options and advice – we will continue to work with customers to offer appropriate and timely advice and assistance to prevent homelessness;
- nominations – we will continue to work with Russet Homes to ensure that the best use is made of vacancies in the social housing stock; and
- link to Choice Based Lettings – Members will note that the revised Allocations Scheme, which has already been subject to an extensive consultation process, will be implemented once the details of the CBL procedures have been finalised.

1.10.2 I have to say I am delighted with the early progress made by the new team under the day to day direction of the Housing Needs and Strategy Manager and Senior Housing Options Officer. We have been fortunate to recruit a new team of talented and committed officers already making their mark with a hugely challenging agenda.

1.11 Legal Implications

1.11.1 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.

1.11.2 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.

1.12 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.12.1 The timely prevention of homelessness is essential for keeping the cost of bed & breakfast within budget.

1.13 Risk Assessment

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

1.14 Recommendations

1.14.1 It is **RECOMMENDED** that Cabinet **ENDORSE** that the Director of Health and Housing be authorised to exercise discretion to determine exceptional cases as set out at paragraph 1.9 of this report.

The Director of Health and Housing confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

Background papers:

contact: Lynn Wilders

Nil

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