

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

6 October 2008

Joint Report of the Director of Health and Housing and the Cabinet Member for Housing

Part 1- Public

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

1 UPDATE OF CHOICE BASED LETTINGS SCHEME

Summary

All local housing authorities and social housing landlords are required by Government to introduce Choice-based lettings (CBL) for the allocation of social rented housing by 2010. This report sets out the progress in implementation of CBL through the Kent CBL Partnership following the signing of the Kent Choice Based Lettings Deed of Agreement.

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Members will recall from previous reports that Choice-based lettings (CBL) represents a new way of allocating homes to people seeking affordable housing from councils. The CBL approach differs from the traditional, officer-led approach to the allocation of accommodation, in that it requires applicants to play an active part in the allocation process by bidding for empty homes that are advertised by the landlord.
- 1.1.2 The Kent CBL partnership includes all local authorities in Kent and all major RSLs operating in the county, including Russet Homes. Following a formal tendering process last year to procure a CBL service provider, 'Locata' was appointed as the preferred service provider in January 2008.

1.2 Implementation

- 1.2.1 The implementation programme agreed by the Kent CBL Project Board is to roll the project out throughout the county in several phases during 2008/09. To date only two authorities, Canterbury and Thanet have gone live, in August 2008. Sevenoaks is due to go live in October, and Dover and Swale in November. Ashford BC, which reports it has been implementing a successful CBL scheme independently for a number of years, is going live in December. Tunbridge Wells and Shepway will go live in January 2009, and Maidstone, Gravesham and

Dartford in April 2009. This Council was provisionally scheduled to go live in January 2009, but at our request, we have been moved to the final phase, scheduled to go live in April 2009. This will ensure that all the necessary preparatory work can be completed, including:

- changes to our housing allocations scheme to incorporate a more transparent 'banding' system, which is the subject of a separate report on this agenda;
- data transfer from the Universal Housing database to the Locata system, incorporating the move to a banding scheme;
- raising the awareness of customers, staff, members and stakeholders including holding workshops and open days, seeking public consultation on the changes to the housing allocations scheme, communicating the changes by providing briefing notes to stakeholders, writing to applicants, and providing details of the scheme on the Council's website and newsletter;
- testing of data and updated allocation scheme (including back-office elements);
- training in the bidding process for Council officers and RSL staff, and other statutory and voluntary agencies that support vulnerable members of the community;
- identifying suitable distribution points throughout the borough for copies of the fortnightly property magazine, known as the Kent Homechoice freesheet containing advertisements for vacant properties, to ensure maximum participation. Delivery of 50 freesheets to each of ten designated distribution points is included within the current contract; and
- identifying potentially vulnerable households who may need additional support or assistance to participate in the CBL scheme.

1.3 How Kent Homechoice works

1.3.1 There are essentially five steps in the CBL process:

Step one – membership: applicants automatically become members of Kent Homechoice if they are already registered on the Council's housing register, or join the register after the commencement of CBL. Although the scheme is Kent wide, applicants can only bid for properties in the area(s) where they are registered on the housing register.

Step two – registration: once registered on the Council's housing register, applicants will be notified of their priority band/points, the size of property they are

eligible for and their unique Kent Homechoice pin number. They will also be sent a User Guide.

Step three – bidding: applicants can bid for up to three properties (as long as they are eligible for them) in each two-weekly cycle. Homes are advertised in the Kent Homechoice freesheet and on the website www.kenthomechoice.org.uk. The advertisements include photographs and give basic details of the properties, including the area, number of bedrooms, floor level and mobility level, weekly rent and service charges, and the date it will be ready to occupy, together with any age or pet restrictions. Advertisements will also specify whether properties are available only to transferring RSL tenants or homeseekers or both.

Bids can be placed in any one of the following five ways:

- on the internet at www.kenthomechoice.org.uk . This is the quickest and easiest way, and applicants will be able to view their bidding history and retract bids made earlier during the same bidding period;
- by telephone to an automated Homechoice property line. Calls will cost 25p per minute and will normally take less than one minute;
- by coupon. Applicants are given blank coupons with their registration pack, which have their name and Kent Homechoice number printed on them. Once completed they will need to be posted – the return address is pre-printed on the front of the coupon, and a stamp will be required. It will be at the risk of the bidder to get the coupon posted in good time to arrive before bidding closes;
- by text message from a mobile telephone to a dedicated Homechoice number. Most mobile phone companies charge around 10p to send an SMS text message; and
- by person at the Council offices.

Step four – offer: at the end of the bidding period, all bids for homes are put in priority order to produce a list of eligible applicants for each property. The landlord of each property will make some eligibility checks, before offering it to the bidder with the highest priority. If this person refuses the property, it will be offered to the next highest priority bidder on the shortlist.

Step five – feedback: applicants will not be notified individually when their bids have been unsuccessful, although they can get this information from the website. All properties that have been advertised will be listed on the feedback page of a subsequent freesheet once they have been let. The feedback report includes details of the number of applicants who bid for each property as well as the points/band of the successful bidder.

- 1.3.2 1.3.3 Choice based lettings will not increase the amount of available social housing. However, people seeking re-housing will have accurate information on how many homes are actually available, where these homes are located and their chances of being housed. As the system is much more transparent, housing applicants will have all the information necessary to make their own informed choices.

1.4 Implementation strategy

- 1.4.1 The Kent CBL Partnership Joint Project Board has agreed a standard implementation strategy timetable, which is being rolled out to all partners during the implementation phase, and which can be adjusted to incorporate individual local requirements. The timetable allows for an intensive period of communication, training, publicity and promotion during the three months immediately prior to the go-live date. This timescale has been used successfully by the two authorities who have already commenced CBL, and is in use in the successive phases.
- 1.4.2 This means that the Council will begin the implementation programme at the beginning of January 2009. In the interim, Officers will be project managing the implementation, and drafting a detailed communication strategy and arranging a number of consultation and information events for customers, Members and stakeholders.
- 1.4.3 Information about the Kent CBL scheme will also be available on the Council's website from October, and in a series of articles in Here and Now, commencing with the winter edition.

1.5 Vulnerable persons strategy

- 1.5.1 The Kent Homechoice partnership has a strong commitment to ensure that no section of the community is excluding from participating in CBL. The Kent Joint Policy and Planning Board for Housing (JPPB) have developed a strategy to ensure that vulnerable people seeking rehousing have fair and easy access to take part in the Kent Homechoice CBL scheme. A copy of JPPB's strategic guidance, entitled "Opportunities and Inclusion for all" is included at **[Annex 1]**.
- 1.5.1 The strategy aims to identify any barriers to the participation of vulnerable people in the CBL process, and ensure they are enabled to exercise the same level of choice about where they live, with support as necessary. In terms of people who may need support or assistance to participate in CBL, the following groups are considered in the strategy to be potentially vulnerable:
- older people;
 - people with a learning or physical disability;

- people with mental health difficulties;
- homeless households;
- young people or care-leavers;
- people with substance misuse issues;
- people who have recently left an institution or rehabilitation;
- people with medical difficulties;
- visual impairment;
- people who have literacy problems;
- people from Gypsy and Traveller communities;
- people who have fled domestic violence or other serious harassment;
- people who do not speak English as their first language; and
- people who are vulnerable through their offending behaviour.

1.5.2 Inclusion in the above groups does not mean that people are automatically vulnerable; for example, older persons may be active retired people who are quite able to access any information. Also, some people who are not included in the above groups will need support too. Therefore every applicant must be considered as an individual. However, it is important that the appropriate support is in place to ensure accessibility for all, should this be required.

1.5.3 All applicants for housing will be surveyed and asked to indicate whether they consider themselves to need assistance with the bidding process or wish to nominate an agency, relative or carer to bid on their behalf. Applicants identified as needing assistance will be carefully monitored to ensure that they are actively participating in the bidding process for suitable properties as they become advertised.

1.5.4 Some applicants may have difficulty in accessing the bidding process, particularly those who are elderly, visually impaired or living in remote rural settlements without access to the internet. Such cases may need additional support, both during the implementation phase to access consultation and information events to gain an understanding of the process, and to actively participate in the bidding process. Personalised free sheets can be provided, which list just the properties that meet the needs of individual applicants, and advocacy bidding on an informal basis from family, friends or neighbours can be arranged. If this is not possible, then advocacy can be supplied by other agencies such as Supporting People.

1.6 Legal Implications

- 1.6.1 The allocation of housing is covered under part 6 of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002.

1.7 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.7.1 A benefit of joining the Kent CBL Partnership is the ability to use Locata's On Line Register at no additional cost, which effectively obviates the need for the Council to procure its own in-house IT software to manage the housing register. Although it will still be necessary to purchase appropriate software to manage homelessness, this would be at a vastly lower cost than procuring a fully integrated system. Locata are currently developing a homelessness module, which will provide a seamless integration with the housing register. As previously reported, the estimated costs of such a stand alone system are in the region of a licence fee circa £8.5K with an annual maintenance fee of circa £2.2K.
- 1.7.2 The Kent CBL Partnership Joint Project Board has agreed how the costs of the operation of Kent Homechoice will be shared between members of the partnership. The Council, as a strategic housing authority, will be required to pay an annual fee of £6,000. The remaining costs are shared between the participating landlords on the basis of stock holding at the beginning of each year.

1.8 Risk Assessment

- 1.8.1 The Government expects all local authorities to adopt a CBL Scheme by 2010. The Council has joined the Kent CBL Partnership, which has a contractual agreement with Locata and CLG to complete the development and implementation of the Kent Homechoice CBL scheme by April 2009. If the Council is unable to proceed with implementation within this timeframe, there is a possibility that our membership of the partnership would lapse and we may then need to procure our own CBL scheme. With the right controls in place (chiefly via a revised Allocations Scheme) I am of the view that the Kent CBL Partnership can be implemented successfully in the borough with the aim of expanding choice for local people.

1.9 Policy Considerations

- 1.9.1 An effective system for the allocation of social housing is essential in helping to create balanced communities and to ensure the Council can meet its duties towards those in housing need.

1.10 Recommendations

- 1.10.1 Cabinet is recommended to:

- (i) **ENDORSE** the proposed implementation timetable of Kent Homechoice CBL with a view to it being fully implemented in Tonbridge and Malling in April 2009; and
- (ii) Receive further reports on the progress of CBL implementation

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:

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Nil

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