

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

6 October 2008

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 UPDATE ON HOUSING NEEDS SERVICE

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 first six months following the return of homelessness and housing register services has seen a number of significant improvements in service delivery, particularly in relation to homeless prevention and temporary accommodation.

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. 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, revealed that a large proportion of applications contained errors in the database records.

1.2.2 As a result, a thorough review of all applications was undertaken during May to July. This process identified a number of applicants where there had been a significant change in circumstances resulting in a change to the priority awarded, and further cases where the applicant had moved away or otherwise no longer required re-housing.

1.2.3 During the period April to August 2008, we accepted an average of 89 new applicants onto the housing register each month. As at 31 August 2008, with in excess of 1,000 outdated applications cancelled during the review process, the number of applications registered on the housing register had reduced to 1468.

1.2.4 The following table gives details of the number of households registered on the housing register at the end of each month, with details of the numbers of new applications accepted and the numbers of cancelled applications.

Date	Number on Housing Register	Applications Received (during the month)	Applications Cancelled (during the month)
31.3.08	2,340		
30.4.08	2,385	April – 78	April - 73
31.5.08	2,155	May - 89	May - 234
30.6.08	1,777	June – 94	June – 474
31.7.08	1,533	July – 109	July – 294
31.8.08	1,468	August – 77	August – 68

1.2.5 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 re-housing and for recording their priority under the allocations scheme.

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).

1.3.2 The panel meet on a weekly basis to determine applications for additional priority on medical grounds. Often, more than one member of the household will have a medical condition, and these will be assessed on a cumulative basis. In cases where the panel do not agree on the level of priority to be awarded, or where applicants have requested a review of the level of priority awarded, the matter is passed to NowMedical for a final decision.

1.3.3 The following table gives details of medical assessments undertaken between April and August 2008.

Month	Panel Assessments	NowMedical referrals
April 2008	33	0
May 2008	45	1
June 2008	57	2
July 2008	58	2
August 2008	60	1

1.4 Housing options and prevention of homelessness

1.4.1 The number of outstanding homeless cases on 31 March 2008 was 11. These cases are where we have taken a homeless application but not yet reached a decision as to whether a re-housing duty is owed. By 31 August 2008, this had reduced to three. The number of new homeless applications taken each month has reduced, and currently the Council accepts a statutory duty to re-house around two applicants per month as a result of their homelessness.

Date / number of outstanding applications	New applications taken during the month	Duty to re-house accepted	Duty to re-house rejected
31.3.08 - 11			
30.4.08 - 6	April - 8	April - 6	April - 2
31.5.08 - 5	May - 3	May - 4	May - 4
30.6.08 - 3	June - 3	June - 2	June - 2
31.7.08 - 2	July - 4	July - 4	July - 2
31.8.08 - 3	August - 5	August - 3	August - 2

1.4.2 Since April 2008, we have dealt with an average of 143 new approaches to the Housing Options team each month. Of these, approximately one third were given detailed advice on homelessness prevention and alternative re-housing options over the telephone during their initial call and did not need to make any further contact. Many cases had their housing need resolved either by casework, including negotiations with landlords or 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.

Month	Number of new approaches to Housing Options team	Advised on homeless prevention/private renting
April 2008	123	Approx. 70
May 2008	173	Approx 115
June 2008	131	Approx 90
July 2008	155	Approx 125
August 2008	131	Approx 120

1.4.3 Since the return of services, the Housing Options team have provided housing advice and options services at the Council's offices at both Kings Hill and Tonbridge Castle. The number of visitors includes housing customers with enquiries regarding the housing register, and those bringing in documents to support their application, as well as those seeking advice on homelessness and re-housing options.

Month	Number of housing visitors to Tonbridge Castle	Number of housing visitors to Kings Hill	Number of housing visitors to Martin Square
April 2008	123	218	13
May 2008	179	192	14
June 2008	170	219	26
July 2008	248	248	20
August 2008	170	180	23

1.4.4 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.

1.5 Out of Hours Service

- 1.5.1 Since 1 April the existing out of hours service within EHHS has been extended to incorporate responding to callers presenting as homeless or threatened with homelessness. Out of hours calls relating to homelessness have averaged at four per month, and in the first five months, four people who contacted us out of hours were placed in emergency accommodation overnight.

Month	Total calls	Housing issues
April 2008	64	4
May 2008	108	4
June 2008	84	4
July 2008	107	3
August 2008	115	5

1.6 Temporary Accommodation

- 1.6.1 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.
- 1.6.2 We are continuing to keep in regular contact with all applicants in temporary accommodation to ensure any problems with rent arrears are addressed and that a move on plan is identified.
- 1.6.3 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. By 31 August this figure had reduced to two homeless households accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation, with a further 50 households in longer term temporary accommodation.

Date	Number in B+B	Number in Temporary Accommodation (AST)	Total
31.3.08	8	70	78
30.4.08	10	68	78
31.5.08	7	59	66
30.6.08	4	57	61
31.7.08	3	56	59
31.8.08	2	50	52

1.7 Nominations and offers of accommodation

- 1.7.1 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. The three highest priority cases are nominated 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 home visits and independent verification checks before selecting a suitable tenant from those nominated.
- 1.7.2 Since April 2008 we have nominated housing register applicants to 139 x one bedroomed properties, of which 105 (Russet Homes) and 34 (Other RSLs), 115 x two bedroomed properties, of which 86 (Russet Homes) and 29 (Other RSLs), and 49 x three bedroomed properties, of which 35 (Russet Homes) and 14 (Other RSLs)

Month	1B Russet	1B Other	2B Russet	2B Other	3+B Russet	3+ B Other	Total
April 2008	18	2	12	2	4	0	38
May 2008	10	2	9	9	6	4	40
June 2008	9	24	22	7	6	4	72
July 2008	37	3	22	8	12	4	86
Aug 2008	31	3	21	3	7	2	67

1.8 County Court Desk service

- 1.8.1 The Council has been selected by Communities and Local Government to receive a grant of £10,000 to provided a County Court Desk service. This is a facility within the County Court premises, to ensure that any household facing repossession (whether by landlord or lender) and attending Court can receive independent legal advice and be properly represented "on the day".
- 1.8.2 On the day of the possession hearing, specialist advice workers liaise with the Court ushers to ensure that defendants have an opportunity to seek advice prior to their hearing. They can offer advice regardless of tenure (social housing, privately rented, or owner occupier), and will seek to establish if there is a basis to have the claim struck out (due to procedural deficiency) or whether the case can be adjourned or a suspended order given pending further advice or action.
- 1.8.3 As there are no County Courts within the Tonbridge & Malling area, possession cases for Tonbridge and Malling residents are heard at either Tunbridge Wells County Court or Maidstone County Court. The Court a resident will attend is usually decided by a resident's postcode; the Borough is split fairly evenly between the two Courts. Broadly speaking, people from the Borough Green area down to Tonbridge have to attend Tunbridge Wells County Court and people further north of this are sent to Maidstone County Court.
- 1.8.4 There is no Court desk at Maidstone County Court and a need has been identified for this service. Currently Maidstone County Court hears an average of 87

Possession hearings every month which are split over three days. Of these approximately forty-six Court hearings are for mortgage arrears cases, thirty-six are social rented tenants and six are tenants with arrears in the private sector. The clerk at Maidstone County Court has reported an increase in possession hearings in recent months, particularly with mortgage possession hearings.

- 1.8.5 There is currently a Court desk at Tunbridge Wells County Court, which is run by Tunbridge Wells CAB and funded by the Community Legal Service (CLS). This desk was set up in January 2006 and an adviser attends Court on possession days. (Tunbridge Wells County Court hears possession cases on three Tuesdays out of every month.) However, the Court desk adviser currently only assists clients with rent arrears (either social rented or private tenants). There is a need for support to be provided for people attending mortgage possession cases – Tunbridge Wells Court has seen an increase of 22 per cent in these cases in the second quarter of this year compared to the same quarter last year. Maidstone County Court has seen a five per cent increase in mortgage arrears cases for the same period.
- 1.8.6 We have also spoken to most of the RSLs with housing stock in the Borough to establish which County Courts they use. As the housing stock is spread quite evenly across the Borough, both Courts are used fairly equally by the RSLs.
- 1.8.7 It is proposed that the £10,000 funding from the DCLG would be used predominately to operate a Court desk at Maidstone County Court on its three possession days. It is also hoped that it will be possible to provide a service at Tunbridge Wells County Court for people with mortgage arrears, on the days mortgage cases are heard. Both desks would be staffed by an experienced legally trained adviser. We have had some preliminary discussions with potential providers, including Shelter and Tunbridge Wells CAB.
- 1.8.8 It is anticipated that the service will be paid by hour of the adviser's time. Shelter, who run a Court desk in Dartford and Gravesham, usually manage to see between five to six people per hour at the sessions they hold. It is hoped that the desk can be set up within the next few months, in order to assist the increasing number of residents of the Borough who are facing possession proceedings. We will closely monitor the performance of the Court desk to establish if it is proving effective in preventing evictions.
- 1.8.9 All capital and revenue costs relating to the County Court Desk scheme will be funded by Communities and Local Government from the allocated grant for approximately the first twelve months of operation, depending on the number of cases receiving assistance. The Council will not have to contribute revenue or capital funding. It is anticipated that CLG will allocate further funding in subsequent years, subject to satisfactory performance of the County Court Desk service provider.

1.8.10 Under the Council's contract procedure rules, there is a requirement to obtain three quotes from prospective service providers. However, as there are realistically only two organisations that could provide the service, Shelter and CAB, we are applying for a waiver from this requirement. Both organisations will be asked to quote for the provision of the County Court desk service, and the funding may be divided between them to ensure the best possible service is provided for residents.

Background papers:

contact: Lynn Wilders

Nil

John Batty

Director of Health and Housing