

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

5 January 2009

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 UPDATE ON CHOICE BASED LETTINGS

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 putting their name forward or '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 five authorities - Canterbury, Thanet, Sevenoaks, Dover and Swale have gone live since July 2008. Tunbridge Wells, Ashford and Shepway are due to go live in February 2009, with Maidstone, Gravesham and Dartford as well as Tonbridge and Malling in April 2009.

1.3 Properties included in the scheme

- 1.3.1 It is anticipated that the majority of general needs accommodation of both local authorities and RSLs in Kent will be let through Kent Homechoice, the name of the Kent CBL scheme. All lettings will be made in accordance with nomination agreements with RSLs. Bidding on some properties may be restricted to take account of special conditions that apply to a given property. For example landlords may designate some properties as being restricted to transferring tenants, subject to any nominations agreements that may apply. Similarly restrictions may reflect agreed local lettings policies or local connection requirements on rural exception site housing schemes.
- 1.3.2 The Kent Housing Group is keen to promote the Sustainable Communities Protocol for new developments. In these circumstances the RSLs and the strategic housing authority would agree a lettings plan for a new development and any lettings conditions would be reflected in the property adverts in the CBL scheme. New build properties should be advertised before the completion date to reduce void losses and to give additional time for lettings plans to be implemented.
- 1.3.3 Occasionally landlords may need to make offers directly to applicants to deal with emergency situations, urgent management transfers, decants for major repairs and redevelopment. Similarly local authorities may need to make direct offers in order to discharge their statutory homelessness duties and obligations. Where a property has been advertised as available for letting and is subsequently withdrawn details will be provided in the feedback report.
- 1.3.4 Sheltered and long term supported housing will be included in the scheme albeit with the provision that bidders must meet the criteria for the support required by the scheme.

1.4 Advertising of properties

- 1.4.1 Properties will be advertised in a fortnightly freesheet and on the Kent Homechoice website. The freesheet will be a Kent-wide publication with separate sections for each local authority area, and will be available from a number of distribution points throughout the borough, including Council offices, libraries and the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- 1.4.2 Local authorities and RSLs can make personalised freesheets available to customers by downloading just the relevant pages with details of properties, for which they are eligible to bid. Customers can also request a subscription and have freesheets posted directly to their home by Locata at a cost of £10 for six months, to cover postage and administrative costs.

1.5 Uploading property advertisements

1.5.1 Landlords will be responsible for uploading in the prescribed format details of properties to be advertised in the next advertising cycle. To reduce re-letting times and void losses, all landlords are encouraged to advertise properties at the earliest possible opportunity. Landlords will label a property with the following information:

- the number of bedrooms;
- the household size eligible for the property;
- any restrictions on letting including age requirements, local connection or conditions of local letting policies;
- the eligibility of homeseekers or transferring tenants to bid for the property;
- mobility attributes;
- energy rating;
- rents;
- restrictions on pets;
- floor level and lift access for flats; and
- any other features of the property or its location that will help potential bidders.

1.5.2 Landlords are to provide a photograph of the property or its vicinity in the case of flats. Where a photograph cannot be provided in exceptional circumstances, the landlord's logo will be displayed in its place.

1.5.3 The landlord is responsible for ensuring that the information contained in the property advert is accurate and complies with the Property Misdescriptions Act 1991.

1.6 Adapted properties

1.6.1 Where vacant properties are suitable for people with access needs, or where properties have been specially adapted for a previous tenant with disabilities, the mobility classification will be indicated in the property advert as follows:

- mobility 1 - Suitable for a wheelchair user indoors and outdoors;

- mobility 2 - Suitable for people who cannot manage steps or stairs and may use a wheelchair some of the time; and
- mobility 3 - Suitable for people who are only able to manage one or 2 steps or stairs.

1.7 Bidding

1.7.1 Homeseekers and transfer applicants will be encouraged to participate in the scheme through a wide range of methods to bid for properties. These are:

- the internet;
- automated telephone service;
- text messaging;
- postal coupons; and
- staff assisted.

1.7.2 The Project Board will regularly review the bidding methods used by homeseekers and transfer applicants to ensure that methods remain cost effective and efficient. Applicants will be allowed to bid for up to three properties in each bidding round, although it is anticipated that this restriction will be lifted once all members of the scheme are operational.

1.8 Shortlisting and offers

1.8.1 Locata will provide automated shortlists at the close of bidding within the agreed timescales. Shortlists will list bidders in priority order according to the allocation scheme relevant to the local authority in which the property is located, and landlords will be expected to offer the property to the bidder with the highest priority. Where special letting criteria are to be applied, for example a local lettings plan is in place, supported housing or lettings restricted to transferring tenants, then this will be indicated in the property advert.

1.8.2 Where a decision is made to overlook bidders and make an offer to an alternative applicant, the reason for this decision will be recorded. The landlord will be responsible for notifying any bidder overlooked for an offer, as to the reason why they were not considered for the property.

1.8.3 Applicants who subsequently refuse an offer will not be penalised or restricted in bidding for future homes.

1.9 Feedback

1.9.1 Providing feedback on the outcomes of previous bidding rounds forms a key part of the transparency of the Kent Homechoice scheme. Landlords must record on

the system the result of the offer as soon as possible after the offer has been made.

1.10 Locata Activity Reports

Source of bids made per edition of freesheet

Edition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	All (1-9)	% All
Coupon	42	82	24	29	46	44	49	51	148	515	3.93%
Phone	22	40	8	31	42	30	52	43	88	356	2.72%
SMS	47	38	22	35	32	29	29	30	61	323	2.47%
Staff	54	134	21	65	42	81	53	53	156	659	5.03%
Web	861	1162	647	1111	979	1265	1342	1342	2679	11242	85.85%
TOTAL	1026	1456	722	1271	1141	1449	1519	1519	3132	13095	100%

Breakdown of bids by bid method against age of oldest household member

Age band	Coupon	Phone	SMS	Staff	Web	Number of bids
16-19	0.14%	0.55%	1.39%	2.08%	95.84%	721
20-29	1.83%	1.25%	2.36%	2.99%	91.57%	5291
30-39	2.36%	2.28%	2.17%	3.29%	89.90%	3644
40-49	4.56%	3.02%	3.10%	5.00%	84.31%	2480
50-59	3.52%	4.47%	3.45%	7.31%	81.25%	1477
60-69	9.85%	2.97%	0.84%	8.36%	77.97%	1076
70-79	6.71%	4.14%	0.59%	12.03%	76.53%	507
80-89	5.16%	12.90%	0.00%	23.23%	58.71%	155
90+	0.00%	28.00%	0.00%	16.00%	56.00%	25
Average	3.23%	2.43%	2.30%	4.66%	87.38%	15376

1.10.1 From the above activity reports provided by Locata, bidding via the internet is the preferred bidding method for all age ranges, although the proportion drops significantly for applicants aged over 80, with a corresponding increase in telephone bidding.

1.10.2 Over the five local authorities currently operating CBL, the participation rate of all registered applicants is 15 per cent. For those two authorities who went live in the first phase in July, the rate has reached 25 per cent, and the overall rate is predicted to rise to 30 per cent in line with national rates.

1.11 Performance monitoring

1.11.1 Locata will send all members performance management information on a quarterly basis. This will include:

- average expressions of interest for properties advertised through Kent Homechoice by local authority area;

- average bids by property size/type;
- participation rates of housing register applicants;
- participation rates of vulnerable groups;
- lettings by housing need band/points (as appropriate);
- lettings by equality monitoring;
- details of offer refusals; and
- shortlisted candidates overlooked in favour of bidders with lower priority.

In addition all members will also be able to produce a range of bespoke reports.

1.11.2 The Project Board will receive an annual report on equalities and diversity issues arising from the operation of the scheme including an assessment of how all vulnerable people have been able to access the service. Further reports will be submitted to this Advisory Board as we progress with preparations to go live with CBL in the early part of 2009.

1.12 Legal Implications

1.12.1 None arising from this report

1.13 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.13.1 None arising from this report

1.14 Risk Assessment

1.14.1 None arising from this report.

Background papers:

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Nil

John Batty

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