

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

9 November 2009

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

Part 1- Public

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

1 PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING UPDATE

Summary

This report updates Members on progress by the Private Sector Housing Team to improve the housing conditions of residents and bring empty housing back into use. There continues to be pressure on the Disabled Facilities Grants budget. Demand for Housing Assistance Grants is being monitored and managed. A temporary waiting list is being maintained for some Housing Assistance Grants whilst a decision is reached on whether additional funding will be secured through under spends from elsewhere within the partnership or funded as part of the contract with Creative Environmental Networks.

1.1 Disabled Facilities Grants

1.1.1 Members are reminded that the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) budget for 2009/10 is £494,000. To recap, the original budget was £561,000, which comprised £360,000 Government allocation and £201,000 Council funding. However the 2008/09 over spend of £67,000 was offset against the budget for 2009/10, reducing it to £494,000.

1.1.2 Spend against budget as at 15 October 2009 is £358,000 with a further £326,000 committed i.e. approved but not yet paid out. All of this commitment is unlikely to realise into actual spend in this financial year. However, there is likely to be some overspend. DFGs are mandatory grants and the only mechanism available to the Council to assist managing expenditure within budget is to increase the period of time in which grants are approved. The normal target for approving grants is 28 days, however, as the financial year progresses, this period increased up to the full six months which corresponds with the legal requirement. This became effective from the end of July. We will still give priority to urgent cases and long standing children's cases that have come forward for approval, hence the large amount of commitment in the pipeline.

- 1.1.3 Should the opportunity to bid for additional funding arise during the course of the current financial year then a bid will be submitted in the same way as it was during the latter part of 2008/09.
- 1.1.4 Members will recall from the last meeting of this Board that we had requested that Russet Homes did not submit any further DFG applications as their agreed notional allocation limit of £350,000 had been reached. I am pleased to report that an agreed procedure between the two partners is now in place whereby Russet Homes still submit details of applications (albeit not a formal DFG application) and we process it in the normal manner with a financial assessment and agreement of adaptation works to be carried out, with an advice form returned to Russet Homes. Russet Homes then progress the works and pay the contractors direct from its own funds after the Council has undertaken a final inspection. To date, eight cases have been processed in this manner with a further two awaiting Council consideration. The total cost of the works so far under this new agreement is £41,000. The average time taken for the Council to consider the case and respond to Russet Homes has been 12 working days. I will continue to update Members on this new arrangement.
- 1.1.5 I reported to the July meeting of this Board that I had written to the Managing Director of Children, Families and Education at Kent County Council, regarding the concerns surrounding the wait for Occupational Therapist (OT) assessments for children in Tonbridge & Malling. I am pleased to report a meeting was held with Liz Totman, Head of Specialist Children's Services at Kent County Council on 2 October 2009. The meeting was attended by Officers from Tonbridge & Malling BC and Kent County Council (KCC) and also Councillor Mrs Jill Anderson, Cabinet Member for Housing. The following information and outcomes came out of the meeting:
- twenty seven children in Tonbridge & Malling BC are awaiting an OT assessment (five from 2007, nine from 2008 and 13 in 2009). These cases will be reviewed by KCC to try and identify which cases are likely to proceed to a DFG and when. They will also provide details of what the split is in terms of tenure i.e. private/socially rented;
 - additional OTs and OT assistants are being recruited by KCC and should be in post by January 2010;
 - the recently improved OT/grants officers liaison meetings which now focus solely on children's cases will now include a review of the OT assessment waiting list; and
 - a set of protocols is to be designed to aid the efficient processing of children's cases from initial assessment to completion. Tonbridge & Malling will be a pilot for this work and the aim is for it to be rolled out across Kent. An initial meeting to progress this has been arranged for 3 November 2009 and I will update Members further at the meeting.

- 1.1.6 A letter has been sent to Liz Totman to confirm the outcomes of the meeting and I will update Members further as these matters are progressed.

1.2 North & West Kent Private Sector Renewal Partnership

- 1.2.1 As Members are aware we lead the North & West Kent Private Sector Renewal Partnership of eight local authorities. Officers have recently been compiling the monitoring return to Government Office for the South East (GOSE) for the period 1 April 2009 to 30 September 2009. I am pleased to report that in this period we have completed 93 grants for home owners (including one landlord) to improve the condition of their property. This includes measures such as installation of efficient heating, insulation, the replacement of windows, re-wiring and roof repairs. The grants will mainly be repayable on sale of the property. The total value of the grants completed is £315,000. Fifty four homes have been made decent with 136 measures delivered in total.
- 1.2.2 The demand for housing assistance (delivered utilising the £4 million the partnership received for 2009/10) in Tonbridge & Malling has been extremely high. The budget for 2009/10 is £726,000. The total spend as at 15 October 2009 is £277,000 with a further £390,000 committed i.e. approved but not yet paid out. The Council is also about to enter into a contract with Creative Environmental Networks (CEN) to deliver energy efficiency measures worth £240,625 in 2009/10. I do not envisage that all the commitment will realise into actual spend in 2009/10 and I am confident that we will be able to utilise underspend from our partners to fulfil all the commitment. This will be discussed with our partners in early November under the terms of our agreed governance arrangements.
- 1.2.3 At the time of writing this report there are 10 applications awaiting approval. These are being held pending the further discussion with local authority partners about how under spends are to be redistributed. This arrangement is important because it protects the overall partnership from losing any of the allocation. Eight of the ten applications include heating works and can, if necessary, be funded through the Warm Homes Assistance that CEN will manage and be met from their allocation under the new contract.
- 1.2.4 In addition, a waiting list of 22 enquiries is being maintained pending resolution of these issues. Again, the majority of these enquiries are of a nature that can be referred to CEN to be progressed if there is any doubt about the availability of additional funding. Progress reports will be submitted to future meetings of the Board.
- 1.2.5 There has been no further update from GOSE on the level of funding for 2010/11 although at a recent meeting of lead authorities they remained confident that funding (albeit reduced by 20 per cent to go towards £1.5bn for provision of 20,000 new affordable homes) will be forthcoming.

1.3 Update on outcomes from Existing Energy Contract with Creative Environmental Networks

1.3.1 At the last meeting of this Board, Members requested an update on the outcomes from the existing energy related contracts with Creative Environmental Networks (CEN). There are two energy contracts, namely 'Coldbusters' and 'Sunrise', which commenced on the 1 December 2008 utilising funding from year 1 of the Regional Housing Board bid allocation. These individual contracts will be superseded by the recently procured energy contract mentioned at paragraph 1.2.2.

1.3.2 The 'Coldbusters' scheme incorporates the following:

- Warm Homes Assistance to improve affordable warmth in poorly insulated and/or poorly heated homes to vulnerable persons in receipt of an income or disability related benefit. This assistance includes top up financial assistance for those people who qualify for the Government Warm Front grant but have themselves to make a contribution to the cost of the works. The maximum assistance available is £5,000 less the fees payable to CEN; and
- Hard to Heat Assistance to provide internal or external wall insulation for hard to heat homes such as those constructed with solid walls. The maximum assistance available is £20,000 less the fees payable to CEN.

1.3.3 The 'Sunrise' scheme provides assistance of £1,500 towards the cost of installing a solar hot water system. Typically the cost of an installation will be between £3,500 and £4,000. Applicants are recommended to apply for a further £400 from the Government Low Carbon Building grant assistance which together with our assistance covers about 50 per cent of the total cost.

1.3.4 The table below illustrates the number of applications approved and completed, it also includes spend and budget for the Coldbusters and Sunrise schemes:

Type of assistance	Number grants approved	Number grants completed	Spend	Budget
Warm Homes Assistance	6	6	£21,250	£30,000
Hard to Heat Homes	4	1	£18,036	£40,000
Solar Hot Water	17	13	£19,500	£25,500

1.3.5 Interest in the Hard to Heat Homes initiative has been higher than anticipated during 2009/10. The under spend in Warm Homes Assistance is available to

meet any overspend in the current Hard to Heat Homes programme (see table in paragraph 1.3.4) and further approvals will be funded as part of the allocation covered by the new CEN contract.

- 1.3.6 The funding for the solar hot water scheme has also been fully committed and any outstanding enquiries (three in total) will be followed up under the recently procured CEN contract.

1.4 Home Improvement Agency

- 1.4.1 The last Home Improvement Agency (HIA) Advisory Group meeting was held on 19 August 2009. I attach the minutes from this meeting at **[Annex 1]**.
- 1.4.2 The HIA Quality Mark for Tonbridge & Malling has now expired. A further assessment had been planned for July 2009 as *in touch* policies and procedures would have bedded-in and a grade 'A' was expected in line with the other agencies managed by *in touch*. However Foundations, the national co-ordinating body for HIAs, have now announced that they are undertaking a full review of the Quality Mark and a new assessment framework is to be developed. This is currently being piloted. We have agreed that the whole of the new Mid & West Kent Home Improvement Agency managed by *in touch* should be reassessed for the Quality Mark as a single entity in 2010.
- 1.4.3 The HomeSafe scheme that *in touch* has previously operated has now been withdrawn as the funding was stopped. However Supporting People have provided additional funding for the Handyperson schemes and all *in touch* handyperson services are rebranded as "HomeSafe Handypersons". The additional funding means the Mid & West Kent Home Improvement Agency now had five full time handypersons. With the additional resource there is an aim to increase the number of completed handyperson jobs to 400 per local authority. This is a considerable increase on the original service specification we have with *in touch*.
- 1.4.4 A paper was presented at the last Advisory Group meeting on the intention to establish a single Advisory Group for the Mid & West Kent Home Improvement Agency. It is the aim to launch the new group by April 2010 and a consultation process is currently underway. An outline of proposed members of the new Advisory Group has been provided. At the moment there is a total of 32 members which in our view seems cumbersome to manage. I am currently seeking the view of our existing nominated Members on this group in order that we can respond to the consultation by the end December 2009.

1.5 Customer Satisfaction

- 1.5.1 As part of the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) and the Housing Assistance Grant processes a customer satisfaction survey is sent to the applicant on completion of the process.

- 1.5.2 For the period 1 April 2009 to 15 June 2009 of the 12 DFG customer satisfaction surveys returned, 11 of them were for applicants in housing association properties and 1 in an owner occupied property. Of those 12, five of the applicants indicated they were White British and the remainder did not respond. Of the five White British two of the heads of the household were over 75 years of age and the remainder 61 to 75 years of age.
- 1.5.3 The DFG customer satisfaction survey is shared with Russet Homes for Russet Homes DFG applicants to avoid the duplication of Russet sending out a separate survey.
- 1.5.4 The table at **[Annex 2]** tabulates the combined 12 responses to the customer satisfaction DFG survey questions of interest to the Council.
- 1.5.5 From the responses shown in 1.5.4 in the main, DFG applicants are happy with the service they receive from the Council and the work undertaken by the builders. The main issue applicants dislike about the DFG process is the time it takes to complete.
- 1.5.6 More households are being encouraged to return their survey forms so that we can better appreciate the views of customers and hopefully use the information to better inform service delivery.

1.6 Stock Condition Survey

- 1.6.1 Under section 3 of the Housing Act 2004 the Council, as the local housing authority, must keep the housing conditions in their area under review. This is achieved by undertaking a house condition survey. The last house condition survey took place in 2005 and the final report was produced in 2006. The next survey is due in 2010.
- 1.6.2 The house condition survey provides information on the condition of the housing stock and other household related information such as income and age of the head of the household. This information is used to monitor progress against national targets for Decent Homes, the Home Energy Conservation Act 1985, fuel poverty and other national and local performance indicators. The results will also form the evidence base to inform our Housing strategy, the Housing statistical returns and our Housing Assistance policy.
- 1.6.3 Budgetary provision has been made to cover the cost of surveys conducted on a five year cycle. An important initial stage of the house condition survey action plan will be to prepare the specification and evaluate the most cost effective and quality survey method.
- 1.6.4 The survey is expected to take place in the Summer/Autumn of 2010 with an interim report scheduled for October 2010 with a final report available in January 2011.

1.6.5 Officers will report to this Board on the progress of the survey at key stages in the process.

1.7 Bringing long term empty properties back into use

- 1.7.1 The Council is committed to bringing empty properties back into use. Following a review of the empty property list in April 2008, ten of the most long term empty or problematic properties were identified for priority action. Two of these properties, one located in Aylesford and the other located in Eccles have been empty for many years. Both properties were in poor repair and uninhabitable. Attempts to encourage the owners to bring them back into use over the years have been unsuccessful.
- 1.7.2 We are pleased to report that excellent progress has been achieved in improving the condition of the Aylesford property, and the owner aims to live there upon completion of the renovation works. The renovations are hoped to be completed in early 2010. This has been achieved by utilising an informal enforcement approach by working with the owner to provide encouragement and advice. The property is no longer the eyesore of the street and has attained an appearance in keeping with the rest of the street.
- 1.7.3 Progress has also been made with the property in Eccles but utilising a formal enforcement approach. Two improvement notices have been served on the owner of this property. One of the notices being to require the owner to undertake works to reduce the risk of entry by intruders and the other requiring works to reduce the risk of harm from excess cold, fire, food safety, personal hygiene, structural collapse and falling on stairs.
- 1.7.4 The compliance period for the entry by intruders notice has expired and as a result the Council has instigated works in default to replace all the windows and external doors to the property. Net curtains have been placed at the front windows and this, with the new windows and front door, has improved the appearance of the property significantly. These works make it less easy to identify it as an empty property and hopefully will reduce the instances of it being a target for graffiti and damage.
- 1.7.5 The Council is currently seeking recovery of its costs in doing the works in default from the owner. Should the owner not pay we will be seeking an enforced sale to recover our costs, a step which will, hopefully, then lead to the property being occupied. It is likely a new owner will bring the property back into use as it is a desirable property as illustrated by the level of interest shown in it.
- 1.7.6 Should the owner pay the costs, a similar exercise as to the above will be taken with the second notice served. The cost of works associated with the second notice is significantly higher and it is hoped to utilise funding from the Kent County Council 'No Use Empty' scheme in order to offset the costs to the Council in undertaking works in default.

1.8 West Kent Landlord Forum

- 1.8.1 The West Kent Landlord Forum continues to be a successful partnership between ourselves, Sevenoaks D.C., Tunbridge Wells D.C. and the National Landlords Association.
- 1.8.2 A forum is held three times a year, once in each of the local authority locations, and is proving a useful tool in providing information to private sector landlords and getting their views on various issues.
- 1.8.3 The latest forum was held at Tonbridge & Malling on 7 October 2009. It was attended by approximately 30 landlords (even in extremely poor weather) and chaired by Councillor Mrs Jill Anderson. The topics discussed included tax issues for landlords and accreditation with updates on a wide range of subjects affecting landlords either now or in the future.
- 1.8.4 The next forum will be held at Sevenoaks District Council on 27 January 2010.

1.9 LACORS Private Sector Housing Councillors' Handbook

- 1.9.1 LACORS is the local authority co-ordinating body for regulatory services and provides support and information to regulatory services within the Council. LACORS covers regulatory services such as Food Safety, Licensing, Environmental Protection, Health and Safety, and Private Sector Housing.
- 1.9.2 Following the recent economic downturn and the recognition of the vital role Members can play in supporting local communities during these difficult times, LACORS have written a "Private Sector Housing" Members' handbook. The handbook recognises the vital role private sector housing regulatory services can provide to increase the supply of affordable quality housing and well managed private rented accommodation. The handbook includes a checklist to gauge a Council's effectiveness at dealing with private sector housing issues. It also provides a legislative context and information on local and national policies. Copies will be available at this meeting.

1.10 Legal Implications

- 1.10.1 As detailed in this report.

1.11 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.11.1 The DFGs are a mandatory grant and valid applications have to be approved within six months. Demand for Housing Assistance Grants is being managed to keep within overall budget. Fresh enquiries for some grants are being held on a waiting list until it is clear if additional funding will be available from under spends from other local authority partners during this financial year.

1.12 Risk Assessment

1.12.1 The suspension of approvals of Housing Assistance grants and the increased delay in approving DFG applications may result in reduced customer satisfaction and hence risk the reputation of the Council.

1.13 Policy Considerations

1.13.1 The broad range of policies progressed in this paper are making a positive contribution to improving the lives and living conditions of vulnerable households within the borough, thereby impacting the policy agenda in relation to healthy lifestyles, equality and diversity, safeguarding children and biodiversity/sustainability.

1.14 Recommendations

1.14.1 Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- 1) **NOTE** the actions being taken by the Kent County Council to clear the backlog of children's cases awaiting assessment by an occupational therapist;
- 2) **ENDORSE** the measures put in place to maintain the Housing Assistance Grant programme within budget; and
- 3) **ENDORSE** the use of under spend in Warm Homes Assistance to offset any overspend on Hard to Heat Homes Assistance during 2009/10.

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: Linda Hibbs

Nil

John Batty
Director of Health and Housing

Councillor Jill Anderson
Cabinet Member for Housing