

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

22 February 2010

Report of Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 HOUSING NEEDS UPDATE

Summary

This report updates Members on the activity of the Housing Options, Homelessness and Housing Register Services.

- 1.1.1 Following the return of homelessness and housing register services in March 2008, there have been a number of significant improvements in service delivery, particularly in relation to homeless prevention and temporary accommodation.

1.2 Housing options and prevention of homelessness

- 1.2.1 The number of new homeless applications taken each month has remained at a low level, 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
30.4.09 – 3	April – 3	April –2	April –3
31.5.09 – 1	May –2	May – 3	May – 3
30.6.09 – 5	June – 5	June – 1	June – 3
31.7.09 – 4	July – 8	July – 3	July – 6
31.8.09 – 3	August – 4	August – 0	August – 7
30.9.09 - 2	September - 9	September - 3	September -10
31.10.09 – 4	October – 9	October – 2	October -4
30.11.09 – 2	November – 5	November – 0	November - 4
31.12.09 – 5	December – 6	December – 1	December - 3
31.1.10 - 4	January - 5	January - 2	January - 9

- 1.2.2 The applications listed in columns three and four are not necessarily the same as those in column two. This is because a decision on a homelessness application not may be reached during the same calendar month it was made.

- 1.2.3 Approximately one third of all new approaches to the Housing Options team are given detailed advice on homelessness prevention and alternative re-housing options over the telephone during their initial call and do 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 with securing 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 2009	121	Approx 97
May 2009	89	Approx 74
June 2009	140	Approx 119
July 2009	158	Approx 127
August 2009	208	Approx 162
September 2009	181	Approx 159
October 2009	152	Approx 121
November 2009	109	Approx 82
December 2009	130	Approx 103
January 2010	143	Approx 118

1.3 Temporary Accommodation

- 1.3.1 The Council is committed to reducing the number of households placed into temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast accommodation, as a result of becoming homeless. In 2004 the Government set a target to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 31 March 2010. Our 2010 target is 41 households and we achieved this at the end of September 2008. Other than two months when the figure temporarily exceeded 41 (in October 2008 and June 2009) we have maintained the level below this figure, with a current total of 20 households in temporary accommodation at the end of January 2010.
- 1.3.2 The number of applicants in temporary accommodation is now a national indicator (NI156), which is reported on an annual basis.

Date	Number in Temporary Accommodation (AST)	Number in B&B	Total
30.4.09	35	2	37
31.5.09	37	3	40
30.6.09	37	7	44
31.7.09	24	6	31
31.8.09	15	5	20
30.9.09	15	5	20
31.10.09	14	6	20
30.11.09	15	5	20

31.12.09	15	5	20
31.1.10	15	5	20

- 1.3.3 The reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation has been achieved mainly as a result of the permanent re-housing of many of these households.

1.4 Severe weather procedure for rough sleepers

- 1.4.1 At the November meeting of the Strategic Housing Advisory Board, Members endorsed the procedure for providing emergency accommodation for rough sleepers during periods of severe weather during the winter months. During the prolonged period of below freezing weather conditions in January, we were contacted by four rough sleepers seeking assistance under this procedure. Of the four approaches, three decided not to take up the option of emergency accommodation either because they made alternative arrangements to stay with relatives or preferred to continue with their existing arrangements. The fourth was placed in bed and breakfast in Medway for four consecutive nights. This rough sleeper was assisted to secure a hostel place in Medway upon leaving the bed and breakfast.

1.5 Rough sleeper street count

- 1.5.1 On 25 November 2009, a county wide street count took place, co-ordinated by Porchlight. Teams of volunteers checked pre-agreed parts of Tonbridge town centre, and found no rough sleepers or evidence of rough sleeping.
- 1.5.2 The final result for the whole of Kent and Medway was 23 rough sleepers with evidence of a further 31. In Tunbridge Wells, three rough sleepers were found, plus nine unoccupied locations showing evidence of rough sleeping. Maidstone and Gravesend found two rough sleepers. Five rough sleepers were found in Medway, and East Kent averaged about three or four people in each borough.
- 1.5.3 Porchlight has recently commissioned research by the University of Kent into the experiences of homeless people in Kent. Their report, entitled 'Slipping through the net: homeless people in Kent' was launched at Porchlight's 'Rough Night' conference on 27 January 2010. It sets out to present a snap shot of how agencies, single homeless people and the services that are set up to assist them are perceived by each other.
- 1.5.4 Porchlight's Chief Executive Mike Barrett said, "The purpose of the report is to generate debate and enable both 'sides' to enter into open and honest dialogue. It is my hope that this will further improve joint working and allow us all to gain a deeper understanding of the problems faced by both providers of services and those who need to use them." A copy of the report can be downloaded from www.porchlight.org.uk

1.5.5 Members may have noted the recent press coverage in the Kent on Sunday newspaper dated 7 February 2010 following the launch of the report, and the reference therein to the “fobbing off” of customers who approached their local authority for assistance. We are confident that the authority referred to was not Tonbridge and Malling, and welcome Porchlight’s proposal for some further discussion about this report at a later date.

1.6 Housing Register

The table below shows number of applicants joining and leaving the housing register:

Date	Applications Received (month)	Applications Cancelled (month)	Number on Housing Register
30.4.09	April – 105	April – 233	1,364
31.5.09	May – 126	May - 71	1,978 (includes 486 transfers)
30.6.09	June - 129	June - 34	2,073 (includes 519 transfers)
31.7.09	July – 174	July – 97	2,087 (includes 527 transfers)
31.8.09	August – 168	August – 103	2,050 (includes 544 transfers)
30.9.09	September - 182	September - 103	2,097 (includes 547 transfers)
31.10.09	October - 143	October -97	2,089 (includes 555 transfers)
30.11.09	November - 139	November - 57	2,152 (includes 574 transfers)
31.12.09	December - 86	December - 119	2,204 (includes 601 transfers)
31.1.10	January - 177	January - 74	2,229 (includes 606 transfers)

1.6.1 In the last nine months the number of registered homeseekers has increased by eight percent, but the number of tenants seeking a transfer has increased by 20 per cent. This has impacted significantly on the work of the team, since existing social tenants are increasingly seeking a transfer to resolve neighbour disputes and other housing management issues. We are dealing with frequent calls and correspondence from tenants and their advocates, who often contact us in the first instance with their housing difficulties, which we ultimately have to refer back to their landlords.

1.6.2 The number of requests for medical and welfare assessments, and reviews of decisions made on priority has similarly increased, which is causing delays in the processing and updating of applications.

1.7 Deposit Bond Scheme

- 1.7.1 Members approved the use of the reviewed Rent Deposit and Deposit Bond Scheme in May 2009. Since then, we have assisted 32 families who were either threatened with homelessness or actually homeless into suitable rented accommodation in the private sector. Eight of these families have been assisted by way of a rent deposit bond, and a further six households have been provided with a rent deposit payment. An additional 18 households have been assisted with no financial outlay or ongoing liability to the Council.
- 1.7.2 Since April 2009, £4,625 has been paid in respect of repayable rent in advance loans for eight households, and £2,498 has been paid in respect of repayable rent deposit loans for six households. There are currently 14 households where the landlord has accepted a deposit bond, with a total potential financial liability of £9,871.18.
- 1.7.3 The Repossession Prevention funding has been used to prevent homelessness for a further eight households. To date £7,377.23 has been used, mostly to private sector landlords and RSLs in payments towards arrears to enable households to remain in their home. In one case, a payment was made to clear Council Tax arrears to enable a mortgage rescue to complete.

1.8 Choice Based Lettings update

- 1.8.1 In November 2009, the Kent CBL Partnership Project Board reported that Kent Homechoice now advertises on average 327 vacant homes each fortnight, or 8,500 homes a year.
- 1.8.2 The partnership has recently conducted a survey of members of Kent Homechoice. A total of 2,972 questionnaires were sent with a pre-paid envelope to members on the twelve local authority housing registers. Each area was represented equally, and there was an even number of members who had used CBL, and those who had not yet bid for a home. 960 survey forms were returned, or 32 per cent of those surveyed. The results for Tonbridge and Malling (84 responses) are included at **[Annex 1]**.
- 1.8.3 Members will recall that free sheets will no longer be provided from 2 April 2010. The cost of the free sheets are a significant part of Kent Homechoice's outgoings (and consequently those of the partners) and the need for them to be phased out was recognised as a key factor in reducing costs in the Memorandum of Understanding that was adopted by the Board in December 2008.
- 1.8.4 The withdrawal of freesheets has been widely advertised, both on the front cover of the remaining freesheets and on the website. Customers will be able to view vacancies on the website, and a reference copy will be available at most of the former distribution points in Kent.

- 1.8.5 A new method of bidding was introduced in January 2010. Customers throughout Kent can now bid for homes through their television remote control if they subscribe to Sky, Virgin Media (previously Telewest/NTL) or have an interactive Freeview box such as BT vision. Early indications show that less than one per cent of applicants currently bid via digital TV, but the numbers are slowly increasing.
- 1.8.6 On 20 January 2010 John Healey announced the award of almost £50,000 to the Kent Homechoice partnership to implement the expansion of the CBL scheme to include Medway Council and Medway Housing Society. This figure represents approximately 60 per cent of the costs of the project, and includes the development of IT systems, Kent Homechoice back office systems and support, project management and training. It is anticipated that Medway will go live by the end of May 2010.

1.9 Fair and Flexible: Statutory Guidance on Social Housing Allocations

- 1.9.1 Members will recall from the last Board meeting that the Council had made a response to the consultation on the draft statutory guidance which aimed to increase the awareness and understanding of the allocations process.
- 1.9.2 The consultation closed at the end of October and CLG published statutory guidance on social housing allocations for local authorities on 4 December 2009. Whilst we propose to amend our housing allocations scheme in the light of this guidance, this has been postponed pending further discussion with other local authority partners of Kent Homechoice. Whilst it may not be practical to introduce a Kent-wide allocations scheme, there may be scope to introduce a common assessment framework, which would be of benefit for cross borough mobility.
- 1.9.3 The proposed amendments to the housing allocation scheme will be the subject of a further report to this Board.

1.10 Government Mortgage Rescue Scheme

- 1.10.1 On 2 September 2008 the Government announced their mortgage rescue scheme providing £200m to support up to 6,000 vulnerable owner-occupiers facing repossession to remain in their home. Since the introduction of the scheme, we have been contacted by 69 customers seeking information about the scheme. Of these, five proceeded to a formal application for mortgage rescues. To date one has completed, enabling a family to remain in their home with the benefit of a shared equity loan from Moat. Two have been rejected by Moat as the properties do not meet the decent homes standard, and the other two are still awaiting a final outcome.

1.11 Social Housing Fraud Initiative

- 1.11.1 In August 2009 CLG invited local authorities to join a national drive to crack down on the unlawful sub-letting of properties in the social housing sector. The Council

expressed a commitment to working with local RSLs to identify unlawfully occupied properties and has since been allocated a grant of £10,000.

1.11.2 We are currently discussing potential initiatives with partners with a focus on enabling fraud detection at the application stage, and this will be the subject of a further report to this Board at a future date.

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.

Background papers:

contact: Lynn Wilders

Nil

John Batty
Director of Health and Housing