

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD**

**19 July 2010**

**Report of the 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 and Housing Register Services.**

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

**1.2 Housing options and prevention of homelessness**

- 1.2.1 Although the numbers of people seeking housing advice has increased in recent months, the number of new homeless applications taken each month has remained at a relatively low level, and currently the Council accepts a statutory duty to re-house around five applicants per month as a result of their homelessness.

<b>Month</b>	<b>New homeless applications taken</b>	<b>Duty to house accepted</b>	<b>Duty to house rejected</b>
<b>Total : 2009</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>58</b>
January 2010	9	3	10
February 2010	10	4	5
March 2010	12	6	5
April 2010	15	5	9
May 2010	18	5	9
June 2010	10	10	7

- 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 have 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.

<b>Month</b>	<b>Number of new approaches to Housing Options team</b>	<b>Advised on homeless prevention/private renting</b>
<b>Total : 2009</b>	<b>1717</b>	<b>Approx 1396</b>
January 2010	143	Approx 118
February 2010	151	Approx 115
March 2010	182	Approx 157
April 2010	172	Approx 146
May 2010	155	Approx 118
June 2010	168	Approx 131

### 1.3 Temporary Accommodation

- 1.3.1 The Council is committed to reducing the number of homeless households placed into temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast accommodation. In 2004 the Government set a national target for all local authorities to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 31 March 2010. Our 2010 target was 41 households and we achieved this at the end of September 2008. Since June 2009 we have consistently maintained the level below this figure, with a current total of 16 households in temporary accommodation at the end of May 2010.
- 1.3.2 The number of applicants in temporary accommodation is now a national indicator (NI156), which is reported on an annual basis.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Number in Temporary Accommodation (AST)</b>	<b>Number in B&amp;B</b>	<b>Total</b>
31.01.10	15	5	20
28.02.10	15	3	18
31.03.10	13	6	19
30.4.10	12	7	19
31.5.10	11	5	16
30.6.10	13	4	17

- 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 Housing Register

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

Month	Applications Received	Applications Cancelled	Number on Housing Register
<b>Total : 2009</b>	<b>1662</b>	<b>1177</b>	
January 2010	177	74	2,229 (includes 606 transfers)
February 2010	157	54	2,372 (includes 661 transfers)
March 2010	244	98	2,492 (includes 695 transfers)
April 2010	165	84	2,507 (includes 702 transfers)
May 2010	160	146	2,576 (includes 712 transfers)
June 2010	158	192	2,5432 (includes 717 transfers)

1.4.2 In 2009 we received an average of 139 applications each month. However, the first six months of 2010 has seen this figure increase to an average of 177 applications per month.

## 1.5 Choice based lettings (CBL) customer survey

1.5.1 All applicants on the housing register are contacted annually to review their application on or around the anniversary of their registration. However, in April 2009 all applicants were reviewed to coincide with the introduction of choice based lettings and the amended allocations scheme.

1.5.2 Following the first anniversary of the introduction of CBL, we commenced an ongoing monthly rolling review of applications. Members will recall from a report to this board in May that we included a brief customer survey with the first 600 review letters to gauge understanding of the bidding process. Customers were invited to make comments about bidding for homes and make suggestions as to how we could improve the service.

1.5.3 We received 214 completed surveys, and a further 19 were returned as 'no longer at this address'. The response rate was reasonably high at 39 per cent. A copy of the survey form and details of responses is included at **[Annex 1]** to this report.

1.5.4 Of the responses, nine (four per cent) were in Band A, 11 (five per cent) were in B and B, 73 (35 per cent) were in Band C and 118 (56 per cent) were in Band D

which is very similar to the overall breakdown of applicants on the housing register.

- 1.5.5 103 (48 per cent) of the respondents stated they did not understand the bidding system very well or at all. Several commented that they had not been given sufficient information about the process. All applicants that indicated they were not aware of how to bid, or wanted more information regarding their application, were contacted by the Homechoice Team and given appropriate advice and assistance. On contacting these applicants, many stated that they were in fact aware of the bidding process but were disappointed in the level of priority awarded to their application as they understood they were less likely to be successful. A number of these were passed on to the Housing Options Team for further advice and information.
- 1.5.6 The participation rate in CBL is steadily increasing with a current figure of 44 per cent of applicants actively bidding for properties. The majority of non-bidding applicants are in Band D, and we continue to closely monitor non-bidders in the higher priority bands.
- 1.5.7 Internet bidding remains the predominant method of expressing an interest in an advertised property, with 90 per cent of bids currently placed by customers online, and a further eight per cent placed by staff members. 44 (20 per cent) or respondents stated that they did not have access to the internet either at home at elsewhere.
- 1.5.8 For those applicants who have not yet placed a bid, 54 (49 per cent) stated they were unaware how to bid or needed more information, and a further 49 (45 per cent) stated there were no suitable properties or they did not wish to move at the current time.
- 1.5.9 A clear finding from the survey is a need for more information in an easy to understand format to guide applicants through the application, assessment and bidding processes. The Kent Homechoice Co-ordinator has recently produced a leaflet to explain how to bid via digital TV which is an increasingly popular method of bidding, especially for those with no access to the internet.
- 1.5.10 A further survey will be carried out later this year to capture the views of customers who have been housed via CBL who will be asked to give comments on the service received. Results of this survey will be presented to a future meeting of this board.

## **1.6 Common assessment framework for social allocations**

- 1.6.1 A review of our housing allocations scheme is currently on hold pending further discussion with other local authority partners of Kent Homechoice. Whilst it may not be practical to introduce a Kent-wide allocations scheme, it is proposed to introduce a common assessment framework, based on a simple banding scheme which would also simplify the process for cross borough mobility. A draft

assessment framework is being produced by Kent Housing Group, which should be available for consultation by July 2010.

- 1.6.2 In the interim, a number of minor amendments to the housing allocation scheme have been approved without the need for public consultation, in accordance with the provisions of the scheme. These include the exclusion of most homeowners with no identified housing need (previously home owners were usually placed one band lower than their assessed need unless they were assessed as Band D, where they remained), and the award of additional priority on welfare grounds to those families who have children of opposite sex sharing a bedroom, once the eldest has reached seven years of age.

## 1.7 Customer satisfaction surveys

- 1.7.1 Customers who contact the housing options team are sent a questionnaire, inviting them to score the service they received and make any comments about how the service could be improved. The table below gives details of the responses received, and the number of customers who were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall service received.
- 1.7.2 Households are encouraged to return their survey forms so that we can better appreciate the views of customers and use the information to inform and improve service delivery.

Month	Number of surveys sent	Number of surveys returned	Number who were satisfied or very satisfied with the service
April 2009	66	14	11 (79%)
May 2009	80	5	3 (60%)
June 2009	13	6	3 (50%)
July 2009	105	8	8 (100%)
August 2009	48	5	4 (80%)
September 2009	146	19	13 (68%)
October 2009	110	10	8 (80%)
November 2009	0	2	2 (100%)
December 2009	121	1	0 (0%)
January 2010	235	29	12 (41%)
February 2010	111	27	15 (56%)
March 2010	15	2	2 (100%)
<b>Total : 2009/10</b>	<b>1,050</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>81 (63%)</b>
April 2010	271	25	19 (76%)
May 2010	22	6	6 (100%)
June 2010	107	6	4 (67%)

## 1.8 Rent Deposit Bond Scheme

- 1.8.1 Members approved the use of the reviewed Rent Deposit and Deposit Bond Scheme in May 2009. In the year 2009/10 we assisted 42 families who were either threatened with homelessness or actually homeless into suitable rented accommodation in the private sector. 11 of these families have been assisted by way of a rent deposit bond, and a further eight households have been provided with a rent deposit or rent in advance payment. An additional 23 households have been assisted with no financial outlay or ongoing liability to the Council.

Month	Bonds	Loans	No financial outlay
<b>Total : 2009/10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>April 2010</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>May 2010</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>June 2010</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>

- 1.8.2 Since April 2009, £7,320.91 has been paid in respect of repayable rent in advance loans for 12 households, and £7,020.63 has been paid in respect of repayable rent deposit loans for 12 households. There are currently 14 households where the landlord has accepted a deposit bond, with a total potential financial liability of £13,668.06.

## 1.9 County Court desk update

- 1.9.1 Members will recall from a previous report to this Board that we received a Communities and Local Government grant to part fund County Court Desk services in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells County Courts for an approximate nine month period from 1 November 2008 to 31 July 2009 for residents in Tonbridge and Malling.
- 1.9.2 1.9.2 The County Court desk has continued since the funding ended. In Tunbridge Wells, the County Court desk is operated by Tunbridge Wells and District CAB which is now funded by the Legal Services Commission. Maidstone County Court is similarly served.
- 1.9.3 In Tunbridge Wells County Court, the desk is covered most Tuesdays when housing cases are listed. There are listings at least three weeks out of four.
- 1.9.4 The court desk covers the whole day and deals with proceedings involving tenants in both the private and social rented sectors, and homeowners with mortgage and/or secured loan problems. On average around four or five customers are assisted each session, with positive outcomes in about 90 per cent of these cases. Customers are often able to negotiate more favourable terms with the support of the CAB to ensure that any agreements are sustainable, with advisers undertaking follow up work which can help to identify underlying problems which

have contributed to the housing problems in the first place for example debt and benefit problems.

Background papers:

contact: Lynn Wilders

Nil

John Batty  
Director of Health and Housing