

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

28 May 2012

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. The number of households seeking advice and/or applying for social rented accommodation remains at a significant level, particularly as a result of economic downturn.

1.2 Housing options and prevention of homelessness

- 1.2.1 Although the number of people contacting the housing options team for advice remains high, the number of formal homeless applications taken each month has continued to decrease in the current year and is a relatively low proportion of the total. The number of households where the Council has accepted the duty to rehouse them has remained at an average of three per month.

Month	New homeless applications	Duty to house accepted	Duty to house rejected
Total 2010/11	95	38	63
Total April – December 2011	43	34	10
January 2012	4	1	3
February 2012	5	2	3
March 2012	3	0	3
Total 2011/12	55	37	19
April 2012	4	0	1

- 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 Whilst the number of accepted homeless households have remained stable in Tonbridge and Malling over the past year, national statistics show an increase of 18 per cent in the number of accepted homeless households in the quarter October-December 2011 compared to the same quarter in 2010. For local authorities within the South East region, this increase was even higher at 24 per cent.

1.3 Housing options approaches

- 1.3.1 The following table gives a breakdown of the outcomes of all recorded approaches to the housing options team.

2012	Contact Made	Advice Only	Prevented	Relieved	Open
January	73	27	8	0	38
February	70	33	5	1	31
March	39	9	3	0	27
April	41	9	5	1	26

Contact Made – Total number of customers approaching Options Team

Advice Only – Customer able to solve their own housing problems following advice and assistance from the Options team.

Prevented – Advice and assistance from the Options Team to secure accommodation to prevent customer from becoming homeless.

Relieved - Advice and assistance from the Options Team allowing customer to remain in their home, from where they have been threatened with homelessness.

Open – Continued advice and assistance to prevent or relieve homelessness.

1.4 Temporary accommodation

- 1.4.1 The following table gives the numbers of households living in temporary accommodation at the end of each month.

Date	Number in Temporary Accommodation (AST)	Number in B&B	Total
31.1.12	8	5	13
29.2.12	6	5	11
31.3.12	6	3	9
30.4.12	6	6	12

- 1.4.2 Whilst the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation has remained stable in Tonbridge and Malling over the past year, national

statistics show an increase of two per cent in the number of households in all types of temporary accommodation during the quarter October-December 2011 compared to the same quarter in 2010. For local authorities within the South East region, this increase was even higher at 15 per cent. The numbers living in bed and breakfast accommodation has increased by 37 per cent nationally over this period, with the corresponding increase in the South East region of 44 per cent.

1.5 Housing register

- 1.5.1 Demand for social housing remains at a high level, with increasing numbers seeking a move on medical or welfare grounds. The table below shows the number of applicants joining and leaving the housing register, including homeseekers (those applying for their first social tenancy) and transfers (existing social tenants applying for a move):

Month	Applications Received	Applications Cancelled	Number on Housing Register
January 2012	161	107	1,819 (includes 668 transfers)
February 2012	152	112	1,916 (includes 644 transfers)
March 2012	138	95	1,897 (includes 649 transfers)
April 2012	143	74	1,945 (includes 681 transfers)

- 1.5.2 Applications are regularly reviewed, and those who either fail to respond to their annual review, or have moved since their original application are cancelled.
- 1.5.3 The following table gives the breakdown of applicants who have been housed through choice based lettings:

Month	Homeseekers	Transfers	Total
January 2012	19 (70%)	8 (30%)	27
February 2012	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	16
March 2012	21 (72%)	8 (28%)	29
April 2012	24 (71%)	10 (29%)	34

1.6 Kent Homechoice

- 1.6.1 On 5 April 2012 an updated version of the Kent Homechoice website was launched. We can now advertise items of interest to the general public or target specific groups of users with advertising campaigns via this website. This functionality can be used to deliver items of interest to our customers such as targeted housing options and the information viewed by them can now be tailored

to suit their individual circumstances. To monitor customer's views, there is a simple question on the website asking users whether they prefer the new version to the old version.

- 1.6.2 The Kent Homechoice online mutual exchange service is moving to a more customer-friendly website. There are currently 8,226 registered tenants who will benefit from improvements to the system, including the ability to amend their advertisements after they have been made live on the website.
- 1.6.3 The government sponsored Digital Exchange service, which will enable vulnerable tenants to search for swaps through their TV or mobile, is due to go live in June 2012.

1.7 Repossession Prevention Fund

- 1.7.1 Members will recall from a previous report to this Board in July 2010 that DCLG awarded TMBC a grant of £38,000 in June 2009 to set up a specific fund for preventing repossessions. The fund was primarily focused on providing small grants and repayable loans to prevent repossessions and evictions across all forms of tenure.
- 1.7.2 In July 2010 Members endorsed the use of this funding to provide small loans and grants in the circumstances described in the accompanying procedure for administering the repossession prevention fund.
- 1.7.3 To date, this funding has been used to prevent homelessness for 22 households. To date £25,492.05 has been used, mostly to private sector landlords and housing associations in payments towards arrears to enable households to remain in their home. Of the £25,492.05 used, £8,964.12 was paid to ten families as non repayable grants and the remaining £16,527.93 is currently being repaid by a further twelve households.

Year	Number of cases	Grant Amount	Loan Amount	Loan Repayments
2009/10	9	£3,023.50 (5 cases)	£5,247 (4 cases)	£2,467.15
2010/11	11	£4,803.62 (4 cases)	£10,161.05 (7 cases)	£3,864.25
2011/12	2	£1,137.00 (1 case)	£1,19.88 (1 case)	£139.98

- 1.7.4 In March 2012, DCLG awarded a further payment of £30,000 to TMBC as part of its commitment to supporting homeowners and tenants at risk of losing their homes. This additional funding has increased the amount available to £48,979.33, and will enable the Housing Options team to continue to tackle homelessness due to repossession, by offering interest free loans or grants.

1.7.5 The existing procedure will not need to be amended as the underlying principles remain the same. DCLG guidance practice suggests that loans or grants from this fund should range from £1,000 to £3,000 ideally and would be capped to a maximum of £5,000 in exceptional circumstances.

1.7.6 Examples of how this fund could be used are:

- one off payments to clear or reduce mortgage arrears where lenders are willing to write down the level of arrears in return from a contribution from the homeowner. These payments would not be made unless the homeowner had acted on money advice, and was able to meet any existing or newly negotiated monthly repayments;
- one off payments as a contribution to clearing or part settling second charge actions where that charge had been taken out against the property for security;
- one off payments for tenants in the private rented sector or social sector who are in rent arrears due to debt or income shocks following loss of earnings or reduced hours, with no previous history of rent arrears. This should only be payable following the outcome of money advice where ability to afford the continuing rent payments were affordable following outcome of debt advice;
- making a joint agreement with a lender, landlord and household to resolve arrears. For example, a third of the arrears could be paid by off through a hardship payment, a third through a repayable loan from the fund, and a third written off by the landlord or lender;
- boost existing prevention funds across the whole range of local authority prevention work;
- boost existing deposit bond schemes where it is not possible to save the person from homelessness in the property they are; and
- supporting mortgage rescue cases where necessary, for example where a household is in negative equity. In cases such as this the lenders would need to consider writing off overhanging debt, and they would be more willing to do this with the financial support that the local authority might be able to offer from this fund.

1.7.7 This is not an exhaustive list, and local authorities are expected to use the fund to assist with their current prevention services.

1.7.8 Loans or grants would only be agreed where the recipient is prepared to act on money advice to resolve the problem that has led to the accumulation of arrears. Loans or grants would only be offered where there is no other way to resolve the problem. TMBC will seek to provide this assistance with loans wherever possible

rather than grants to ensure that the fund is recycled to enable maximum use of the fund.

1.8 DCLG Homelessness Funding

- 1.8.1 In December 2011, Housing Minister Grant Shapps announced that £20 million would be made available to Local Authorities to prevent single homelessness and rough sleeping. The expectation is that funding is used to bolster front line provision across regional groupings to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping to support the delivery of ‘No Second Night Out nationwide”, the Government’s vision to end rough sleeping.
- 1.8.2 Medway Council has been chosen as lead authority for the ‘Kent’ grouping which will include Medway, Ashford, Canterbury, Dartford, Dover, Gravesham, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Shepway, Swale, Thanet, Tonbridge & Malling and Tunbridge Wells. The Kent group were awarded **£577,000**.
- 1.8.3 The funding will enable a co-ordinated approach across traditional local authority boundaries and draw upon good practice examples within the groupings. There is therefore an expectation that the funding will remain as a single approach and will not be split between the authorities within the designated group.
- 1.8.4 This one off payment is intended to support work across all of the above local authority areas, with the aim of ensuring that all homeless people approaching an authority for assistance get:
- tailored advice and assistance as appropriate to prevent or resolve their homelessness;
 - an offer of suitable accommodation if required (be that access to the PRS, a hostel place or emergency accommodation); and
 - access to or linked into any additional support they may need.
- 1.8.5 A working Group with lead officers from each local authority has been set up with the aim of reviewing current service provision, identifying any gaps in services and develop action plans which will be submitted to a specialist advisor for approval. Examples of some of the proposed initiatives are;
- to promote a generic service across Kent and identify a minimum service level to assist all single homeless applicants and rough sleepers;
 - to raise awareness and early intervention to prevent homelessness and support residents likely to be affect by welfare reform;
 - develop a web based self-service process to enable single homeless/rough sleepers secure settled accommodation. This will be linked with

tenant/landlord support to encourage landlords to provide accommodation and help tenants sustain their tenancies;

- develop a Kent wide rough sleeper database within the current Kent wide housing database - Locata, including a PrOMT type tool to support service development to prevent rough sleeping; and
- to raise awareness for 11 to 16 year olds on homelessness and early intervention in this age group to prevent homelessness.

1.8.6 Members will be updated on the progress of this project by further reports to this board in due course.

1.9 Legal Implications

1.9.1 The Council has a legal duty to provide accommodation for households that are homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need. In the absence of suitable permanent accommodation, bed and breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation must be made available instead. Use of the repossession prevention funding to prevent homelessness occurring will reduce the need to take a homeless application in some circumstances.

1.10 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.10.1 The use of the Repossession Prevention fund to prevent homelessness, including grants in appropriate cases, will reduce the need to rely on bed and breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation, and ensure that certain households who could otherwise face lengthy periods of unsettled housing can remain in their current home.

1.11 Risk Assessment

1.11.1 There is a significant risk that levels of homelessness (and the consequent use of temporary accommodation) will increase as a result of the recession. The Repossession Prevention fund could reduce the need to rely on temporary accommodation, and ensure that more households can avoid homelessness.

Background papers:

contact: Lynn Wilders

Nil

John Batty
Director of Health and Housing