

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITIES and HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

27 February 2018

Report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE

This report provides a summary update in various key areas across the Council's housing service.

1.1 Disabled Facilities Grant update

1.1.1 In the Autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced an additional £42 million of capital funding for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) in 2017-18 for local authorities in England. Towards the end of January 2018 Tonbridge & Malling B.C. received a further £107,283 from central Government for expenditure on DFGs or any other social care capital projects.

1.1.2 I am pleased to report that to date in 2017/18 we have approved significantly more DFGs than in previous years. This is due to the following actions/initiatives:

- West Kent Hospital Discharge Scheme – referrals in directly from the Health & Housing Coordinator following a home visit;
- Occupational Therapists seconded into the Housing Team - allowing a more flexible approach to enquiries, faster response times and support across the whole housing function;
- More targeted promotion of grants using benefit/disability information, assisted bin scheme list and local publications;
- Focus on offering Warm & Healthy Homes visits to residents where we can provide informal advice on keeping them safe in their homes with a real focus on prevention e.g. repairing paths to prevent falls;
- Focus on improving awareness of our services amongst health colleagues and other partners we work with.

1.1.3 We also have within our case list, the highest number of children's cases that we have had for a considerable number of years. We have been undertaking some promotion of availability of grants for children and we will continue to build on this across West Kent.

1.1.4 A full report on the DFG activity and spend for 2017/18 along with the West Kent Hospital Discharge Scheme will be provided at the next meeting of this Board.

1.2 Changes to licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation

1.2.1 Under the Housing Act 2004 mandatory licensing is required for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) that are

- Three or more storeys high **and**
- Occupied by five or more people in more than one household **and**
- Share bathroom, toilet or kitchen facilities.

1.2.2 In response to its consultation paper in December 2016 on HMO reforms, Government is proposing to:

- Extend mandatory licensing to all HMOs (other than section 257 HMOs and flats in larger purpose built blocks) that are occupied by five or more persons in two or more separate households. This will remove the existing "three storey" rule so that buildings meeting the above criteria, regardless of the number of floors, will fall within the scope of mandatory licensing.
- Introduce mandatory conditions in all licensed HMOs concerning minimum sleeping room sizes and maximum number of occupants. This would mean that when licensing the HMO the Council would disregard rooms of less than a prescribed size of usable floor area from being included as a room suitable for sleeping accommodation. The prescribed sizes are likely to be 6.52 m² for one person and 10.23 m² for two persons.
- Introduce a mandatory condition in all licensed HMOs concerning the provision of suitable and adequate refuse storage facilities for the number of persons or households permitted to occupy the HMO.

1.2.3 It is envisaged that the above changes, subject to parliamentary approval, will come into force in October 2018. The Council currently has twelve licensed HMOs but it is estimated that this number may at least double with the removal of the three or more storeys rule.

1.3 Energy Deal Collective Switching Scheme

1.3.1 Members are reminded that Tonbridge & Malling BC has been taking part in the Energy Deal collective switching scheme. A collective switching scheme is where a third party negotiates a better energy tariff on behalf of a collective of residents.

Such schemes enable residents to register an interest in participating in a 'reverse energy auction' and to subsequently receive a new energy tariff offer. The energy providers that offer the best deal on the auction day for the majority of residents will be selected. There is no obligation on registrants to accept the offer.

- 1.3.2 Under an interim arrangement the Energy Deal collective switching scheme partnership with Dartford District Council, Dover District Council, Gravesham Borough Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council accessed East Riding of Yorkshire's contract with iChoosr, thereby ensuring continuity of the collective switching initiative while a longer term procurement process took place.
- 1.3.3 This procurement process, led by Dover District Council, has now been completed and the contract has been awarded to iChoosr.
- 1.3.4 In liaison with Legal Services each Energy Deal authority will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with iChoosr enabling them to access the contract. Each authority will also enter into a new MOU/Participation agreement to confirm our continuing partnership working with Energy Deal councils and to reflect the new arrangements.

1.4 Energy Company Obligation – Flexible Eligibility Scheme

- 1.4.1 At the July 2017 meeting of this Board, Members were updated regarding the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) Flexible Eligibility mechanism whereby obligated energy companies are able to allocate ten percent of their Affordable Warmth Obligation to installing energy efficiency measures in households declared as eligible by a local authority.
- 1.4.2 The Council has published its Local Authority Flexible Eligibility Statement of Intent to enable those fuel poor households in the borough to benefit from energy efficiency improvements at the following link:

<https://www.tmbc.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/sustainability/energy-efficiency-advice-and-assessment>
- 1.4.3 The Flexible Eligibility approach provides an opportunity for local authorities to engage with energy suppliers by identifying and making referrals of those fuel poor households on low income, who are vulnerable to the effects of living in a cold home, and whose homes would benefit from energy efficiency improvements. Participation in flexible eligibility is optional for both energy suppliers and local authorities. Tonbridge & Malling BC is only one of three across Kent so far that has published its statement of intent.
- 1.4.4 Participating local authorities must publish a statement of intent on their website advising how they intend to identify eligible households for referral. A local authority declaration must be made determining the reason a household meets the flexible eligibility criteria. It should be noted that including a household in a declaration does not guarantee the installation of measures. The final decision

rests with the energy company and is subject to additional factors, such as, survey of the property and cost of measure, energy savings that can be achieved by installing the measure/s and whether the energy company has met or is close to their obligation target.

- 1.4.5 We will be targeting households that we believe may benefit from our flexible eligibility approach to provide assistance with heating and insulation.

1.5 Homelessness Reduction Act

- 1.5.1 As members will be aware the Homelessness Reduction Act will come in to force on 3 April 2018. The Act will modify and extend the existing homelessness duties in several ways, the key changes being;

- To improve the advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness to everyone in the Councils district.
- To extend the period during which a person becomes threatened with homelessness from the current 28 days to 56 days, allowing more time for the council to prevent homelessness.
- Introduces new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness for all eligible people regardless of priority need and intentionality.
- Introduces assessments and personal housing plans setting out the actions to be taken by the council and the applicant to secure accommodation to prevent and relieve homelessness.

- 1.5.2 It is expected that these changes will result in an increase in the number of customers approaching the Council for assistance and with this in mind we have recruited an additional Housing Options and Support Officer, increasing the team to five Officers.

- 1.5.3 Further to this a new Accommodation Team has been created specifically to work on initiatives to find and secure accommodation from the private sector intended to increase the Councils access to affordable housing options to resolve housing need and prevent and relieve homelessness. The Team will also be responsible for the management of emergency and temporary accommodation.

1.6 On-line Registration

- 1.6.1 Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council currently use the Choice Based Lettings system, Kent Homechoice for the allocation of social housing in the borough. Applicants who wish to be considered for affordable and social housing must apply to the housing register in order to have access to Kent Homechoice. Applicants are currently required to complete a paper application form which they submit to the Housing Options and Support team for processing.

1.6.2 We have now decided to offer our customers the option of on-line registration so that they have a choice of how they wish to submit their application. Many of our customers already use an on-line pre-assessment tool which informs them if they are eligible to join the register and we have received feedback from those customers that they would like to have the rest of the form available on line. It is likely on-line registration will be available by April 2018.

1.7 Auto-bidding

1.7.1 We are also looking to provide our customers with the option of 'automatic' bidding when they apply for housing. The customer will be able to register the type of property they need and the areas in which they would prefer to live in their application so that when a property is advertised that meets their specific requirements, their interest will be automatically registered.

1.7.2 The advantages of auto-bidding are;

- Customers will not miss suitable properties if they forget to log on to Kent Homechoice for one or more weeks.
- Customers will not have to call the Council to bid on their behalf if they are unable to access Kent Homechoice.
- Officers will be able to register vulnerable customers for auto-bidding rather than bidding manually which could lead to wasted bids and missed opportunities.
- Short-lists will be reduced because customers will invariably bid for properties just because they are available without properly considering the property type or its location.

1.8 Legal Implications

1.8.1 From 3rd April 2018 the Housing Service will be applying the new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act.

1.8.2 Later this year the Private Sector Housing Team will review its procedures to adopt new requirements of the Government's HMO reforms.

1.9 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.9.1 None arising from this report.

1.10 Risk Assessment

None arising from this report.

Background papers:

Nil

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