

A proposal concerning the future of Tonbridge House retirement housing scheme

This information sheet sets out the proposal being made for the future of Tonbridge House retirement housing scheme, and other important information.

Before you complete the attached questionnaire, please take the time to read this document as it contains a lot of useful information.

October 2013

Introduction

This information sheet provides information for residents about the Council's proposals for Tonbridge House retirement housing scheme (Tonbridge House).

This information sheet tells you:

1. The background to the proposals for the change of use
2. How the blocks were shortlisted
3. Summary of findings for Tonbridge House retirement housing scheme
4. The proposal
5. How we will consult with you
6. The deadline for submission of completed questionnaires or other comments relating to the proposal
7. Questions and answers

Background to the proposal

Over the past two years, Croydon has seen a significant increase in homelessness. Not every household that approaches the Council is accepted as homeless. In fact, Croydon's process for making enquiries into homeless applications is such that we accept a statutory duty to provide accommodation to fewer households than many other London boroughs.

In 2009/10, the Council accepted a statutory duty to house 380 families with children. By 2011/12, this had more than doubled to 715. In 2011/12 Croydon saw a greater increase in homelessness than any London borough except Lambeth.

Demand from statutory homeless families is at a critical level and the forecast for the next few months, and possibly the next few years, is for further sharp increases in the number of people requiring general needs temporary accommodation.

As a result, the Council has had little option but to accommodate homeless families in council housing temporarily or, increasingly, in accommodation such as bed and breakfast hotels, a situation that creates a number of problems.

For example, nightly charged bed and breakfast accommodation is expensive. During the nine months between April and December 2012, the Council spent just over £5 million on the provision of bed and breakfast accommodation for statutorily homeless households. Some, but not all, of this cost is covered by housing benefit, and the Council has to make up the shortfall – which was £1million over that nine-month period. This is not sustainable.

The actual cost to the Council is projected to rise to £1.9m. Unfortunately, this places continuing pressure on the General Fund which is the pot that all the Council's income goes into except for rents and leasehold charges.

Up until around 2008/9, the Council was able to source private rented accommodation, which provided sufficient properties to meet the demand for general needs temporary accommodation and homeless prevention. However, the supply of private rented properties has virtually dried up. To illustrate this, in the year 2008/09 the Council secured 373 private sector properties for homeless households. By 2010/11 this had fallen to 93 and last year (2011/12) had dropped to 30 properties.

The increase in demand from homeless families and the reduction in the number of properties that the Council is able to secure through the private sector are due to a number of reasons that are beyond the Council's control such as those listed below:

- The need for councils to make savings each year, and provide the same or more services with less money.
- The difficulty in borrowing money e.g. mortgages. The effect of this is that more people are looking to rent properties instead of buying and this pushes up rents to levels that many people cannot afford.
- The introduction of new rules that will restrict the size of accommodation that people can receive Housing Benefit for based on the number of people in the household.

Although all London boroughs are faced with this problem, Croydon has been hit particularly hard due to the factors set out above, the size and make-up of Croydon's population, and the relatively limited social housing resources we have available for households in housing need. The situation has been compounded by households and housing providers from outside the borough being attracted to Croydon due to its relatively cheap rents and good transport connections.

This growing demand means that the Council has to look at options for how it can make best use of its existing housing stock to provide as many roofs over people's heads as possible, while also balancing the needs of different households at a time of great financial difficulty.

'General needs' is the name given to housing that the Council makes available to any type of household including older people who do not wish to live in retirement housing.

The council is aware that there is an imbalance between general needs accommodation and the supply of council-owned retirement housing schemes in the borough in that the council has 24 retirement housing schemes providing social rented homes for 1,050 older people. However, the average wait for retirement housing ranges from one year to just under two years, but for general needs housing, people wait between eight months and 11 years for a one bedroom property. For family accommodation, the wait can be even longer.

As well as trying to balance the needs of different households, there are a number of factors that the council has to take into account; these include older people choosing to stay in their own homes instead of moving into retirement accommodation. The effect of this is that the number of people wanting to move into retirement housing has been falling, making some retirement housing schemes difficult to let. This has been the case for some time.

Yet, on the other hand, demand from statutory homeless households is at critical levels and the Council's provision plan suggests that there will be increasing difficulty in meeting its responsibility to homeless families with children. In January 2013, there were 11,000 people on the Council's housing waiting list and, of these only 258 were retirement housing applicants.

As a result, the Council has to make some difficult decisions about the way that its housing stock is used to meet this increasing need and ensure that it is making effective use of housing resources, including looking at the possibility of changing the classification of one of the retirement housing schemes to general needs, thus providing temporary accommodation for homeless families with children as a cost-effective alternative to nightly charged bed and breakfast with shared facilities.

In the light of the issues outlined above a detailed feasibility study was carried out to identify retirement housing schemes which might be suitable for a change of use from retirement housing to general needs temporary accommodation for homeless families with children.

How the blocks were selected and shortlisted

The feasibility study involved a three stage selection process which was:

Stage 1:

Drawing up a long list of retirement housing schemes which may be suitable for general needs housing.

Stage 2

Three criteria were applied at this stage:

- Popularity;
- Availability of alternative retirement housing schemes near by; and
- The composition of the block.

Stage 3

This part of the evaluation process involved looking at:

- Past and future investment needs including the number of adaptations;
- The age profile of the tenants;
- The number of tenants that receive monitoring calls or face to face contact from Careline Plus.

Stage 1

Stage 1 began with a long list of the 11 high-rise blocks. The reasons for using those blocks as a starting point were:

- All are high-rise blocks that have previously been deemed "hard to let" resulting in a situation during 2006, that saw vacancies arising on the upper floors having to be advertised in the local press, and offered with rent-free weeks to improve take-up;
- That anecdotal evidence suggests that the high-rise blocks, particularly above the fourth floor, are less popular with older people; and

- The blocks, not having been specifically built as retirement housing, would have been used as general needs accommodation at some stage in the past and therefore are considered to be generally suitable for declassification and conversion to general needs housing.
- The 11 blocks considered were:
 - Beech House
 - Bridge Place
 - Cedar House
 - College Green
 - Garnet Road
 - Gillett Road
 - Gordon Crescent
 - Laxton Court
 - Sevenoaks House
 - Tonbridge House
 - Windmill Bridge House

Stage 2

Having created the list of the 11 high-rise blocks, the following criteria were examined:

Criteria 1: popularity

- The average number of offers per let before the property was accepted was compared with the average for all retirement housing over six financial years starting at 2006/7.
- The total and average number of days from properties at each block being ready for let to actual let was also examined over the same six-year time frame.
- The reasons for refusal, and the reasons for properties becoming void, were also reviewed to assess whether there were any recurring reasons for this.

Criteria 2: availability of alternative accommodation

- The availability of suitable alternative accommodation is seen as being critical to successfully resettling the existing tenants and ensuring that their existing support network is not disrupted should the use of a block be changed.
- Assessing the availability of other council-owned and registered social landlord (RSL) retirement housing schemes available near by.

Criteria 3: the composition of the block

- Due to the critical need for general needs temporary accommodation, the number of flats in each block was considered, as well as the type of property. That is, whether the block comprised only one-bedroom flats or a mixture of flats and bed sits.
- The needs of the existing residents are of paramount importance. Therefore, the initial list of blocks was narrowed down further by excluding blocks which did not form part of a “twin-tower” configuration. This approach has two main benefits, as the neighbouring block is of the same or similar structure and composition, it will enable many of the existing tenants to relocate to the neighbouring block and

remain in their immediate community, thus minimising, the level of disruption as much as possible.

The blocks shortlisted

By applying criteria 1, 2, and 3 described above, 7 of the 11 high rise blocks were not shortlisted and these are:

- Beech House
- Bridge Place
- Cedar House
- College Green
- Gordon Crescent
- Laxton Court
- Windmill Bridge House

The four retirements housing schemes which were shortlisted are:

- Gillett Road
- Garnet Road
- Tonbridge House
- Sevenoaks House

Reason for the short list

Criteria 1: Popularity

- Across all 11 schemes, there were many reasons for people refusing offer of accommodation.
- Based on the average number of offers and the number of days Sevenoaks House took the highest number of and the most number of days to let the property compared to Gillett Road and Garnet Road and Tonbridge House.

Criteria 2: Availability of alternative accommodation

- In the case of Sevenoaks House and Tonbridge House, there are 17 other retirement schemes near by.
- Both Gillett and Garnet Road have the highest number of alternative retirement housing schemes close by. In total, there are 23 other retirement housing schemes close to Gillett and Garnet Road; seven owned by the Council and 16 owned by registered social landlords.
- Beech and Cedar House have the lowest number of alternative retirement housing near by.

Criteria 3: the composition of the block

- Only Sevenoaks House, Tonbridge House, Gillett Road, Garnet Road, and Beech House and Cedar House have a neighbouring twin retirement housing block. The other seven blocks in the long list do not.
- The flats in all four shortlisted blocks are one bed roomed and self contained
- Gillett Road and Garnet Road each have a greater number of flats than Sevenoaks and Tonbridge House.
- Sevenoaks House and Tonbridge House each block have 39 flats.
- None of the four blocks require any major alteration to make it suitable for families with children to live in.

Stage 3

Having arrived at a shortlist of four blocks, a fourth criteria was looked at as well as other considerations. The details of criteria 4 and other factors are detailed below

Criteria 4: past and future investment needs

The past and future investment needs were reviewed including:

- Whether the properties meet the decent homes standard;
- Whether kitchen and bathroom refurbishments have been carried out;
- The number of level-access showers, adapted bathrooms and/or kitchens;
- Whether future investment needs took into account whether the blocks had any characteristics which would need major alteration beyond any works already programmed to make them suitable for homeless families with children and what level of investment would be required.

Other factors taken into consideration

- The age profile of existing tenants at all 11 high-rise retirement housing blocks was calculated.
- Finally, a basic dependency analysis looking at whether tenants receive monitoring calls from Invicta or face-to-face contact from Careline Plus was carried out.
- The availability of communal facilities such as a communal lounge.

Change of use at Gillett Road retirement housing scheme

In the light of the above, a consultation exercise was carried out with tenants living at Gillett Road retirement housing scheme (Gillett Road) about the proposal to change the use of the block from retirement housing to general needs temporary accommodation for homeless families with children.

Following the consultation process and completion of a detailed equality impact assessment, the decision was made by the Council's Cabinet to change the use of Gillett Road to general needs temporary accommodation for families with children subject to taking a number of steps to address the concerns raised by tenants at the block during the consultation. For example, to deal with concerns of anti-social behaviour once families with children moved into the block the Council have committed to provide a concierge service at the block to minimise the risk of anti-social behaviour as well as managing the communal areas such as the lounge and laundry.

The proposal for the future of Tonbridge House

Although the use of Gillett Road has been changed to general needs temporary housing, there are still not enough properties to meet the demand from homeless families.

During the year 2011/12, the council was approached by 2,279 households. Of those, the council accepted that it had a statutory duty to provide accommodation for 839. In the same year, 876 properties became void and available to let.

In the year 2012/13 the number of households accepted under its statutory duty had increased to 916 but the number of properties that became void and available to let fell to 860. Due to this situation, the Council needs to make sure that it is making the best use of the homes that it has to house as many people as possible.

Overall, the reason for this proposal is the very serious shortage of family housing, but there is a lot of retirement housing in Croydon, and we often have difficulty finding people who want to move into some of these empty flats.

The findings leading to the proposal concerning the future of Tonbridge House

- After Garnet Road, Tonbridge House is the next block of the four shortlisted block that might be suitable for conversion to general needs temporary accommodation.
- Although Garnet Road is ranked second in the shortlist, it is not considered to be suitable to be considered for a change of use because it is the twin block of Gillett Road.
- Gillett Road is in the process of being changed to general needs temporary accommodation for homeless families with children. Therefore, any vacancies arising at Garnet Road have been temporarily ring fenced so that tenants at Gillett Road who wish to relocate, have the option of moving only a very short distance into the neighbouring block to minimise disruption.
- While the closeness of Gillett and Garnet Road was known from the start, it was still appropriate to originally rank them 1& 2 based upon the criteria detailed above. If the consultation on Gillett Road had led to a decision that it should not be converted, it would then have been appropriate to go on to consider Garnet Road for change of use.
- Like Gillett Road and Garnet Road, Sevenoaks House (Sevenoaks) and Tonbridge House (Tonbridge) are a pair of retirement housing blocks and would enable the use of one of the pair to be changed whilst providing existing tenants who wish to relocate with the option of moving of moving into the neighbouring block subject to the availability of void properties.
- There are a reasonable number (17) of other retirement housing schemes near to Tonbridge House. Tonbridge has a higher number of adapted baths/showers than Sevenoaks. Level access showers in particular are generally less appealing to families with small children.
- As at August 2012, 37% of tenants at Tonbridge were aged 65-74, compared with 29% at Sevenoaks. 40% and 29% respectively were aged between 75-84 years of age. 7% of tenants at Tonbridge were over the age of 85 and 17% at Sevenoaks. Overall the number of tenants between the 65-74 years at Tonbridge is lower than Sevenoaks but and the number between the 75-84 age range is higher at Tonbridge House.
- However, despite the higher number of people aged between 75-84, a desk-top dependency analysis of tenants of Tonbridge carried out in August 2012, suggests that dependency levels there are lower than Sevenoaks. That is, 28% of tenants at

Tonbridge have not contact with Carline or Invicta compared with 19% at Sevenoaks House.

- A higher number of tenants at Sevenoaks receive monitoring calls from Invicta a 73% at Sevenoaks compared with 59% of tenants at Tonbridge.
- Other factors taken into consideration are the availability of communal facilities, in that Tonbridge has a small community room compared to Sevenoaks House which has two that are available to existing tenants. In addition, like Garnet Road, the equipment for the community alarm (Carline) is located in Sevenoaks.

A proposal to increase the amount of housing for homeless families

The previous pages explained that, due to a number of factors beyond the Council's control, it is facing high and increasing levels of demand for temporary accommodation from statutory homeless families with children for whom the Council has accepted the responsibility of housing. As a result the Council have to make some difficult decisions about the way that the Council's housing stock is used to meet this increasing need.

Because of this, the Council is considering changing the classification of your block from retirement housing to general needs housing to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households with children.

The proposal would be to change the use of Tonbridge House retirement block to provide general needs temporary accommodation. If agreed, this would change the type of households who live there to include homeless families with children.

The options

We are seeking your views on the three options presented below.

Option 1: Keep Tonbridge House as retirement accommodation and other retirement housing block as retirement housing (in other words do nothing)

Under this option, there would be no change for tenants at Tonbridge House or tenants of any other retirement housing block.

However, the Council need to increase the supply of general needs housing and reduce the cost of providing bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children. If all of the retirement housing blocks are kept as they are at the moment there will be less supply of general needs accommodation and pressure will continue to be placed on the general fund

Option 2 (preferred option): Change the use of Tonbridge House retirement housing scheme to general needs housing classification

Under this option, the Council would change the use of Tonbridge House from retirement housing to general needs temporary accommodation for homeless families with children.

If this option were chosen, from around 1 April 2014, families with children would be housed in the block. Each family would live in the block usually lasting around six months while their case was investigated by the Council

Option 3: Change the use of another retirement housing block to general needs housing classification

Under this option there would be no change for Tonbridge House but the use of another retirement housing block would need to change from retirement housing to general needs temporary accommodation for homeless families with children.

If this option were chosen, from around 1 April 2014, families with children would be housed in the block. Each family would live in the block usually lasting around six months while their case was investigated by the Council.

Consultation

We want to hear your views on the proposal and options presented, as these will form part of the decision-making process.

Do you need help to complete the questionnaire?

If you require assistance to complete the questionnaire, officers from the Council's consultation team will be happy to help you. They will be visiting your block soon and will put posters up to let you know when they are there. If they miss you, they will put a letter through your letter box.

Ways to return your completed questionnaire

The consultation officers will be happy to return your completed questionnaire on your behalf. If you prefer, you can send it back to us yourself using the pre-paid envelope that has been provided but please allow plenty of time for your completed questionnaire to reach us by the closing date.

- **The address for any correspondence is:**

Resident involvement team
Croydon Council
Department of adult services, health and housing
Third Floor, Zone A
Bernard Weatherill House
8 Mint Walk
Croydon CR0 1EA

- **By email.**

If you would prefer to receive an electronic copy of the questionnaire, please email hsg-residentparticipation@croydon.gov.uk
Complete questionnaires can also be returned to the same email address.

- **Further queries**

Should you have any further queries, please contact Joy Gardner (special projects officer) on 020 8726 6100 ext. 62119 or email joy.gardner@croydon.gov.uk

Deadline for submission of comments

Whatever method you use to express your views, please can you ensure that any correspondence is received by the Council no later than **5pm on Friday 8 November 2013**.

What will happen next?

During May 2013, we will analyse the findings of the consultation and this will inform the recommendations that will be made about the classification of Tonbridge House. We expect to be able to inform you of the outcome of the consultation during July 2013. If we are not able to meet this date, we will write to you and let you know.

Questions and answers

Tenants, their families and/or carers are likely to have a lot of questions. We have attempted to anticipate some of these and provide the answers. This list is by no means exhaustive and you may have other questions that we will be happy to answer.

Q1. Why are you proposing to change the use of Tonbridge House and not one of the other retirement housing blocks?

A1. At this stage, we know that we need to consider changing the use of one of the retirement housing blocks to increase the supply of general needs temporary accommodation that would be available for families with children. A decision has not been reached as to whether one block should be declassified. However, the council carried out a thorough 3 stage feasibility study looking at a long list of 11 retirement housing high-rise blocks.

The reasons for long-listing the 11 retirement housing high-rise blocks are:

- of all the retirement housing schemes across the borough, the high-rise blocks are the most difficult to let and this has been the case for several years;
- we know that, generally, older people would prefer ground-floor accommodation (preferably a bungalow) in a quiet neighbourhood;
- whether the block has a neighbouring twin block so that, were the decision made to change the use of the block, subject to availability, existing tenants would have the choice of moving only a very short distance to the neighbouring block;
- the number of units in each block;
- void turnaround times, meaning the length of time it takes to let vacant properties; and

The reasons for Tonbridge House being the preferred block are:

- Tonbridge House is one of the 11 high-rise retirement housing blocks;
- It has a twin block next door, enabling some existing Tonbridge House tenants to easily move the short distance into Sevenoaks House as and when properties become available;
- There are a reasonable number (17) of other retirement housing schemes near to Tonbridge House.
- Tonbridge House Gillett Road has a lower number of flats with adapted bathrooms compared with Sevenoaks House.
- Tonbridge House has a larger communal lounge than Sevenoaks House.

Q2. Why can't you house homeless families with children elsewhere, or in other council housing?

- A2.** Unfortunately, there are not enough properties to go round because the demand for social housing is much greater than the number of properties that become available.

During the year 2011/12, the council was approached by 2,279 households. Of those, the council accepted that it had a statutory duty to provide accommodation for 839. In the same year, 876 properties became void and available to let. This would not be a problem if the homeless households were the only ones in the borough waiting for a council home.

Unfortunately, in addition to the 876 homeless households waiting for a home, at the end of December 2012, there were 10,321 households waiting to be re-housed; in total, there are more than 11,000 households on the council's waiting list.

What this shows is that there are not enough council properties in Croydon to house the number of people that need one. The situation is made worse because the council would normally rely on private landlords for properties but this supply has dropped dramatically, leaving the council having to house families in bed and breakfast accommodation, often with shared facilities.

Q3. Why can't you send these families to other councils?

- A3.** Other local authorities are facing the same pressures as Croydon due to the increased demand from homeless families.

Although it is not ideal, some families with children are housed outside of Croydon. However, this can be difficult for families because many parents have work commitments. Also, they may have child care commitments or children that attend school in Croydon, and living outside the borough might require them having to travel long distances, and this would not be ideal. Changing schools could have a detrimental effect on their education.

Q4. Doesn't the council have any empty buildings that can be used to house these families?

- A4.** Although some properties may appear to be empty, often they are going through what is called "the void cycle". This is the time when work is carried out on the property after one household has moved out and before another takes it over.

The council has been looking at a number of empty buildings that could potentially be used. However, these properties would require a lot of building works to make them habitable. And while it would be a long time before they would be ready for occupation, they would not provide enough properties to bridge the gap, given the number of homeless families.

Q5. If I didn't want to move, could I stay in my home?

- A5.** Even if option 2 were chosen, you would be able to remain at Tonbridge House if you wish to do so.

The council would not and could not seek to evict you because change-of-use is not one of the situations that would allow the council to go to court to seek possession of

your home.

Obviously, if the use of Tonbridge House were to change to house homeless families with children, the block would be occupied by tenants whose lifestyle may be different to your own. However, antisocial behaviour can occur in age-restricted blocks as well as general needs housing and would be dealt with under the usual terms and conditions of tenancy.

Under option 2, if the block were used as general needs temporary accommodation, the flats occupied by homeless households would have a licence to occupy the property, as opposed to a secure tenancy. This enables the council, as the landlord, to deal with antisocial behaviour more easily.

Q6. What happens after the consultation?

- A6.** The closing date for receiving your completed questionnaires and views is **5pm on Friday 8 November 2013**. If returning by post, please ensure that you allow plenty of time for your completed questionnaire to reach us.

Having gathered all the comments received, we will analyse the findings of the consultation during November 2013 and this will inform the recommendations that will be made about the classification of Tonbridge House.

Q7 When will we be told the outcome of the consultation?

- A7.** We expect that we will be able to inform you of the outcome of the consultation exercise in January 2014. If, for any reason, we are not able to inform you by then, we will write to you to let you know.

Q8. What would happen next if option 2 were chosen?

- A8.** If option 2 were chosen, we would need to meet with you again as a group and individually.

At this stage, it is envisaged that the purpose of the group meeting would be to give you detailed information about the timing of the change, and what support and assistance the council would provide to help people to deal with such issues as removals, flooring, decoration, and redirection of mail.

Should we proceed with option 2, we would also need to speak to people individually to get an understanding of whether they would prefer to remain at Tonbridge House or move to other accommodation. If you chose to remain at Tonbridge House you would still be able to receive the same support to meet your needs as you receive now, such as access to Careline Plus.

Q9. If I decided that I wanted to move to other accommodation, when would it be?

- A9.** If the decision were made to proceed with option 2, we would imagine that tenants who wish to move could start doing so from around March 2014, as and when suitable properties became available.
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