**DRAFT NOTES – Affordability v Statutory Duty Task and Finish Group**

**12th September 2016 - Golding Homes, Whatman House, Near Aylesford, Kent**

**Present:** Deborah White, West Kent HA; Marie Gerald, Dartford Borough Council; Helen Sudbury, Golding Homes; Sarah Lewis, Tunbridge Wells BC; Daren Donoghue, TCHG; Rebecca Smith, KHG

**Apologies:** Eileen Martin, Chair & Amicus Horizon Limited; Jo Ellis, TCHG; Juliet Knott and Francesca Lepora, Golding Homes

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| **ITEM** | **NOTES** | **ACTION** |
| **Introductions & Apologies** | Introductions and apologies noted. |  |
| **Minutes & Matters Arising** | Matters arising:  Page 3: MG advised that the Affordability issue was raised at the KHC Board meeting. MG suggested an affordability calculator could be included for registration of a new client and is then reviewed annually to keep records up to date. KHC agreed to look at this and get some costing on this, this will fit with their work around pre assessment. This will be picked up at the Operational meeting of KHC in a few weeks and then meet again about the new Homelessness Reduction Bill and the Welsh model of prevention as these are all linked.  Page 4: Pre Tenancy Work Action – some providers are already doing work around pre tenancy counselling, DHP and use of funds was discussed at KHOG and it was agreed it was difficult to influence HB teams about the use of these funds, but it shouldn’t stop the intention to pose the questions.  NMSG are going to look at who is going to use or set up their own waiting list. MG asked if anyone does lettings returns for local authorities in Kent, WKHA do to Sevenoaks DC as they run the register in Sevenoaks. In Dartford this is going to be introduced to ensure that they get the 75% nominations. There is an element of trust but with all the changes coming forward and affordability there is a need to monitor lettings. It is likely to enable this also through targeted adverts. Moat in Dartford are looking to let to tenants within their own stock, to those who can afford to rent the properties. An affordability calculator would help applicants identify what property they could afford.  SL advised that TWBC did use their waiting list for intermediate lets recently as a pilot, there were two of the four properties that could be let and they had to go via the Homebuy Agent, in TWBC you are not allowed to register for housing without a housing need.  Page 5: RS updated that Mark Lobban from KCC is attending KHG EXB on Wednesday 14th September to discuss the issues about the future of Supported Housing and funding of support related services at KCC and where there are savings to be made. Christy Holden and Mel Anthony will also be in attendance from KCC.  RS also updated that KHG have arranged a short visit with the Secretary of State for the DWP to an Ashford Extra Care Scheme on Friday 30th September, this is on the back of the NHF Starts at Home Campaign and will be an opportunity for housing health and social care colleagues to make casing points with the Rt Hon Damien Green about the importance of supported housing and the positive impacts of it, and the potential implications should the exemption from the -1% rent policy change be removed after year one of the new welfare reform. A briefing paper will also be shared with him to take away. | **MG to feedback outcomes from the Operational Meeting coming up**  **RS to liaise with EM about meeting with Chair of Benefits Group about this issue** |
| **KHOG Feedback** | MG provided feedback from the KHOG meeting that followed the initial meeting of this task and finish group. There were some concerns about the impact of affordability on homelessness, especially with regards to those who are not stock holders. SL advised that there have been discussions with TCHG about the impact for single persons households, for accepted homeless households there haven’t been any issues to date. TWBC are working with a particular client about income and expenditure to assist with housing, TCHG are assisting with what information they require to secure a tenancy.  KHOG are keen to see examples of a calculator and housing options colleagues tend to opt for the DCLG calculator model. DD advised that their calculator has been adapted to -10 to capture those on low income who may still be able to be housed and will not then be instantly refused accommodation.  Single people are approximately £10 out when they test through the calculator and a part time job or additional hours of work would assist with this. TCHG commit to working with clients about their income and expenditure, but this is timely and does need to be started as soon as possible. There have been approximately 12 refusals since inception in April, not all of these are under 21 years old, and the biggest issue is debt. Signposting is done to get the debt payments reduced. MG advised that there is a referral module on the KHC system, this is not used by all local authorities and will track the pathway and the referring agent can respond to the referral. Failures were clients such as taxi drivers who couldn’t provide sufficient paper work or those with large debts.  The is concern with regards to the Welsh model is the potential length of stay in temporary accommodation and the cost. RS advised that this has been raised with the Kent Chief Executives and there has been a suggestion to investigate commissioning of Kent model to provide TA for specific hard to let clients such as ex-offenders / perpetuators of sexual violence. Affordability is just part of this wider temporary accommodation issue. The implications of the Welsh Model will be discussed at KHOG on Thursday 15th September.  Who is going to lead on the discussion about the affordability calculators and how they are used and the model or style of calculator? It was agreed that this discussion should take place at a senior level within KHG, to get the agreement and commitment to establish what will work in Kent for the benefit of the residents.  There was a discussion about the directive of the Government with regards to priority debts and then what is considered by housing providers who are using a calculator to establish whether an applicant can afford to sustain a tenancy. There has to be an agreement in Kent to increase the minimum threshold about affordability, working jointly to get households to understand the priority debts and alter their lifestyles to ensure that this can happen.  MG commented that we need to identify who is likely to be impacted by the use of the calculator going forward, the new benefit caps introduced and to be introduced are likely to be impacted by an affordability assessment. It was agreed a common model of set of principles about affordability would help ease some of the timing and administration burden related to lettings.  It was agreed that this should be discussed at a half day briefing session.  KHOG also discussed whether they are going to change their policy about lettings and there are some who are using a lower band. MG questioned how we can facilitate letting with providers of accommodation to those who can afford to occupy but may not be eligible to join a waiting list. | **MG to liaise with TCHG about presentation of the affordability calculator at a future meeting. DD to send a few scenario examples with MG for sharing with KHOG colleagues** |
| **Draft Principles of Affordability Document** | HS circulated the draft Principles of Affordability Document.  This was developed by a few colleagues from the NMSG, a framework of principles that have been addressed in the document. HS has reformatted into a protocol design and asked questions throughout the document.  The general feedback for the document was that it summarised the discussion of the morning. Question 1: It was agreed to develop a common set of principles. Question 2 – TCHG have adapted their calculator model to consider savings held by an applicant as an income, the flat threshold is £16k. MG commented that generally clients do not have savings to consider, it’s mainly elderly who can be housed more easily. MG commented that this would likely to be taken into account.  Question 3: if an applicant is assessed as unable to afford, there will be sign posting or an offer of actions to be undertaken to secure an offer of accommodation, including work experience and training. If this happens at the point of application who would take responsibility for the sign posting as they may not be refused ability to join the register but would flag affordability? MG advised that they would only have capacity to work with those who are likely to be picked up through a statutory duty and others would be sent an email to confirm the decision and an automatic signpost to relevant agencies in the area to assist them further.  Question 4: MG has suggested an annual review as a prompt with a note that if circumstance change for a household they update the relevant agencies at the earliest time. Question 5: can’t answer this question today, what are we benchmarking income and expenditure against, we will need average rents by property type and tenure and by area? This would help applicants understand what they could afford in terms of tenure. Question 6: another question to answer when looking at the affordability calculator in more detail.  DD advised that using the calculator has not placed any more burden on staff as these are actions that were taken previously but it’s now more formalised. The key element is that the calculator is self-serving for the applicant and the time is taken around the discussion of the outcomes from the calculator.  When discussing the calculator DD confirmed that when an applicant is refused through the calculator there is an expectation for them to have demonstrated a commitment to a plan to reduce debts and make consistent payments and confirmation of this from a debtor about the agreement; this could help in a future application. Also signing up for training or going to employment interviews, demonstrates a willingness to attain employment to benefit their situation positively. WKHA and Golding agreed that this would be their approach too.    DD did stress to colleagues that the affordability assessment is there to validate their customer’s current financial situation, validate affordability and income. It is to assess whether they will be able to sustain a tenancy based on their income and not set them up to fail. It is important to address that is not specifically based around the rent levels but their personal circumstances. | **MG to share with KHOG for feedback and then HS to undertake any updates and share an updated version** |
| **Snug Bug** | DW is going to take forward this item about developing a shared model for housing the under 35 year’s client group. DW will set up a discussion with St Vincent’s about a potential model. DW questioned if any issues from the information shared within the slides circulated? SL questioned whether it would still be managed through existing in house housing management and DW confirmed it would be.  MG suggested it does need careful consideration about how applicants are assessed and the support ahead of the move into shared accommodation. This was agreed by the group and DW will share further information when available. DD confirmed that TCHG are looking at this for two bedroom accommodation, again looking at who is housed, licences or tenancies and who should take responsibility for the household. There are a number of models of shared accommodation being considered or used by providers. SL commented that from a housing need perspective such accommodation models would be welcomed. | **DW to follow up and share any additional information.** |
| **Half Day Briefing Workshop Scope** | Those attending discussed the scope for a workshop session about the affordability issue and other elements related to it. It was agreed that it would be useful to have a session, to have someone chair and provide the overview to the workshop. There was then a discussion about potential themes and having speakers to facilitate themed table discussions, giving a five minute overview and then using discussion to highlight key outcomes or recommendations to take forward.  Suggested themes: **Affordability** – trying to establish to an agreed common set of principles for Kent and Medway about the use of an affordability calculator, if possible agreeing a model calculator that can be used across the providers and is available for applicants to self-serve through Kent Homechoice. Pre tenancy counselling, what is offered, who is not offering, is there a Kent and Medway model to replicate and co fund? How to support those who fail an affordability test but are close to being eligible for housing, who is responsible for this?  **Housing solutions for the under 35 year old applicants with housing need** – what are the solutions for these applicants? What are the models out there, should we invite St Vincent’s to talk about Snug Bug? What is a good model for Kent and the good practice about management of models of shared accommodation?  **Running and managing waiting lists** – what are the implications for those who are considering running waiting lists outside of the housing register?  **The Welsh Model of prevention of homelessness** – what is the wider role of all providers and agencies to prevent homelessness, reduce numbers placed in TA as a result of homelessness? HA’s do have a role to assist LA’s with discharging their duty for those eligible for housing via homelessness legislation so it’s an issues for all partners, which is the strength of KHG. | **RS and DW to take back to EXB and KHG Events Sub Group feedback on the outcome and decision for how to take the event forward.** |
| **AOB** | It was agreed to set a date for a next meeting after the half-day session, then we can take forward any outcomes.  The group agreed to assist with the half-day session in terms of facilitation. | **RS to note**  **ALL to note** |

***Thanks noted to Golding Homes for hosting the meeting***