

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: WEDNESDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2012

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

SUBJECT: SARTH

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.01 This report updates members on the development of a Single Access Route to Housing across the North East Wales sub region and seeks Members views on progressing to the next stages of the project.

2.00 BACKGROUND

- 2.01 SARTH (Single Access Route to Housing) is a partnership project between all the major social landlords in North East Wales, covering in the local authority areas of Conwy County Borough, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham County Borough.
- 2.02 The partners are Conwy County Borough Council, Denbighshire County Council, Flintshire County Council, Wrexham County Borough Council, Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn Housing Association, Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd, North Wales Housing and Wales and West Housing.
- 2.03 The overall aim of SARTH is to provide a common access route to a range of affordable housing options which is transparent, legal, efficient and accessible to all sections of the community.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

Progress to Date

- 3.01 This report follows on from the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Workshop held on the 25th July 2012. The successful workshop provided members with information on proposals for a Joint Register, Joint Policy and Joint Advice and Options. Members provided positive feedback about the benefits of the

proposals, in particular, the benefits to the customer.

- 3.02 Members had a number of questions about the project and its impact. These questions and the response to them are detailed in appendix 1. The two main issues that emerged from the workshop were concerns regarding the speed of the implementation and the costs to Flintshire. These two areas have been addressed and details are provided in this paper.
- 3.03 In response to the concerns about the timescales for implementation, Flintshire has asked for a more phased approach. This is outlined below:-

A Joint Register and Policy

Flintshire County Council is committed to the development of a Joint Allocation Register and a Common Allocations Policy and recognises the numerous benefits that will be obtained from the successful implementation of the SARTH. A first draft of a common allocation policy has been produced and most SARTH partner organisations have sought, and been granted, approval to undertake a public consultation exercise. However, the officers representing Flintshire's interest in the SARTH project are of the opinion that until a full impact assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the proposed policy will not have a negative impact on certain groups, the authority cannot commit to the public consultation exercise. In particular, officers are concerned how effectively the proposed policy will be aligned to the authority's aim of fulfilling its statutory homeless duties as cost effectively as possible. For example, the authority needs to be reassured that proposed bandings within the policy will not result in households, to whom the authority owes a full homeless duty, remaining in temporary accommodation for prolonged periods. The officers also suggest that it will be prudent for the authority not to sign up to the Common Allocations Policy until it is known which parts of the Welsh Housing White Paper will become legislation. For example, will legislation be introduced that enables Welsh local authorities to discharge their statutory homelessness duties by offering homeless households accommodation within the private rented sector, etc. Flintshire has senior officer representation on the various SARTH working groups who are carrying out work to assess the impact of the proposed policy and identify potential future cost efficiencies. On completion of these pieces of work, if officers are content that the proposed policy does not conflict with the authority's statutory homelessness duties, approval to move ahead to full public consultation on the Joint Register

and Common Allocations Policy could be obtained through the delegated powers of the Lead Cabinet Member.

Joint Housing Options

Work on the proposals within the SARTH project for the development of an enhanced Joint Housing Options Service will be explored at a later date and as a next stage in the project. Flintshire may choose not to progress to this part of the project. This decision will be informed by work which will be undertaken to identify the most suitable model for a Housing Options Service which will provide the best service delivery and cost efficiencies.

- 3.04 It is important to note that Flintshire, along with the other partner organisations, have **not** agreed to finally signing up to the scheme. This paper is asking for Scrutiny to support the next stages of the development project on the Common Allocations Policy so that a paper can be presented for Cabinet approval. It is planned that a further paper would be brought to Scrutiny/Cabinet for discussion/approval which will contain the results of the consultation exercise, information on potential cost efficiencies and will present a business case for signing up to all or part of the regional scheme.

Key elements of the SARTH

- 3.05 Partners share one register and so an applicant need make only one application to access the whole system. Each partner with properties in an area chosen by an applicant will be aware of the application and able to give the applicant the appropriate priority in the allocation process.
- 3.06 Housing need will be assessed uniformly across the region, providing fairness and consistency to the customer, taking into account people's individual needs and expressed preferences. The definition of housing need is based on the legal concept of reasonable preference. The approach adopted makes use of the further legal powers to prioritise within applicants entitled to reasonable preference according to local connection and urgent need.
- 3.07 The draft allocations framework adopts a banding scheme to prioritise people in housing need, following the legal principles regarding reasonable preference, additional preference and local connection.
- 3.08 When a vacancy becomes available, applicants who have expressed a preference for the area and whose household is suitable for the property type are shortlisted. Applicants are

ranked on this shortlist by their band, with those in band one given highest priority and so on. Applicants within the same band are ranked according to date of application, with those who have been waiting longest given highest priority.

- 3.09 There is not enough housing for everyone on the current register. The bandings will give priority to local people with a recognised housing need. People without a recognised housing need will be given better advice and informed about useful alternatives rather than just waiting on a register.

Funding

- 3.09 The development costs for the project are £394,000 in total. The project has secured £197,000 in Social Housing Management Grant from the Welsh Government.
- 3.10 The remaining costs will be apportioned between the partners. In other examples of partnerships, the costs are apportioned based on stock size and council partners contribute more to reflect their strategic role and duties. The apportioned costs have not been finalised but Flintshire's contribution based on previous examples is likely to be £23,000 for 2013-14. This cost will be included in the draft budget for 2013.14 subject to Member approval.
- 3.11 The project represents a significant opportunity to gain efficiencies in terms of sharing the costs for maintaining a register with the other SARTH partner organisations in the longer term. The exact level of savings is being worked out through the business case. The level of savings will depend on whether Flintshire signs up for all or part of the project. Some of the benefits achieved will be improved service delivery as well as cost savings.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 To note the development of the project to date and the responses to the questions from the Member Workshop.
- 4.02 To seek support for Flintshire to continue with the SARTH project and contribute to the development costs, subject to budget approval.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 Development costs to be included in the budget for 2013/14 subject to Member approval. Development costs for 2013-14 approximately £23,000.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 There are no specific anti-poverty implications within this report.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 There are no specific environmental implications within this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 A full project wide Equality Impact Assessment is currently being undertaken with assistance from Tai Pawb, an organisation specifically dedicated to promoting equality in housing.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 As the Neighbourhood Housing Teams will still be responsible for allocating Flintshire County Council housing properties that become vacant, there are no personnel implications at this stage.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 Full Public Consultation Required in 2013

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 None undertaken to date

12.00 APPENDICES

Appendix One - Questions from the Workshop and Answers

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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