

**FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:**           **COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**DATE:**                   **WEDNESDAY, 7 OCTOBER 2015**

**REPORT BY:**           **CHIEF OFFICER (COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE)**

**SUBJECT:**               **SARTH POLICY**

**1.00   PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.01   The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Members on the progress over the first five months of the SARTH Common Housing Register and Policy.

**2.00   BACKGROUND**

2.01   SARTH is a partnership project between all the major social landlords in North East Wales, covering the local authority areas of Conwy County Borough, Denbighshire and Flintshire.

2.02   In addition to the above Councils, the partnership also includes Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Grwp Cynefin, North Wales Housing and Wales and West Housing Associations.

2.03   In 2011, the Welsh Government supported a project to explore the options for a sub regional common housing register and policy. A Regional Steering Board was created with senior officer representatives from all the project partners. A project manager was recruited in January 2012. The Council held a workshop in July 2012 for Housing Overview and Scrutiny in order for members to feed into proposals. In November 2012, Cabinet gave approval for a consultation process on the new policy. Elected Members were invited to attend a workshop in April 2013 as part of that consultation and an update report was circulated to Elected Members in July 2013 providing feedback on the consultation results.

2.04   The SARTH policy was implemented in April 2015. Applicants are given priority on the register based on the statutory 'reasonable preference' categories which include homelessness, overcrowding, living in unsanitary conditions, medical grounds or hardship. As long as an applicant meets one of these 'reasonable preference' groups then they are entitled to register. Additional priority is then given based on the urgency of need and local connection.

- Band 1 Local Connection – housing need (urgent)**
- Band 2 Local Connection – housing need (not urgent)**
- Band 3 No Local Connection – housing need (urgent)**
- Band 4 No Local Connection – housing need (not urgent)**

- 2.05 Within each band applicants are listed in date order of their application. Applicants can choose their preferred property type and location and are advised on availability of stock in their chosen areas. Applicants' position on the register will be subject to review if they refuse two reasonable offers of accommodation that match their choices. Applicants who fall within the reasonable preference groups but have assets or savings which could reasonably be used to resolve their housing need may have their priority reduced in order to ensure those in most need are given priority. Circumstances are considered on an individual basis and there is a process of appeal. Similarly, applicants with previous poor behaviour and/or arrears may have their priority reduced. If an applicant has existing arrears and has no adequate arrangement in place to address the arrears then they will be informed that their application will be placed in band four until they can demonstrate they have an arrangement in place. The applicant has the right to appeal this decision.
- 2.06 The SARTH policy does not only include a revised allocation policy but includes some changes to the way the register is currently managed. This includes a move away from a focus purely on social housing and a move toward providing advice on realistic housing options.
- 2.07 In January 2014, Cabinet approved the implementation of the new allocation policy for Flintshire County Council. (Copy of policy attached at Appendix 1). Cabinet approved the development of a Housing Access Team providing improved advice on housing options ahead of the development and transfer of applicants to the new register.

### **3.00 CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **Implementation**

- 3.01 There has been a phased transition from the points register to SARTH and the new Common Housing Register. Allocations from the new register went live on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2015. All applicants on the register were contacted in January and asked to confirm if they wished to stay on the register. Older applicants received a visit from the Community Based Accommodation Support Service. These applicants and new applicants were triaged and placed in the appropriate band ready for the switch over to the new policy.

- 3.02 It was an important part of the transition that applicants were contacted so that all the information held was up to date and an accurate reflection of their housing need. However, as the combined number of applicants including those on the Housing Association's lists was approximately 4,000 some very high pointed applicants who did not respond were transferred over to the banding system. This action mitigated the risk of someone in housing need not being included on the register but did cause some data to not be current in the early days. Regular reviews of applications is resolving this situation.
- 3.03 The number of applicants who responded and wanted to apply to be on the Common Housing Register was lower than anticipated. This reduction in the register is not unusual and is representative of other areas that have cleansed their data and moved to a Common Housing Register. Initially, the points register was maintained alongside the new banding system and Housing Officers allocated from the new policy but were able to check the old register for any high pointed applicants so they could be contacted by the Housing Access Team.

### **Triage**

- 3.04 A core principle of the new policy is that instead of accepting applications from households, who may have very low housing need, the existing staff resources will be targeted at providing information to applicants about their housing options including wider choices than social housing which may be more realistic for some people. This contact with applicants can also be an opportunity to inform them about area choices and high and low demand, in order to maximise the chance of meeting housing need and managing expectations. Guidance for staff has been completed. However, as the team deal with cases there is the opportunity to add flexibility and continue reviewing and refining the guidance to recognise the complexity of individual cases. It has been a joint learning experience across Housing Solutions and the Housing Management Service.
- 3.05 On initial enquiry the Housing Access Team identify if there is a housing need and whether the household is eligible for social housing. The team are located with the Duty Homeless Officer so households at risk of homelessness or in need of housing advice can be forwarded directly to the Homeless Officer. The team can also make referrals to the Bond Scheme, NEW Homes, Welfare Rights, Vulnerable Adults Social Worker or Tenancy Support depending on the needs of the individual. Some Flint Connects staff have been trained to provide the equivalent service face to face. The call centre statistics show that the Housing Access Team receive an average 55 calls a day and in May this peaked at 105 calls in a day. The table below shows the numbers of triage assessments carried out and where households were referred.

Service	May	June	July	August	Sept	2015 Total	Grand Total
Bond Scheme	10	15	17	14	4	60	60
Environmental Health	3	6		1	1	11	11
Housing Access	19	31	41	22	11	124	124
Housing Solutions	72	119	129	107	33	460	460
No Further Action	5	7	5	4	4	25	25
Neighbourhood housing	1	1	1	2		5	5
Supporting People	1	5	5	7	1	19	19
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>704</b>	<b>704</b>

- 3.06 The transition to the new Common Housing Register and the new policy coincided with the introduction of the new Homeless Legislation. In addition to learning new legislation and a new policy, the demand on the service has remained high. There have been some early problems with the data in the system. Capita and the Business Systems Team have worked closely with the project to resolve issues in order to minimise disruption to the service.
- 3.07 The volume of calls and in some cases the lengthy phone assessments also led to delays in responding to customers. The Customer Services Team has supported the service to implement new arrangements to ensure call handling is efficient. The Project Manager and Compliance Officer have provided training and continued support from a weekly panel made up of management representatives from Housing Management, Housing Options and the Independent Compliance Officer. The information in the register will be subject to regular review to ensure it is up to date to assist with letting properties in a timely manner.

### The Register

- 3.08 The numbers on the register is considerably reduced from the points register and now reflects live information on applicants in housing need with up to date information and ensures those on the register are ready to move.
- 3.09 The current breakdown of numbers in bandings is as follows:

### October 2015

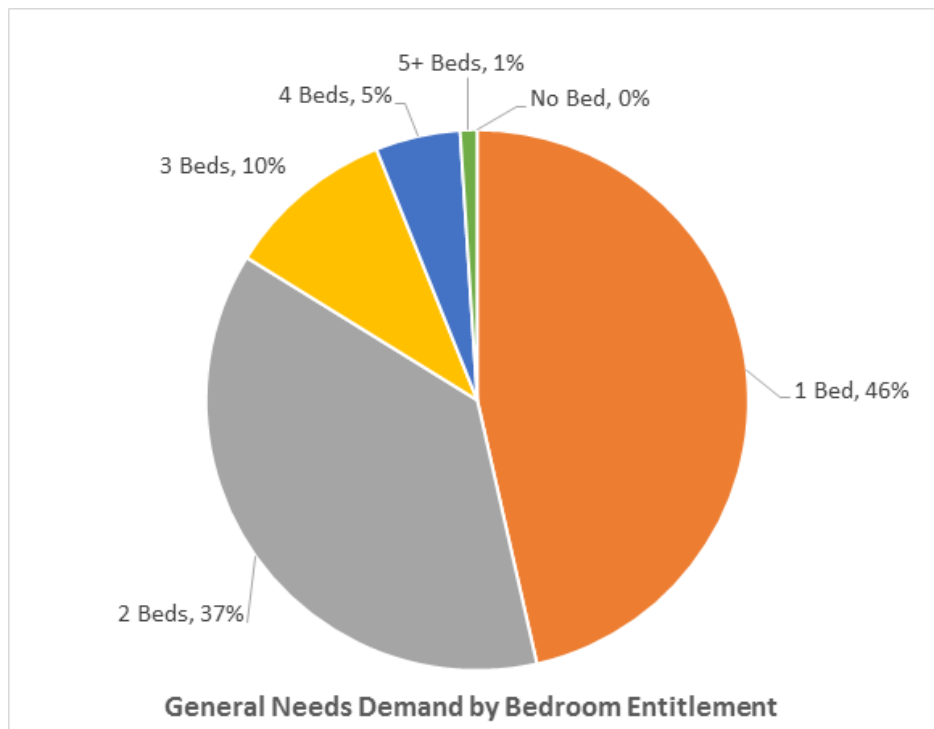
Band 1	151
Band 2	764

Band 3	3
Band 4	59
Triage	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>1012</b>

3.10 The figures for July and August demonstrate that there has been a steady increase with more new applications than properties let across all the partners. There were 99 lets across all the landlords in July and August whereas 153 new applications were added to the register. However, there is not always a match between need and availability of stock.

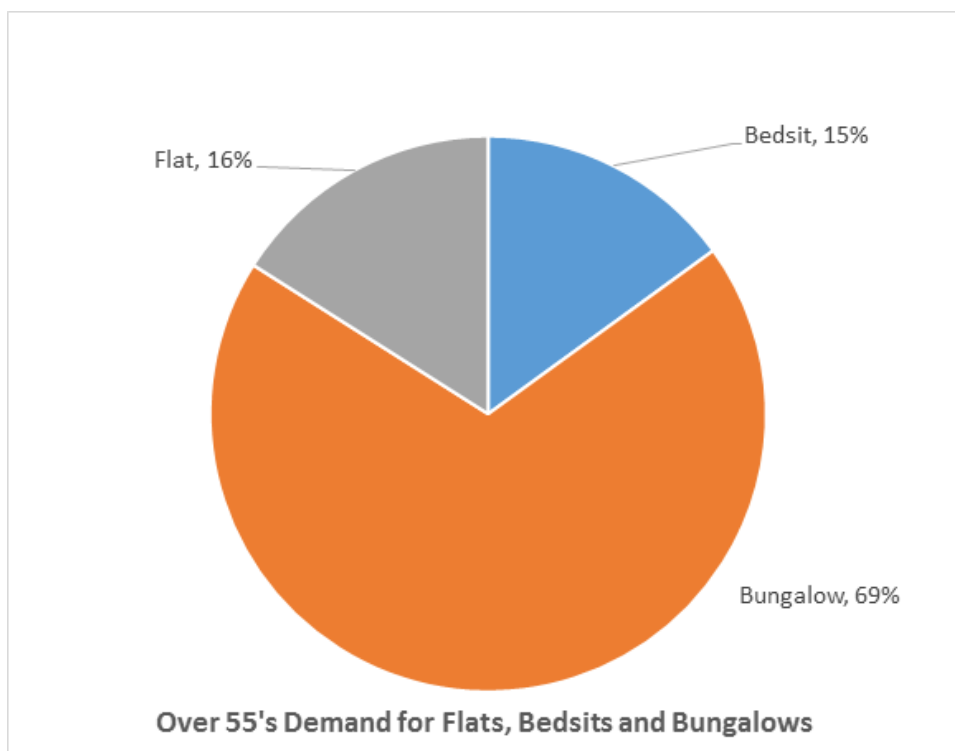
### Housing Demand

3.11 The following shows the current demand by property size for general needs accommodation. It is worthy of note that these figures show what a household will match to and not what they may choose and what they may be offered. For example all the older single and couples will match to a 1 bed. Many families will match to a 2 bed but following an affordability assessment could be offered a three bedroom if the three bedroom list has been exhausted first.



3.12 The following chart shows the property type preference for those aged

over 55.



- 3.13 The areas of high demand are Shotton, Buckley, Flint, Mold and Connahs Quay with half of the people on the register choosing one of these areas as their first choice.
- 3.14 There is varying levels of demand in other areas and limited demand in some villages. Before the data cleanse, the numbers on the register did not necessarily accurately reflect current demand, the subsequent cleanse and more accurate figures has highlighted some areas of limited demand for sheltered properties and larger family houses. Demand for sheltered housing will be considered as part of a wider project following a report brought to this scrutiny earlier in the year. The total stock list for all partners is attached at appendix two.

### **The Project and Partners**

- 3.15 Flintshire County Council now holds and manages the register for all the social landlords in the county. This has created a single application process and widened choice for households. The Common Housing Register and policy is the result of a regional project and it has been a significant challenge to join up a number of organisations to agree a common policy and implement a single process aligning our separate IT systems.

- 3.16 The regional SARTH Steering Group still meets to oversee the implementation. Flintshire also has its own project group with membership from Business Systems, Estate Management and Housing Solutions which is supported by a Project Manager. All issues are logged and resolved through this group and the procedures beneath the overarching policy have been finalised.

### **Next Steps**

- 3.17 The aim of the new policy is that those in most housing need are given priority consideration for social housing as prescribed within current housing law. However, there are other households without a specific housing need who would choose social housing as their preferred housing option. As long as the register has been exhausted then these properties can be offered to other households.
- 3.18 The next stage of the project is to implement the Immediate to Let process. It may be that at any given time for a range of reasons there is not a household in housing need requiring a property of a particular size. In this instance the property can be promoted through the website and other channels. This stage of the project will be led by the Housing Management Service and is reflected in the Voids and Lettings Improvement Plan.
- 3.19 Maintaining a register is resource intensive and household circumstances change rapidly so that information becomes out of date very quickly. In order to keep costs and staff time to a minimum it is proposed that those households who do not have a housing need are advised to look on the website and apply for any properties as they become available.
- 3.20 There is the opportunity for the website to be extended to include affordable rental properties creating a central point for all affordable housing in the county.

### **4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.01 Committee notes the progress of the project since January 2015.
- 4.02 Committee supports the next stage of the project to make best use of housing stock.

### **5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.01 The change to the Common Housing Register has been included as an efficiency saving for 2015/16 realising a reduction of £30k in costs.

### **6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT**

- 6.01 The proactive work being undertaken by the Housing Solutions Team

will assist applicants to access affordable housing and mitigate the increase in homelessness at the earliest opportunity.

**7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

7.01 None specifically associated with the content of this report.

**8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT**

8.01 None specifically associated with the content of this report.

**9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

9.01 None specifically associated with the content of this report.

**10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED**

10.01 No further consultation required.

**11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN**

11.01 Full consultation carried out ahead of Cabinet agreeing the policy.

**12.00 APPENDICES**

12.01 Appendix 1: Common Allocation Policy

12.02 Appendix 2: County Stock List

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

None.

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