

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 26 th September 2018
Report Subject	Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH)
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Housing
Report Author	Chief Officer (Housing and Assets)
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Single Access Route to Housing (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.

SARTH introduced a banding allocation system and a policy that shifted away from a focus purely on social housing towards one which provides advice on realistic housing options.

SARTH went live in Flintshire in April 2015 and following a successful bid the Council has hosted SARTH for Denbighshire from April 2017.

The Council manages the housing register on behalf of Denbighshire County Council. This includes the housing solutions triage as well as managing the social housing register. The Council are developing new contracts for Denbighshire County Council and the partners with revised performance targets.

Demand for the social housing register has grown over the past three years. This is putting increasing pressure on the management of the register and leading to increased wait times for properties.

A review of the policy was carried out in 2017 following a year of operation. The review was necessary to ensure the policy was compliant with new legislation. It also allowed any issues raised to be addressed and to develop the policy into a more user friendly document.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	To continue to support the management of the Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) policy in Flintshire
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE MANAGEMENT OF THE SARTH POLICY
1.01	Background
1.02	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.
1.03	In addition to the above Councils, the partnership also includes Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Grwp Cynefin, North Wales Housing, Wales and West and Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd housing associations.
1.04	The SARTH policy introduced a banding allocation system and a policy that moved away from a focus purely on social housing and more towards providing advice on realistic housing options. The regional policy was developed in recognition that there is a high demand for rented homes in the region and too few vacant properties to meet demand.
1.05	It was agreed that partners will provide the best, most useful, consistent and accessible advice and information to everyone who approaches them looking for housing. The aim is to enable customers to make the most informed choice about how to find a home to meet their needs. This advice covers a whole range of affordable housing options, including social housing, private rented accommodation, home ownership and other alternatives.
1.06	<p>The policy provides the following commitment:</p> <p><i>“All partners in the region will allocate housing stock in a transparent, fair, consistent and accessible way, which prioritises the people in our communities according to their housing needs and which meets our legal requirements. Working together in this way, partners can share strengths and good practice and place the customer at the heart of everything we do.”</i></p>
1.07	SARTH went live in Flintshire in April 2015 and following a successful bid. The Council has hosted SARTH for Denbighshire from April 2017.
1.08	New Policy
1.09	A review of the SARTH policy was carried out in 2017 following the first year of operation. The review identified that the policy required updating to ensure compliance with the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.
1.10	<p>The allocation policy is principally governed by The Housing Act 1996 and the Code of Guidance for Homelessness and Allocations 2016 and Welsh Statutory Instruments 2014 No. 2603 (w. 257) – Housing Wales – The Allocation of Homelessness (Eligibility) (Wales) Regulations 2014. Other relevant legislation includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of Information Act 2000 • Equalities Act 2010

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Care and Well Being Act 2014 • Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 • Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015
1.11	A review of issues raised at the operational panel and steering group established that there were no significant changes required to any of the key principles of the policy.
1.12	<p>The requirement for an updated policy provided an opportunity to develop a document that is easier to read and understand. The policy (attached at appendix one) sets out the key commitment of the partners to a common regional approach to social housing allocations. There are three main sections within the policy:</p> <p><u>Part one</u> - policy statement including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aims and objectives • equality information • legal context; • commitment to preference and choice; • how the application will be handled; • eligibility for the register; • how to apply and how to review decisions. <p><u>Part two</u> - the banding scheme;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how applications are prioritised. • circumstances in which additional preference is given • circumstances where an application may be given reduced priority. <p><u>Part three</u> - allocation of properties;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • matching a household to a property; • making an offer; • offer refusals • specialist housing requirements.
1.13	Regional Collaboration
1.14	A regional panel has been in place from the outset to maximise the benefit of collaboration through the SARTH partnership. The panel is formed of operational managers from each partner. The primary purpose of the panel is to ensure consistency in the application of the policy across the three counties and to review complaints and appeals from applicants.
1.15	The panel has been instrumental in addressing wider topics than the register such as approaches to changes in legislation and issues arising from welfare reform. The panel led the review of the policy to ensure that policies and working practices remain compliant.
1.16	The SARTH steering group includes senior officer representatives from all partner organisations across all three counties. The group meets on an ad-hoc basis to serve as an escalation point for strategic issues arising out of the panel. The group has further developed partnership arrangements

	between landlord organisations across the region and agreed spend of the regional SARTH budget for IT developments such as Flintshire's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) integration and staff support where necessary.
1.17	Flintshire has been managing the triage and housing register for Denbighshire since they went live in April 2017. There are many tangible benefits of Flintshire hosting both registers including consistency of approach, reduced management and ICT costs and an income stream for Flintshire. The Council receives £74,345 from external partners for delivering this service.
1.18	Flintshire's legal department are drafting contracts for Denbighshire and the other partners which will meet all the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and include detailed performance targets expected from the Council as host for both Flintshire and Denbighshire.
1.19	Social Housing Demand
1.20	In 2017/18, there were 3495 triage applications completed for customers approaching for housing assistance which represents a 3.9% increase in enquiries when compared to the same reporting period in 2016/17.
1.21	The numbers on the social housing register are increasing and as such waiting times for properties are becoming longer. There were 960 households on the list in April 2016, this increased to 1,478 in April 2017 and increased again to 1,649 in April 2018. The households that were let properties in quarter four of 2017/18 for one, two and three bedroom properties had been waiting on average between twelve to eighteen months to be allocated a property.
1.22	The current process for administering applications is manual and extremely labour intensive and this was becoming a pressure as volumes increased. Work is currently underway to introduce automation of the process which will streamline processes and allow the limited resources available to focus on the more critical aspects of the service. This is a high priority action for the service and we expect CRM integration to be complete in the Autumn which brings further benefits such as improved housing demand information.
1.23	The chart below shows the breakdown of all the applicants on the register by their band. It is expected that the vast majority of cases will be in band two (B2) which is for applicants with a local connection and a housing need. Band one (B1) applicants are those with an extreme urgent need and Band three and four (B3 and B4) are for applicants with no local connection or those who have had their banding reduced as a result of their behaviour, not addressing rent arrears or it has been identified that they have adequate resources to resolve their own housing need.

	<table border="1"> <caption>Line Graph Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Category</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>B1</td> <td>5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B2</td> <td>75%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B3</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B4</td> <td>15%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Category	Percentage	B1	5%	B2	75%	B3	0%	B4	15%
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1.24	Audit Update										
1.25	An audit of SARTH was undertaken during September 2017 as part of the approved Internal Audit Plan for 2017/18. This was a follow up to an audit on Housing Allocations undertaken in 2016/17. A report was brought to Overview and Scrutiny committee in January 2018 to update on progress with recommendations which showed that all urgent actions had already been implemented. Outstanding actions reported at the time have been completed within the agreed timescale.										
1.26	A key area of work was the need to develop updated and more comprehensive operational guidance and procedure documents that sit beneath the policy for staff involved in the management of the register and housing allocations. Comprehensive guidance and procedures have been finalised. A robust implementation process is being rolled out providing small group training sessions for all staff that have any part managing the register or making allocations. This is mandatory training which will improve consistency, ownership and engagement across the teams.										
1.27	Specialist Housing										
1.28	The vast majority of applicants' housing need will be met from the available housing stock. However, some applicant households require properties to meet needs arising from disability or household size; for example, to accommodate wheel chairs, fit bed hoists, stair lifts and accessible bathing rooms and some households require more than four bedrooms. Such housing is in particularly short supply within the social housing stock and these requirements would not necessarily be met within reasonable timescales or within existing stock without some further intervention.										
1.29	In Flintshire, the current specialist register has 56 applicants awaiting adapted properties of which 16 have an urgent need in band one. In addition, there are 12 applicants awaiting large properties (five beds or more).										
1.30	The Specialist Housing Group's purpose is to keep a track of complex cases and work to identify solutions where there are specialist requirements. Since its relaunch in 2017 the group have found long term suitable housing solutions for 35 specialist cases with a further eight provisional allocations										

	in progress.
1.31	Sourcing suitable accommodation for applicants with specialist needs and identifying properties that are suitable for complex adaptation work within our housing stock is difficult and budget constraints makes this even more challenging. The 35 cases that have received specialist housing have been delivered through a mixture of new builds and adapting existing stock.
1.32	Although good progress has been made in this area the level of demand for specialist housing is growing and appropriate solutions cannot always be achieved quickly which often means applicants who do have specialist requirements have a considerably longer wait for properties than those without. A full report on Specialist Housing will be brought to committee early in 2019.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	There are no specific resource implications arising from this update report.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	There were no consultations required for this update report.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	The growing demand for social housing and increased wait times presents a risk of increased pressure on the Homeless Service.
4.02	Flintshire receives income from Denbighshire County Council and the social landlords to deliver the register on their behalf. If any of the partners terminated this arrangement it would result in a reduced income to the Council. This risk is managed within existing business planning approaches.
4.03	The updated policy has been subject to an equality impact assessment carried out by Tai Pawb.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix One: Single Access Route to Housing Policy 2018 attached.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
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6.01	<p>None.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Katie Clubb, Customer Support Manager Telephone: 01352 7035518 E-mail: katie.clubb@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	Housing Solutions Triage – the initial discussion with the customer about their circumstances and housing need.
7.02	Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) Policy – the regional common policy for all major social landlords allocating social housing properties across Conwy, Denbighshire and Wrexham.
7.03	CRM – the Council’s customer facing case management system