

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **HOUSING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2013**

REPORT BY: **DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

SUBJECT: **SARTH**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.01 This report updates members on the development of the Single Access Route to Housing Project across the North East Wales sub region and seeks support to continue with the project and implement the policy locally.

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 the local authority areas of Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham.
- 2.02 The partners include all those councils plus Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd, 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 and a project manager was recruited in January 2012. Flintshire 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 Flintshire to put the policy out to public consultation. Members were invited to attend a workshop in April 2013 as part of that consultation and an update report was circulated to members in July 2013 providing feedback on the consultation results.

The aim of the SARTH Policy and Register

- 2.04 All partners recognise there is high demand for rented homes in the region and too few vacancies to meet demand. The overall aim of SARTH is to simplify access to a range of affordable housing options which is transparent, legal, efficient and accessible to all sections of the community. The allocation of social housing must be fair,

consistent, and prioritise those people within our communities according to their housing needs.

- 2.05 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. Currently, Flintshire receives approximately 30 housing applications a week compared to circa 10 homes available for letting each week. All these forms are inputted and the number of points confirmed to the applicant. Many of these applicants have low points and are unlikely to be allocated housing in their chosen areas.
- 2.06 The SARTH policy aims to provide the most useful, consistent and accessible advice and information to everyone who comes to the council for housing and/or housing advice. The aim is to help customers make the most informed choice about how to find a home to meet their needs. The advice provided will cover the whole range of affordable housing options including social housing, private rented accommodation, home ownership and other alternatives. This approach helps to manage expectations and for customers to understand fully their realistic housing options.
- 2.07 The draft policy is simpler to understand than the current points based system. Applicants are given reasonable preference determined by a banding scheme which lists people in date order of their application within each band. Reasonable preference is given to those who fall within the statutory categories such as homelessness, overcrowding, living in unsanitary conditions, medical grounds or hardship.
- 2.08 The priority given to applicants within the banding scheme will vary according to whether the applicant has an urgent housing need, whether the applicant has a local connection and the date order of the application. Applicants who are not in the categories entitled to reasonable preference will not be given any priority in the banding scheme and will not be recorded on the housing register. However, advice and assistance will be provided to assist those applicants in finding affordable housing that meets their need. The policy allows for applicants to be dropped to a lower banding where their behaviour affects their suitability to be a tenant.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

Public Consultation

- 3.01 The public consultation on the Common Allocation Policy took place between 4th March and 30th April 2013. This included each partner sending surveys to 10% of applicants on the register and 10% of tenants in their housing stock. Each partner placed the survey and draft policy on their website. There were local consultation events, a

regional stakeholder event and coverage in the local press.

3.02 There were 450 survey responses. Below is a summary of the findings from the main questions:-

- 90% of people responding stated they agreed with the proposal for a single register.
- 80% of people agreed with the proposal to only put people with a recognised housing need on the register.
- 82% of people agreed with the proposed banding scheme
- 89% of people agreed that people with a local connection be given priority over those with no local connection.
- 92% agreed that an applicant's past behaviour should count against them when applying for a new home.
- 79% of people agreed with the proposal to remove people from the register if they turn down two suitable offers.
- 95% of people agreed with having a separate accessible housing register which would match people with a disability with appropriate properties.

3.03 Following the consultation there were some amendments to the policy in line with feedback received. The Draft Common Allocation Policy was submitted for legal opinion in August 2013 and the regional steering group has now agreed that this final version be submitted for political approval by all the partner organisations. The policy will remain subject to annual review.

Regional Policy and Register

3.04 The core aim of the regional project has been to develop a Joint Allocation Register and a Common Allocations Policy across the North East Wales sub region. Currently all the partner organisations have their own IT systems. This is not an obstacle to the implementation of a Common Allocation Policy. However, the development of a regional register to support the policy is more complex and requires an IT system to be purchased or developed. The regional project has carried out some work to consider the most appropriate IT solution to support the policy and attended a number of demonstrations on IT packages that could support a regional register. There has been no financial commitment from all partners to contribute to a regional system at the moment.

3.05 In light of additional pressures facing Local Authorities, Flintshire believes there needs to be additional work to identify cost savings and benefits of a regional register before investment in a new IT system can be proposed. However, the regional policy can be implemented with county based common housing registers where the Local Authority can host the system for the Housing Associations in the Local Authority.

Local Development

- 3.06 Flintshire County Council is committed to continuing with the regional project but would also like to seek approval to move ahead locally with the implementation of the new policy in Flintshire for the Local Authority and Flintshire Housing Associations. A local register would support local service delivery which is closely aligned to the existing housing options teams. The feedback results detailed in this report demonstrate support for the new policy and support for the changes to the current approach to managing applications including the option for enhanced housing options to be provided to applicants and only those with an identified housing need to be added to the register.

Housing Solutions

- 3.07 Flintshire County Council has taken a step towards delivering the enhanced service by piloting a central housing register team. This provides a central point for application processing and queries about access to social housing. The team is located in Housing Options so early support and advice can be provided where it is identified there is a threat of homelessness.
- 3.08 The proposal is that the Central Housing Register Team and the Housing Options Team join to form a 'Housing Solutions Model' which will deal with all requests for housing by assessing an individual's requirements and needs, and advising them on the most suitable option. The team will not input applications with no identified housing need but will advise and assist on other options. For applicants with low needs, advice will be given on areas where there is a likelihood of properties becoming available. The proposal would see applicants seeking housing and/or housing advice being referred to the Housing Solutions Team for an initial assessment rather than applications being sent out automatically by other teams or departments. This will provide an opportunity for applicants to be advised on their housing options and for better matching of applicants to available housing. The proposal will reduce the number of applications processed where the applicant has little chance of being allocated housing either due to the chosen areas or the level of housing need.
- 3.09 This reconfiguration of the service will ensure that Flintshire County Council is prepared for the changes to Homelessness Legislation in 2015. From that time, the Local Authority will have a duty to provide full advice and assistance to all those who approach the Local Authority in housing need. This need can be met without extra cost by staff spending less time inputting data and more time giving advice and assistance and better matching applicants to areas. This early work will assist Flintshire County Council to manage the additional burden of the legislation change without needing to invest in additional staff resources.

3.10 The outcomes will include:-

- A significant improvement in customer service
- Reduction of duplication and unnecessary work
- A triage system that will manage expectations by providing realistic options
- Better matching of applicants to areas with available properties and promotion of hard to let properties

Medical Panel

3.11 The proposal includes implementing a leaner approach to administering the Flintshire County Council Medical Panel. The panel has seen an increase in applications in the last twelve months. This has not been an increase in cases where re-housing is urgent and necessary. The award of medical points can be perceived as a way to increase points for applicants and therefore increase the chance of being allocated a property. Some medical forms are submitted and are not awarded any points. This increase in forms has put a strain on the medical panel and incurred additional pressure on staff time attending and managing the panel. A lean review has been undertaken which has analysed the current process and costs and benchmarked with neighbouring Local Authorities.

3.12 Implementing the recommendations from the review would realise an estimated £3,500 reduction in annual costs of medical panel. The review proposes a new form which is simpler to complete and makes a clear link between the medical need and the current housing situation. The review also suggests that lower level issues be assessed by the Housing Asset Officer and Housing Occupational Therapist. The review suggests that better use is made of internal expertise including mental health services and Occupational Therapy. This is particularly relevant as some doctors have started applying a charge for supporting letters. These changes would be supported by a robust appeals process.

Housing Register

3.13 The proposals above to adapt local management of the register can commence from January 2014. However, the full move across to a common housing register shared with Housing Associations will require a more phased approach. The current housing register is based on a points system and contained within Capita Open Housing. The proposal would be to progress the implementation phase to prepare for a move across to the new banding system. This would include working with Flintshire Corporate IT colleagues to develop a test system that could run behind the existing register so that any impacts can be assessed with a full move over potentially planned for the end of 2014. The IT development will need to include options for

hosting the register and providing access to Housing Associations. Corporate IT and Business Systems colleagues will be fully involved in the development and consideration of options. The SARTH project is a standing agenda item at the Housing IT Steering Group. The necessary IT development time would give officers in the team the opportunity to carry out cleansing work on the current register by contacting people on the register to discuss their current application and status and ensure all information is fully up to date and explain the changes to the register and allocations policy.

- 3.14 The proposed timescales above are outlined in a project plan attached at appendix 2. The plan details the high level activities required to implement the policy and register in Flintshire.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 To support the new allocations policy for Flintshire County Council (appendix 1)
- 4.02 To support continued involvement in the regional project and the Contribution of £10,000 in 2014-15 for the Regional Project Officer post.
- 4.03 To support the phased implementation of the new allocations policy and register in Flintshire as detailed in the project plan (appendix 2)

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 Flintshire has contributed £10,000 to the project for 2013-14 and it is expected that the 2014-15 contribution will remain the same. The £10,000 funding in 2014-15 has been identified through staff vacancies whilst finalising the restructure. Flintshire remains committed to exploring the most efficient way of implementing the new register and policy from existing council fund resources.
- 5.02 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. Implementing the policy locally will require investment in IT development which will be carried out in-house. If there is a need to revisit the IT requirements, we anticipate that we should be able to access the regional funding for this purpose.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 The proactive work being undertaken by the Housing Solutions Team will assist applicants 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 A full project wide Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken with assistance from Tai Pawb. Further testing of a system will provide more specific impact assessments to be carried out at a local level.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 None specifically associated with the content of this report

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 Applicants currently on the register will be contacted about proposed changes. Nobody currently on the register will be removed unless they no longer wish to remain on the register.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 The policy has been subject to wide consultation in 2013.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1: The SARTH Policy

12.02 Appendix 2: Project Plan for Implementation

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None

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