

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CABINET**

DATE: **TUESDAY, 21 JANUARY 2014**

REPORT BY: **DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

SUBJECT: **SARTH**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 This report seeks approval to implement the Single Access Route to Housing Project locally, to the development of a Housing solutions service; and to continue to engage with the project across the North East Wales sub region.

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. The partners include all those councils plus Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd, North Wales Housing and Wales and West Housing Associations.

2.02 In November 2012, Cabinet gave approval for Flintshire to put a draft sub regional common housing register and 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

2.03 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.

2.04 The SARTH policy not only includes a revised allocation policy but includes some changes to the way the register is currently managed such as 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. All these

forms are registered 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.

- 2.05 The SARTH policy aims 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 helps to manage expectations and for customers to understand fully their realistic housing options.
- 2.06 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.
- 2.07 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 regional steering group has now agreed that this final version be submitted for approval by all the partner organisations. The policy will remain subject to annual review.

Regional Policy and Register

3.04 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.

3.05 In light of additional pressures facing Local Authorities, Flintshire council believes that there needs to be additional work to identify cost savings and the benefits of a regional register before investment in a new IT system could be proposed. However, the regional policy meets Flintshire's current requirements and can be implemented locally with the Local Authority hosting the system for the Housing Associations operating in the County. This in itself will bring significant benefit and simplicity for those seeking social housing; as there will only be one application to make which will be assessed against a single allocation policy.

Local Development

3.06 Flintshire County Council is committed to continuing to work positively with the regional project where it can be shown that there is a direct benefit for local people, and at this stage is seeking approval to move ahead locally with the implementation of the new policy in Flintshire. A County wide register would support local service delivery which is closely aligned to the existing housing options service. 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.

3.07 Housing Solutions

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 Central Housing Register Team and the Housing Options Team will join to form a 'Housing Solutions Model' dealing with all requests for housing. 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 team will not input applications with no identified housing need but will advise and assist on other options. 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 by staff spending less time inputting data and more time giving advice and assistance and better matching applicants to areas. This will enable Flintshire County Council to manage the additional burden without needing 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 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. The panel has seen an increase in applications in the last twelve months but not an increase in cases where re-housing is urgent and necessary. 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 By simplifying the forms and making better use of internal resources (such as occupational therapists) the review would realise an estimated £3,500 reduction in annual costs of medical panel. 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 for Flintshire shared with Housing Associations will require a phased approach. 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 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, 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 approve the new allocations policy for Flintshire County Council (appendix 1)
- 4.02 To approve the phased implementation of the new allocations policy and housing solutions service in Flintshire as detailed in the project plan (appendix 2)
- 4.03 To support continued involvement in the regional project work to the benefit of Flintshire residents.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 A £10,000 contribution to the regional development work has been identified from the 2014-15 budget.
- 5.02 Implementing the policy locally will require investment in IT development which will be carried out at no additional cost over existing budgets.

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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