

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 14 JANUARY 2015**

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

SUBJECT: **UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SARTH**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 This report updates members on the development of the Single Access Route to Housing Project (SARTH) across the North East Wales sub region and the development of a Common Housing Register in Flintshire.

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. The social landlords involved include Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Grwp Cynefin, North Wales Housing and Wales and West Housing Associations.

2.02 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.

2.03 In January 2014, Cabinet approved the implementation of the new allocation policy for Flintshire County Council. (Copy of policy attached at Appendix A). Cabinet agreed to the development of the Housing Access Team providing improved advice on housing options ahead of the development and transfer of applicants to the new banding register.

2.04 The SARTH policy will be 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.

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 accessing social housing and a move toward providing advice on realistic housing options.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 The timeline proposed that the move to improved housing advice would start immediately and the Flintshire register would be developed by December 2014.

3.02 The Housing Access Team is operational and is providing advice to all applicants about their housing options. Previously, the team were receiving 30 applications a week and these were all registered (even where applicants had little or no points or were choosing areas with very few vacancies and very high demand).. Customers now receive clear information about their choice of areas and can be assisted to explore other options that may be more suitable including the private rented sector and affordable housing.

3.03 The target date for developing the SARTH register was December 2014. The register has been developed and is ready for applicants to be transferred across. However, it is proposed that this transfer is managed over a period of time so that each applicant can be dealt with individually and offered a triage service over the phone or in person to ensure all the information collated for the new register is correct and applicants with low priority can be offered information, support and assistance to explore alternative options.

The current housing register will be maintained while the housing solutions service transfers applicants over to the new banding register. The implementation date for allocating properties from the new banding register will be 1st April 2015.

3.04 The work of the project has progressed significantly during the past 12 months. All partners are represented on the sub-regional Steering Group and on three key work streams leading on ICT, Communications and Operational Developments in order to ensure the smooth transition to the new housing register and allocation policy.

3.05 Communications

All current applicants for social housing will receive a letter at the beginning of January requesting that they complete and return a reply slip if they wish to remain on the housing register and still require

social housing. Currently, there are 3633 applicants who will receive a letter. Once the applicant has confirmed that they wish to remain on the housing register, they will be contacted by a member of staff from the Housing Solutions Team, in order that they can discuss the changes to the allocation policy, talk through the applicants circumstances and assess which band, if any, the applicant would be placed into.

The new system will place people in date order in their priority band group. For all existing applicants, their original application date will transfer.

The process above has been amended slightly for those people on the current registers who are aged over 55 and have applied for Sheltered Housing. In order to ensure that needs are assessed appropriately, it was agreed that visits would be arranged to this group of applicants, rather than sending out a letter. This ensures that the council will be able to fully explain the process and alleviate any concerns that applicants may have regarding the new policy. In addition, it also allows for family members to be present if necessary. These visits are being conducted between January and March by Accommodation Support Workers from the Community Based Accommodation Support Service (CBASS).

Only those people with an identified housing need will be placed on the new housing register. However, Flintshire County Council has made a commitment that if a current applicant does not meet the criteria for any of the new Banding priorities, they will be able to remain on the old register and may be considered for a housing allocation if there are no suitable applicants for a vacancy on the new common housing register. It is suggested that a timescale be agreed for the closure of the old register and removal of applicants with low housing need. Applicants would be informed that if no suitable allocation is identified within a 12-month period then they will be assisted with other options and removed from the register. All elected members will be provided with a copy of the letter being sent to applicants.

It is anticipated that this work will take approximately 4 months to complete. As this will cross over the implementation date, the work will be prioritised according to those with the current highest points on the register. This will ensure that those with the highest level of needs are assessed as a priority.

Applicants will be informed that they will remain on their current point levels and still be considered for housing between January and the end of March according to the current process. They will also be informed of their new Band Level from 1st April.

All relevant staff have received briefings in relation to the new process

and a more in depth training programme is being delivered during the first two weeks of January. This will ensure that there is a consistent approach to the advice given to and management of housing applications.

3.06 ICT Work Stream

There have been two main areas of development within the ICT work stream. Firstly, work between the Councils business systems team and Capita to develop parameters for the revised application process to place applicants into bandings. This work has been completed and testing of the system is taking place.

The other area of development is the partner access portal which will enable the Housing Associations to access the register to prepare a shortlist in order to allocate their properties.

Corporate ICT have completed the technical evaluation for this development and will be starting the infrastructure design and the build of the server required to host this access portal. This development is on target to be in place in time for allocations to commence on April 1st 2015.

3.07 Operations Work Stream

The Operations Work Stream has been developing the operational procedures that will sit beneath the overarching policy; and testing the ICT developments. All work in relation to the triage of applicants will be completed by Flintshire County Council on behalf of the Housing Associations in the County. In the lead in period support has been offered from appropriate staff who will receive full training within Connects, the Admin team and Neighbourhood Housing Management.

Assistance with the staffing resources needed to undertake this task has also been offered from Wales & West Housing Association, and the regional funds will cover any additional costs involved with this.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 Committee notes the progress made to implement a new allocation policy and common housing register.

4.02 Committee supports the phased transfer of applicants to the new register including Housing Association applicants, and supports the proposal to set a 12-month timescale for those with no identified housing need to be able to remain on the original register.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 Flintshire County Council has contributed £10,000 in 2013/14, £8,000 in 2014/15 and will contribute £8,000 in 2015/16. (subject to budget approval) towards the project.
- 5.02 The regional project funding has paid for the cost of the Project Manager in Flintshire (3 days a week) and covered all the ICT development costs.
- 5.03 Flintshire will be managing the register on behalf of the Housing Associations in the county. The Housing Associations will contribute to the costs of managing the register from April 2015. The level of contribution will be agreed based on an analysis of current costs and expected savings.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 None specifically

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 7.01 None specifically

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.01 Initially, the new register will continue to record previous points awarded under the current policy. This will allow for a comparison to be made between where an applicant is placed on the old register against the new one. This will inform any issues that may arise in relation to Equalities.
- 8.02 Cartrefi Conwy carried out a comprehensive equality impact assessment as part of the early consultation and development. External legal advice was sought to ensure the policy gave reasonable preference to the groups identified within the relevant housing legislation.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.01 There are no specific staffing implications not already addressed.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

- 10.01 Individual discussion will take place with each applicant for social housing. Applicants who no longer qualify for access to one of the four bandings within the policy will be given advice and assistance to secure alternative suitable housing solutions

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 As previously detailed in Section 2.00 of this report

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix A – Common Allocation Policy

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

None

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