

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 14th January 2014

Lead Member / Officer: Councillor Hugh Irving/Sue Lewis

Report Author: Sue Lewis

Title: Common Allocations Policy – Single Access Route to Housing

1. What is the report about?

1.1 The report updates members on the development of a Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) across the North East Wales sub region and seeks approval of the Common Allocations Policy CAP) for implementation locally.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

2.1 To provide information regarding the details of the revised CAP following the consideration of feedback from the CAP consultation, research and legal opinion. The CAP has been agreed by the SARTH steering group and is going through the committees/boards of the partners organisations.

2.2 To seek approval to continue with the project and implement the CAP locally from late 2014.

3. What are the Recommendations?

3.1 For members to consider the CAP and to approve the new allocations policy for Denbighshire (**appendix A**).

4. Report details.

4.1 SARTH (Single Access Route to Housing) is a partnership project between all the major social landlords in north east Wales, covering in the local authority areas of Conwy County Borough, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham County Borough. The partners are Conwy County Borough Council, Denbighshire County Council, Flintshire County Council, Wrexham County Borough Council, Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn Housing association, Cymdeithas Tai Clwyd, North Wales Housing and Wales and West Housing.

4.2 Aim

4.2.1 All partners recognise there is far greater demand for rented homes in the region with relatively few vacancies within Council/housing Association properties. The overall aim of SARTH is to provide a common access route to a range of affordable housing options which is transparent, legal, efficient and accessible to all sections of the community. SARTH will improve the service to customers by providing a single, common waiting list with one allocation policy across Local Authorities and Housing Associations across North East Wales. The allocation of social housing must be fair, consistent, and prioritise those people within our communities according to their housing needs.

4.2.2 The SARTH policy moves away from focusing purely on social housing and towards providing realistic advice on a range of housing options. Denbighshire receives approximately 1050 housing applications per annum but only has 200 vacancies per year.

The application forms involve significant administration in terms of printing, inputting, pointing and dealing with queries. Many of these applicants have low points and are unlikely to be allocated housing in their chosen areas. The SARTH CAP policy aims to provide useful, consistent housing advice to all requesting it. The aim is to help customers make informed choice and 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.

- 4.2.3 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.
- 4.2.4 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 find 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. **Appendix A** provides further details.
- 4.2.5 The public consultation on the Common Allocation Policy took place between 4th March and 30th April 2013 including 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. There were 450 survey responses and the key findings were:
- 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.
- 4.2.6 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.

4.3 **Regional Policy and Register**

- 4.3.1 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 means that the region can implement a Common Allocation Policy relatively easily. 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 further work is required. A further report will be taken to Scrutiny once the options and costs are evaluated fully.

4.3.2 In light of additional pressures facing Local Authorities, Denbighshire 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.

4.4 Local perspective

4.4.1 Denbighshire County Council is committed to continuing with the regional project but would also like to seek approval to move ahead locally within the county. Homelessness, housing options and warden services are currently undergoing a restructure and the CAP can only be implemented once this is finalised. This is likely to be approximately September 2014 for the Local Authority and Denbighshire Housing Associations. The consultation feedback demonstrates support for the new policy, enhanced housing options advice and only allowing those with an identified housing need to be added to the register.

4.4.2 Denbighshire County Council has taken a step towards delivering the enhanced service by focusing more and more on the housing option approach in recent years where there is a threat of homelessness. The CAP will involve an increased demand for housing options advice and this is being fed into the restructure as part of a wider duty which will be placed on the Local Authority in terms of homelessness under the new housing legislation being developed currently.

4.5 Housing Register

4.5.1 The proposals above to adapt local management of the register can commence from approximately September 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.

4.5.2 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 Corporate IT to develop a test system that could run behind the existing register so that any impacts can be assessed with a full move over planned for autumn 2014. The IT development will need to include options for hosting the register and providing access to Housing Associations. 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.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

5.1 The project links directly into the following corporate priorities:

- Ensuring access to good quality housing
- Responding to demographic change
- Customer focus approach – improving service delivery a single contact point and early realistic housing options advice

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

6.1 The project has secured the following funding:

- Nearly £120,000 of Social Housing Management Grant (SHMG) has been provided from the Welsh Government to fund this innovative project. The project is awaiting confirmation of the amount for 2014/15 from Welsh Government.
- The SHMG element has been match funded by the partners of the project

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

7.1 A full project wide Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken with assistance from Tai Pawb (see **Appendix B**).

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

The SARTH project originated from a Scrutiny discussion involving Housing Services and Housing Associations on 16th September 2010. The project has been to a range of committees including:

- Various scrutiny committees – Communities and Partnerships
- Informal Cabinet – 4th July 2011
- Communities Scrutiny - 14th June 2012
- Public consultation on CAP – March to April 2013
- Regular project groups – SARTH steering and working groups
- Partnerships Scrutiny on 19th December 2013 – please refer to appendix C for key points from the discussion

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The capital and revenue costs to deliver the IT solution will need to be clearly identified & contained within the available funding when confirmed. The IT costs will need to be agreed with all partners & closely monitored against the funding. Associated benefits will need to be determined once the preferred IT solution has been identified.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1 The risks for each project are monitored and evaluated regularly as part of the project management approach by the Project Manager and each of the organisations involved.

11. Power to make the Decision

Section 167 of the Homelessness Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 relates to allocations.