

Report to: Partnerships Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 7th November 2019

Lead Member/Officer: Tony Thomas - Lead Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Environment
Geoff Davies - Lead Officer - Community Housing

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Title: SARTH - Single Access Route to Housing

1. What is the report about?

This report details the operation of SARTH, which is the Single Access Route to Housing which deals with how applications for social housing are managed.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

This is in response to a request to scrutinise the “effectiveness of the new partnership in helping people to access accommodation within reasonable timescales”.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That the Committee considers the contents of this report and comments accordingly.

4. Report details

SARTH is the “Single Access Route to Housing” which is the name given to the Common Housing Allocations policy between Denbighshire, Flintshire and Conwy councils and the Housing Associations (RSLs) that operate in these counties.

Cabinet approved the Allocations Policy in January 2014 and in April 2017 SARTH was implemented in Denbighshire.

4.1 Common Allocations Policy

The policy ensures that we deliver social housing allocations in accordance with housing legislation (Housing Act 1996, Housing (Wales) 2014) and the Code of Guidance for the Allocation of Accommodation. This is necessary to mitigate the risk of legal challenge but also to ensure that homes are allocated to those most in need. **Appendix 1** is the current SARTH Policy document.

The overall operation of the policy is monitored by a Regional Steering Group made up of the 3 councils and the RSLs involved. In addition, operational issues regarding

the day to day implementation of the policy including appeals from applicants about their priority banding are discussed at a monthly Operational Panel Group meeting.

4.2 Denbighshire Common Housing Register

Whilst the policy is a joint partnership between the 3 counties, the delivery of the common housing register is individual to each county. In Denbighshire, we now operate one single register for all social housing let by the council and the 6 RSLs that operate within Denbighshire.

With regards to the operational delivery of the Denbighshire common register we made the decision in September 2016 to partner with Flintshire County Council as they were already delivering this service and had been through the significant change process to ensure smooth implementation and operation of the service.

4.3 Flintshire Partnership

The partnership approach with Flintshire has gone well overall. The work required to implement the operational delivery of SARTH was considered in detail in 2016 but we recognised the benefits of using Flintshire's experience and how they have established their services to meet the demands of delivering this effectively. In addition the ability to use already configured ICT systems has been a significant benefit.

In summary, the service involves handling over 300 calls per week involving initial call handling, interviews with customers, detailed assessment of applications in accordance with the policy and challenges regarding decisions. Cases are often referred to other services such as Homeless Prevention, Housing Enforcement, Tai Teg and also support services. Call handling and written correspondence are all Denbighshire branded and customers are not aware of where the staff are located.

Denbighshire receive value for money for the partnership as the cost is less than the cost to deliver this service ourselves. The annual cost to Denbighshire is currently £52k which is less than the cost of 2 full time grade 5 staff. We calculate that we would need these additional staff as a minimum in addition to the ability to deal with significant call volumes and the lengthy triage process. Flintshire benefit from economies of scale with providing the service for additional partners.

4.4 Performance

We monitor performance and the operation of the partnership agreement with Flintshire to ensure service standards are delivered and maintained including call answering performance. We are aware of significant call volumes and the complexity of calls and Flintshire have continually reviewed the operation of the service and given some detailed consideration as to how best to deliver the service effectively. The current average call response time is 1 minute 19 seconds.

4.5 Meeting Housing Need

We know that the number of applicants for housing has decreased significantly since the introduction of the new policy. Previously there were in the region of 3,000 applicants across several landlord maintained registers in Denbighshire but the revising of the eligibility has seen this reduce to around 1,200. **Appendix 2** gives some background data on housing need and the allocation of social homes in

Denbighshire during 2018 / 2019. **Appendix 3** outlines how the service ensures that more complex needs are recognised through the policy.

4.6 Impact of the Policy

The partners in the wider SARTH partnership are aware that the policy should now be reviewed to ensure that the policy is achieving its aims and is meeting housing need appropriately. Conwy County Borough Council Housing Strategy team have been commissioned to undertake a review of the impact of the policy.

4.7 Compliance & Consistency

The steering group have also commissioned work to carry out regular audits of compliance with the policy by all landlords to ensure consistency in allocations. This will ensure correct application of the policy and highlight incorrect or inappropriate use of bypassing options. The findings are reported regularly to the regional steering group

4.8 Prospects Information

One of the main concerns for applicants is having the ability to understand how long current waiting times are. Managing clear expectations can reduce frustration and provide households with better information to manage their housing circumstances. **Appendix 4** gives information on waiting times based on actual experience through recent lets. This is intended as a guide as this data is based on average waiting times and these can vary depending on the property type and area.

On a positive note there is a significant social and affordable new build programme underway in addition to the Council's own new build plans. Information on the programme is attached in **Appendix 5**

4.9 Internal Audit Review

SARTH has been subject to an internal audit review completed in September 2019. The audit gave a Medium Assurance level. The full report will be presented to Corporate Governance in the autumn.

The main recommendation is the need for more formal written agreements to clarify the roles, responsibilities and relationship between the Regional Steering Group, Operational Group and local partnership arrangements.

It should be noted that there is strong governance for the partnership particularly as senior managers represent the partners at steering group level such as the Managing Director of Cartrefi Conwy, Deputy Chief Executive of Wales & West Housing Association, Director of Resident Services at Clwyd Alyn Housing, Head of Housing at Grŵp Cynefin in addition to Denbighshire's Lead Officer for Community Housing.

4.10 Customer Satisfaction

We have some feedback from customers on the applications process. This is gathered when applicants move into their new home. Satisfaction with the application process is currently 88% and comments regarding dissatisfaction refer to the length of wait for a home. We recognise that a survey of applicants whilst they are on the housing register and yet to receive an offer of a home may give us more meaningful

information. Therefore a full survey of current housing register applicants is planned for early 2020.

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

Housing and Resilient Communities are corporate priorities.

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

There are no additional costs associated with this report

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

An impact assessment was not required for this report as no changes are proposed

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

Information on SARTH was delivered at a council briefing in June 2019

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The costs associated with services and maintenance for council housing are contained within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. The plan for 2019/20 was approved by Cabinet in January 2019.

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

The Council has a duty to maintain a register of housing need and to ensure that homes are allocated in accordance with a published policy.

11. Power to make the Decision

11.1 Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000

11.2 Section 7.4.2(b) of the Council's Constitution details Scrutiny's powers with respect of policy objectives, performance targets and/or particular service areas, whilst Section 7.4.2(e) states that Scrutiny may review and scrutinise the performance of other public bodies in the area and invite them to address a Scrutiny Committee about their activities and performance.

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