COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	

Date of Meeting	Monday 15 January 2018
Report Subject	Audit Report – Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH)
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Housing
Report Author	Chief Officer (Community and Enterprise)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An audit of SARTH (Single Access Route to Housing) was undertaken during September 2017 (final report November 2017) as part of the approved Internal Audit Plan for 2017/18. This was a follow up to an audit report on Housing Allocations in September 2016.

The audit focused on the new processes arising from the introduction of SARTH and has examined a number of County Council allocations for compliance with these procedures.

The audit has highlighted a number of recommendations for improvement, two being flagged as red. Immediate action has been taken in response to implement a revised process.

RECOMMENDATIONS	
1	Scrutiny Committee is asked to review this report and be reassured that all high risks actions have been fully implemented. All remaining actions are either also complete or currently in progress.

1.00	AUDIT OF SINGLE ACCESS ROUTE TO HOUSING
1.01	An audit of Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) was undertaken during September 2017 as part of the approved Internal Audit Plan for 2017/18. This was a follow up to an audit on Housing Allocations undertaken in 2016/17.
1.02	Of the original audit report recommendations, 75% have been completed in full, with 3 actions partially completed and 1 action outstanding. The outstanding action is in relation to the password security to the Portal. This is the gateway system that partner RSL's use to enable them to make allocations for their properties from the shared waiting list. This was classified as a (green) low risk action, as each user is required to log on via a secure system with a complex password before access to the housing system is enabled. Housing Services are actively engaging with the ICT service to progress the implementation of the security code and this work will be included in a suite of actions which will be closely monitored against timescales. This is part of an on-going ICT support development plan which will be included on the Housing Services risk register and will be regularly reviewed. Two of the three partially completed actions relate to procedural updates. This work was delayed as it was agreed by the SARTH Regional Steering Group to complete the policy review before undertaking an update of procedures. The SARTH Regional Steering Group consists of Senior Officers from all SARTH partners who collectively oversee the collaboration and are responsible for policy decisions. The policy review was only completed and agreed by the Regional Steering Group in September 2017 and the new policy document has now been drafted and is with partners for sign off. The third partially completed action relates to the allocation override of applicants who have been bypassed for a property on the Capita system (please see 1.07). A comprehensive monthly review is now carried out by the Team Leader which will result in all overrides being monitored.
1.03	The most recent audit report has highlighted a number of areas that demonstrate compliance with new procedures that have been introduced following the first audit, however, new actions have been identified as control weaknesses within the current processes. Of the 13 actions identified, 10 of these are issues which have not previously been highlighted.
1.04	Out of the 13 actions, 9 have been fully implemented and 2 relate to the procedures. The procedures are currently being reviewed and updated by the Regional SARTH group with a view to being fully implemented by June 2018. Many of the actions are being carried out operationally, it is the formal documentation which requires updating and agreed by all partners.

	The remaining 2 are in progress and the details are below: • **Periodic reviews not completed within timescales** (amber). While it is accepted that not all reviews have been undertaken within the agreed timescale the level of risk of an incorrect allocation is low. All applicants have a pre tenancy assessment by the potential landlord before being allocated a property and any change of circumstances would be picked up by the allocating officer at this time. The purpose of the review is to ensure applications are up to date and accurate to help speed the pre tenancy assessment up and enable the letting process to progress quickly. The Housing Contact Centre and The Housing Solutions Contact Centre are due to merge into one single contact centre and it is here that Housing Register calls will be answered. Once fully set up the call centre staff will be trained to complete reviews of housing applications with applicants when they call to make enquiries/changes to their application. This will reduce the number of scheduled reviews that need to be completed and will also reduce duplication for those customers where recent contact has been made. Enquiries have been made with the IT System supplier about introducing more automation to reduce the need for manual interventions for this process which will ensure applications are amended and cancelled where necessary within the agreed timescales. • **Timescales for the cancellation of applications due to non-receipt of evidence are not always adhered to** (green). While it is accepted that not all applications have been fully cancelled within the agreed timescale the level of risk is low as these applications are suspended on the system and would not therefore show on a shortlist. There is therefore no risk that an applicant that should be cancelled could be allocated a property. It is for this reason that the service deemed this a low risk area and focussed resources available on higher risk parts of the service.
1.05	Although two actions have been identified as being red, where action is imperative to ensure that the objectives of the area under review are met, it was noted that actions from the team following the review have been prompt in implementing control measures to mitigate the risks identified. As part of the final report discussions further evidence was submitted to audit who have confirmed the evidence received demonstrates full compliance with the recommended actions.
1.06	The first red action relates to errors which have been identified relating to the application date and banding allocation date within the Capita system. This does potentially pose a risk that an applicant's position within the short-list may not be accurate. However, an exception report was in place to identify any applications where the banding allocation date was different to the application date to allow these to be reviewed and corrected if necessary. The audit found that this report was ran periodically but was not scheduled to be run frequently enough to mitigate the risk of an error. However, there is on average a 10 month wait for a 3 bed property and longer for 1 and 2 bed properties, therefore the risk of an applicant not

	being correctly placed is low. Following the audit recommendation this is now scheduled to be monitored weekly.
1.07	In the original audit, it was highlighted that incorrect override codes were being used. This has been addressed, as has the functionality for Housing Officers to create a direct let. However, the latest audit has highlighted that a potential risk remains for an inappropriate allocation as there was no formal review of housing allocation overrides. Having received the audit report, a series of measures have been introduced to mitigate the risks, these being: • Since October 2017, a monthly override report is run which details every override and the Housing Officer responsible. This is checked by the Team Leader to ensure the applicant has been bypassed in line with procedures. • This report will be included in the suite of performance measures for Housing Services as a key performance indicator and submitted to CEMT and the Housing and Regeneration Programme Board for monitoring purposes. • Housing Services are engaging with ICT regarding the development of the Openhousing system to allow for more effective filtering on property types and performance management of manual overrides It is recognised that there is a need for some applicants to be bypassed, for example, when a property has been substantially adapted as it is important that a suitable applicant is matched. Also, where a sensitive let is required with regards to activity of organised crime groups or the needs of an applicant's individual circumstances. The Management team is currently reviewing all overrides to ensure compliance however this may be reviewed in time to a sample 50% of allocations for each Housing Officer. It is pleasing to note that of all overrides checked, 98% have been in compliance and no concerns have been raised regarding an inappropriate allocation. Of the remaining 2%, correct override codes have been used however, full details on the reason why has not been recorded and this has been addressed with the individual member of staff.
1.08	**Demand for SARTH** The demand for social housing has significantly increased with 2016/17 recording more than double the number of applications previously received and managed by the service (please see appendix 2). The number of referrals quoted refers only to the number of referrals made directly to SARTH. There are additional referrals that are made from the Housing Options Team following a homelessness assessment. If a duty is accepted by this service the case will be forwarded onto the Housing Register as the applicant will qualify for social housing. During the period April 2016 to March 2017, the Housing Options Team received 1,232 referrals from triage for households who were homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days. Many of these would have been directed to the Housing Register as part of their personal housing plan to help secure accommodation.

| | The Housing Register waiting list has increased from 973 in April 2016 to over 1600 in April 2017. This increase in demand has placed the service under pressure and has impacted on the service's ability to meet the agreed SLA's as referred to in the audit report.

The service does not have the capacity to continue to manage current demand levels with existing resources. The service plans to address this in a number of ways:

- **System Integration and Enhanced Automation**
  The current process for administrating applications is manual and extremely labour intensive. Work is currently underway to integrate initial triage applications directly onto the Housing System reducing the need for re-keying. The specification for this work has now been finalised and passed to the supplier so that indicative costs and timescales can be agreed. Workflow and more enhanced automation is also being investigated with the supplier, which will streamline processes and allow the limited resources available to focus on the more critical aspects of the service. This is a high priority action for the service and full implementation will require agreed prioritisation of ICT resources across services.

- **Better utilisation of wider services within portfolio**
  The Housing Contact Centre and The Housing Solutions Contact Centre are due to merge into one single contact centre and it is here that Housing Register calls will be answered. Once fully set up the call centre staff will be trained to complete reviews of housing applications with applicants when they call to make enquiries/changes to their application. This will reduce the number of scheduled reviews (*please see 1.04)* that the Housing Register Team will need to be complete and will also reduce duplication for those customers we have already had recent contact with. This again will allow resources to focus on the more critical aspects of the service.

- **Increase the digital offer**
  There are currently no self-service or online functions for an applicant to manage their application. As part of The Council's Customer Services and Digital Strategies, work has begun on developing a Customer Portal that will enable customers to log in to their own account and check their application details/status. The vision for this service is it will be interactive giving customers the ability to both view and update their details and as a result the number of scheduled reviews and outgoing contact will reduce. |
| 1.09 | As a result of the actions implemented, Housing Services are confident that any area of high risk (red) identified in this audit now have the appropriate control measures put in place. The service intends to invite audit back to review these areas ahead of any planned schedule. |

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	Any further increase in demand would exceed the resources currently available within the service.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	Consultation with Regional SARTH Partners on all policy and procedure matters.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	Allocation actions arising from the audit report will be kept under active consideration as part of Housing Service's Risk Register along with ICT action plan and reviewed as a service.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Audit action updates and comments Appendix 2 –SARTH Action Plan

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	**Audit report:** September 2016 on Housing Allocations **Contact Officer:** Steve Agger / Katie Clubb **Telephone:** 01352 701658 / 01352 703518 **Email:** steve.agger@flintshire.gov.uk / katie.clubb@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	**SARTH – Single Access Route To Housing** A single housing register held and managed by Flintshire County Council for all major social housing providers in Flintshire (Clwyd Alyn Housing Association, Wales & West Housing Association and Grwp Cynefin). All SARTH partners are committed to a common allocation policy. **Regional Steering Group** The SARTH Regional Steering Group consists of Senior Officers from all SARTH partners who collectively oversee the collaboration and are responsible for policy decisions.