

COMMUNITY & HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 7 th February 2024
Report Subject	Common Housing Register (Single Access Route to Housing – SARTH)
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration
Report Author	Chief Officer (Housing and Communities)
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) is a partnership between all the major providers of social housing in North Wales, covering the local authority areas of Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire.

The Council manages the housing register on behalf of Flintshire's Social Housing Partners (Flintshire County Council, Clwyd Alyn Housing, Wales and West Housing, Grwp Cynefin and Adra Housing Association) and a single Common Housing Register provides the list of all eligible applicants for social housing. Housing partners allocate their empty properties from the Common Housing Register but have discretion to also apply a small number of 'management moves', as they see fit, in line with principles of 'best use of stock'.

The service to applicants includes the housing triage assessment, housing solutions triage, for those who present as homeless or at risk of homelessness, and a wide range of housing options advice. The service also manages all the applicants accepted onto the Common Housing Register once a clearly evidenced housing need has been identified. Only those applicants with a housing need are accepted onto the Housing Register, but all applicants benefit from housing options advice.

The number of applicants accepted onto the Common Housing Register has grown significantly over the past four years. This is putting increasing pressure on the administrative burden and management of the register and is also leading to increased waiting times for the limited amount of social housing that is available each year.

The report will outline the current levels of housing need across the County and the disparity with the availability of social housing which is not increasing at the same rate as the levels of housing needs that are prevalent within our communities.

An annual customer satisfaction survey is now undertaken to gauge customer experience, satisfaction with service delivery and opportunities for service improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	To note the current levels of housing need across the county and the growing pressures regarding social housing which is not aligned with the supply of available homes locally.
2	To note the applicant feedback following the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey results for the Common Housing Register and Housing Advice function.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE MANAGEMENT OF THE COMMON HOUSING REGISTER
1.01	<p><u>Background to the Single Access Route To Housing Partnership (SARTH)</u></p> <p>SARTH is a partnership between all the major social landlords covering the local authority areas of Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire. Conwy is not a stock holding authority but both Denbighshire and Flintshire have social housing available through their Council Housing Departments.</p> <p>In addition to the above Councils, the partnership also includes Housing Associations; Cartrefi Conwy, Clwyd Alyn, Grwp Cynefin, North Wales Housing, Wales and West Housing and Adra. The SARTH partnership has been in place for over 10 years and is recognised as a strong partnership by all partners involved and externally by Welsh Government and other housing sector and public sector peers.</p> <p>A SARTH operational panel meets monthly, with the primary purpose to ensure consistency in the application of the policy across the three counties and to review complaints and appeals from applicants. The panel has been instrumental in addressing wider topics than the register such as approaches to changes in legislation and issues arising from welfare reform, Covid and more recently elements of the introduction of the Renting Homes Wales Act 2016. The panel considers lessons learnt from appeals, complaints and identifies policy challenges. Issues are escalated as required for consideration of the SARTH steering group which operates as the board for the partnership.</p> <p>The SARTH steering group includes senior officers from all partner organisations across all three counties. The group meets on a quarterly basis to serve as an escalation point for strategic issues arising out of the operational panel along with emerging regional and national sector wide risk and policy issues.</p>

1.02	<p>The Common Allocations Policy and Common Housing Register</p> <p>All partners work within the framework of the Common Allocations Policy. This policy identifies the main principles of the eligibility and prioritisation of applicants seeking social housing, as well as the allocation of social housing across the counties of Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire. Applicants who approach the Council applying for social housing are assessed through a housing triage. Only those applicants with a housing need are accepted onto the register, but all applicants will receive housing options advice. Where it is possible to do so, housing help will be offered to overcome housing problems.</p> <p>The policy recognises that there is a high demand for social homes and too few vacant properties to meet demand. That was true when the policy was first developed, and now even more so, as evidenced in the charts within the housing needs data found within Appendix 1 of this report.</p> <p>The numbers of eligible applicants with a wide range of qualifying housing need continues to be significant, but the number of applicants on the register has reduced from 2,424 on the 31st March 2023 to 1,983 on 31st December 2023 (down 18.2%). Whilst this may suggest the need for social housing is reducing, this is not the case, and is a reflection of better-quality applicant data and the improved performance of register administration.</p> <p>Following the decision by Denbighshire Council to return administration of the Common Housing Register within the Council on 31st March 2023, operational staff have had more time to focus on data accuracy and routine maintenance of the register. This has resulted in a significant increase in periodic reviews of applicant data. As a result, the register data is cleaner and more accurate, with a number of dormant applications now cancelled.</p>
1.03	<p>Housing Options Advice</p> <p>The Housing Register Team provide the most useful, consistent, and accessible advice and information to everyone presenting with a housing problem. This person centred and problem specific response ensures people are helped to explore all their housing options.</p> <p>It is intended that where possible resolving housing problems is the priority, to avoid the need for a move. Issues such as disrepair, financial problems, neighbour disputes may be addressed through advice and support and referrals to appropriately placed support services. This avoids disruption for households and reduces demand for the limited social housing that is available in the county.</p> <p>When a move is required, applicants are accepted onto the Common Housing Register and their housing application is prioritised in line with the Common Allocations Policy banding. Housing options advice is still offered, enabling customers to make the most informed choice about how to find a home to meet their needs. This advice covers a whole range of affordable housing options, including social housing options and locations, private rented accommodation, supported housing, extra care, home ownership and other affordable housing alternatives as appropriate.</p>

	<p>It is acknowledged that finding affordable private rented housing is a challenge, but advice and assistance is still offered and financial help, by way of deposit and rent in advance, will be offered if required. Other low-cost housing options are available via the Tai Teg Affordable Housing Register Service, which is a North Wales wide service hosted by Grwp Cynefin Housing Association.</p>
1.04	<p>Policy Development</p> <p>The Common Allocation Policy is principally governed by The Housing Act 1996 and the Code of Guidance for Homelessness and Allocations 2016 and Welsh Statutory Instruments 2014 No. 2603 (w. 257) – Housing Wales – The Allocation of Homelessness (Eligibility) (Wales) Regulations 2014. Other relevant legislation includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of Information Act 2000 • Equalities Act 2010 • Social Care and Well Being Act 2014 • Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 • Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 • Renting Homes Wales Act 2016 <p>In recent years and as a direct response to the Covid pandemic and significant pressures on homelessness services following the ‘no one left out’ directive from Welsh Government, a variation to the Common Allocations Policy by way of 50% nominations to homeless households was introduced. Take up of the 50% quota for homeless households has always been well below 50%. Appendix 1 provides analysis of the offers made to homeless households through the homeless nominations process.</p> <p>The policy variation is intended to free up the limited resource of emergency and temporary housing and ensure local authorities can still fulfil their statutory duties through the provision of interim housing (s.68 Housing Wales Act 2014). The table in Appendix 1 outlines lettings data over a 3¾ year period from April 2019 to December 2023 by offer category and shows the increase of offers to the homeless cohort via Homeless Direct Lets.</p> <p>Without this policy variation, the Council’s expenditure on emergency and temporary housing would be far greater. However, whilst this variation in policy has assisted with the homeless pressures, it is of significant concern that when looking at the needs of households who are homeless or imminently homeless, single people and couples under the age of 55 account for approximately 80% of the current homeless cohort in emergency or temporary housing offered by Flintshire County Council Homeless Team.</p> <p>With more families and older people (over 55s) experiencing homelessness in recent years, the take up on the homeless nominations has naturally increased since first being implemented in 2020-2021 resulting in these households having significantly reduced periods of homelessness.</p> <p>This disconnect between supply of social housing and the local homeless cohort profile is what accounts for the lower than permitted take up on the 50% homeless quota. The homeless pressures options paper presented to</p>

	<p>Scrutiny Committee in November 2023 outlines a number of proposed actions to support greater take up of social housing to ease current homeless pressures and further updates on progress will be shared later in the year.</p>
1.05	<p>Future Policy Direction for Social Housing Allocations</p> <p>It is anticipated that there will be significant changes with regards to the guidance relating to the allocation of social housing on the back of Welsh Governments ambitions to end homelessness and adopt a Rapid Rehousing approach.</p> <p>When people experience homelessness, assisting them to secure safe suitable housing as quickly as possible is key to the Rapid Rehousing approach. It is expected that the future changes to allocations guidance will further strengthen the links between homelessness and social housing as a significant tool within the prevention and relief of homelessness. Such an approach would support efforts to ensure homelessness is brief within the context of Welsh Governments aspiration for 'homelessness to be rare, brief and unrepeatable'.</p> <p>Consultation on a White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales has recently closed. When specifically looking at allocations and social housing application the White Paper has considered a piece of research '<i>Allocations: Understanding more, in the context of homelessness in Wales</i>' which sought to understand the performance of social housing allocations in relation to the prevention and relief of homelessness.</p> <p>The report found that across Wales there are significant variances in the rate of allocations to homeless households through local housing allocation schemes. The data from several 'spotlight areas' found that allocations to homeless households ranged from 23% - 60% during the financial year 2021-2022.</p> <p>Flintshire was one of the spotlight areas within the research and reported the lowest figure of 23% of all social housing allocations going to homeless households. The figure of 23% was a combination of the Homeless Direct Lets (10.4%) and other offers to homeless households via the SARTH Banding process (12.6%).</p>
1.06	<p>Housing Need</p> <p>All applicants accessing the Common Housing Register have clearly evidenced housing needs. They either have no current settled housing due to homelessness or their existing housing is unsuitable. This is clearly different to wanting a move so housing need data is a more appropriate title as opposed to demand data.</p> <p>The numbers on the social housing register are increasing and as such waiting times for properties are becoming longer. There were 1,816 households on the Common Housing Register at the end of Q1 in the 2020/2021 period. As evidenced in the chart below demand has grown in the following years and the current number of eligible households on the</p>

Common Housing Register at the end of Q3 2023/2024 was 1,983 as at December 2023. The breakdown of data can be found in Appendix 1

The chart below shows the breakdown of all the eligible applicants on the register by band as the end of Q3 of 2023/2024 reporting period.

REGISTER BREAKDOWN	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS
BAND 1	120
BAND 2	1614
BAND 3	1
BAND 4	248
TOTAL	1983

Further data relating to the Common Housing Register can be found within Appendix 1 of this report, including data on housing triages, applicants housing needs and property requirements.

1.07 Social Housing Supply

When looking at the supply of social housing across all social housing providers operating in Flintshire it is noted there has been a significant slowdown following Covid in the numbers of available homes. This downward trend of supply alongside the upward trend in housing need as evidenced by the numbers of applicants accepted on the social housing register is a significant concern. This is not unique to Flintshire. (Appendix 1 Housing Register Data).

1.08 Specialist Housing Needs

Most applicants' housing need can be met from the available housing stock, although not quickly. However, some applicants require properties to meet needs arising from disability and properties need to accommodate wheelchairs, bed hoists, stair lifts and accessible bathing rooms. Such housing is in particularly short supply within the social housing stock and these requirements would not necessarily be met within an acceptable timescale or within existing stock without significant adaptations or other property specific interventions (purchase or repurpose existing stock).

In Flintshire presently, the current specialist housing register has 46 applicants awaiting significantly adapted properties and the applicant's priority banding is detailed below:

REGISTER BAND	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS
BAND 1	19
BAND 2	25
BAND 3	0

BAND 4	2
TOTAL	46

A significant lack of larger homes (5 bedrooms plus) is also noted across Flintshire. There are currently 17 applications on the Common Housing Register for families requiring larger properties (5 bedrooms plus). Of these, the applicants can be broken down into the following bands:

REGISTER BAND	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS REQUIRING LARGER PROPERTIES
BAND 1	0
BAND 2	15
BAND 3	0
BAND 4	2
TOTAL	17

1.09 Specialist Housing Needs Supply

Over the last 3 years and 9 months there have been a total of 45 households with significant specialist housing requirements (major adaptations) who have benefited from the support of the specialist housing process.

PERIOD	NUMBER OF APPLICANTS
April 2020 – March 2021	17
April 2021 – March 2022	11
April 2022 – March 2023	10
April 2023 – Dec 2023	7

Specialist housing needs are met through a range of significant adaptations to existing homes, purchase of properties and further investment to bring these homes to the standards and specifications required for disabled household members, or through the creation of purpose-built new build homes funded through the Social Housing Grant (SHG) programme.

Sourcing suitable accommodation for applicants with specialist need, and identifying properties that are suitable for complex adaptation work within our housing stock is difficult and budget constraints makes this even more challenging as many of our existing homes that become available each year are not suitable for major adaptations.

The desire to build more specialist and larger homes is therefore appropriately recorded as a desired outcome within the Councils Housing Prospectus, and both the Council and Housing Association partners intend

	to explore solutions to adapt or extend existing social housing to meet these needs.
1.10	<p>Customer Satisfaction Survey</p> <p>An annual satisfaction survey is now completed for the Common Housing Register Service. Attached as Appendix 2 are the headline findings of the survey. All applicants were invited to engage in the survey and a total of 210 responses were received.</p> <p>Headline satisfaction data confirms that when first approaching the Housing Register & Advice Team 51% of applicants felt the service offered was excellent (17%) or good (34%). 34% of residents were satisfied with the service offered and 15% of residents were dissatisfied with the service offered (11% poor and 4% very poor).</p> <p>Follow up survey work will be completed over the coming months to better understand reasons for dissatisfaction with services offered by the Housing Register and Advice Team and to further develop customer satisfaction monitoring and feedback to inform service delivery.</p> <p>Work to digitise elements of applicant engagement and move to a self-service model for uploading information as part of the applicant verification and review process is programmed into the IT service work schedule for later in 2024.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>Detailed below are the cost implications associated with the delivery of Common Housing Register, housing advice services and meeting housing needs in Flintshire:</p> <p>Revenue: The cost of delivering Flintshire’s Common Housing Register is in the region of £248,055 for 2023/2024 with most cost relating to staff in Customer Services and Housing Register Team.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% of the cost is apportioned to the Council Fund as the local authority has a statutory duty to hold a register. A contribution from the Councils Housing Support Grant award is accessed and relates to housing advice and housing related support activities. • 50% is apportioned to Housing Partners on an equitable split based on their stock levels in the County. <p>Capital: Whilst administering the Common Housing Register is a revenue cost, there are implications for capital expenditure if we are to meet the housing needs of the people of Flintshire. Housing needs data as identified through the Common Housing Register informs the build programmes of both Flintshire Council and our Housing Partners. Flintshire’s Housing Prospectus, which has been approved by Council and shared with our Housing Partners, focusses current and future</p>

	developments around the increased supply of social housing and specific areas of unmet or growing needs.
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3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>The following risks and mitigations have been identified by way of control measures:</p> <p>Risk: Failure to meet the needs of applicants for social housing resulting in excessive waiting times for social housing and prolonged impact on levels of homelessness and other forms of housing hardships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation: Build more social housing at scale and pace in line with current and projected demand. • Mitigation: Continue to support people to explore all their housing options including renting privately, supported housing, as well as other affordable housing products such as low-cost home ownership, shared equity housing and intermediate rentals. <p>Risk: Emergency housing costs continue to increase at a greater rate due to more households becoming homeless at significant revenue cost to the local authority on the Council fund.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation: Sustain the 50% nominations approach as we transition to the Rapid Rehousing model longer term as outlined in the Councils Rapid Rehousing Transition Action Plan. • Mitigation: Successfully deliver on the Homeless Pressures Options Paper approved by Members in November 2023. • Mitigation: Build more homes that meet the needs of the homeless cohort such as one-bed general needs housing, of which there is a significant shortage. • Mitigation: Support the Sheltered Housing Review process to better meet the wants and the needs of older people and explore opportunities to address disparities in the local housing supply. • Mitigation: Develop more specialist housing to avoid those with significant and complex housing needs becoming homeless <p>Risk: Satisfaction levels for those residents accessing the Housing Register services drops due to a failure to respond to opportunities to modernise service delivery and embrace elements of digital self-service or lack of staffing resource.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation: Review staffing levels for the register service and methods of service delivery in light of budget pressures.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation: Continue to develop online services and self-help tools to enable people to access more modern and dynamic Housing Register service with a full range of housing options advice. 														
3.02	<p>Ways of Working (Sustainable Development) Principles Impact</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Long-term</td> <td>Positive – Increase supply of high-quality sustainable homes and make best use of the housing stock.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Prevention</td> <td>Prevention - Preventing homelessness and housing hardships through positive interventions that relieve pressures on an already strained housing market.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Integration</td> <td>Positive – Increased integration between services and partner organisations</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Collaboration</td> <td>Positive – Increased collaboration between services, partner organisations and service users</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Involvement</td> <td>Positive – Service user involvement to help shape effective housing and services so that access to homes and housing advice and support is timely and person centred.</td> </tr> </table>	Long-term	Positive – Increase supply of high-quality sustainable homes and make best use of the housing stock.	Prevention	Prevention - Preventing homelessness and housing hardships through positive interventions that relieve pressures on an already strained housing market.	Integration	Positive – Increased integration between services and partner organisations	Collaboration	Positive – Increased collaboration between services, partner organisations and service users	Involvement	Positive – Service user involvement to help shape effective housing and services so that access to homes and housing advice and support is timely and person centred.				
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5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1: Common Housing Register Data.
5.02	Appendix 2: Customer Satisfaction Data.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>Research Report: Allocations – Understanding more in the context of homelessness of Wales</p> <p>https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2023-10/allocations-understanding-more-context-homelessness.pdf</p>

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Martin Cooil – Housing & Prevention Service Manager Telephone: 07880 423234 E-mail: martin.cooil@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	Single Access Route to Housing (SARTH) – the project that enabled the development of the Common Allocations Policy and the label for the Housing Options and Housing Register Partnership.
8.02	Housing Triage – the initial discussion with residents about their circumstances and their housing needs.
8.03	Housing Solutions Triage – the initial discussion with residents about their circumstances and their housing needs where homelessness or a risk of homelessness is identified.
8.04	Common Allocations Policy – the shared policy that Local Authority and Housing Partners have signed up to in regard to the eligibility and prioritisation of housing applications for social housing in Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire
8.05	Rapid Rehousing - an internationally recognised approach which ensures that anyone experiencing homelessness can move into a settled home as quickly as possible, rather than staying in temporary accommodation for long periods of time.

8.06	Flintshire's Housing Prospectus – the strategic document that clearly highlights the housing needs and aspirations of the local authorities social housing build programme linked to the Social Housing Grant
8.07	Social Housing Grant – Capital funding from Welsh Government to enable the development of social housing to meet local needs.
8.08	Housing Support Grant – Revenue funding from Welsh Government for the provision of a wide range of housing related support services, to meet local needs.