CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP – 17TH SEPTEMBER 2015

SUBJECT: **A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON HOUSING REGISTER & COMMON ALLOCATION POLICY**

REPORT BY: **DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members of the CHTG with an update on the progress being made on the development of the common housing register and common allocation policy. This update builds upon a previous update report to CHTG in May 2014.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 A number of working groups have been established to progress key elements of the project.

2.2 A 12-week consultation exercise has been completed on the draft policy.

2.3 The council has awarded Abritas the contract to provide a new IT system to manage the common housing register.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

3.1 By designing a system that markedly improves the experience of customers, by providing fairness and flexibility in terms of outcome and process, the development of a common housing register and common allocation policy links to the following strategies:

- the national housing strategy for Wales – '*Improving Lives and Communities*' (Welsh Government, 2010);
- Caerphilly Delivers: The Single Integrated Plan (2013-17); and
- *People, Property & Place: A Housing Strategy for Caerphilly County Borough*.

4. THE REPORT

Common allocation policy

4.1 Development of the common allocation policy has been coordinated by a small working group, which consists of two tenants and officers from the council and housing associations. A draft policy was prepared by the group for public consultation. Prior to the public consultation exercise taking place two rounds of internal consultation were carried out.

4.2 The public consultation exercise lasted for 12 weeks and was conducted between November 2014 and February 2015. As part of the exercise the council wrote to those people currently on its own waiting list and/or on the housing associations waiting lists, circa 8,000 applicants.

The purpose of the letter was to notify people of the proposed changes and to seek their views. In addition, an on-line survey was produced and posters placed in several locations around the borough including main council offices, housing offices, libraries, customer first centres, leisure centres and medical centres. Paper copies of the survey where made available, in English and Welsh.

4.3   A £50 prize cash draw was provided to incentivise residents to complete the survey. A total of 107 residents completed the survey. The draw was made by the Chief Housing Officer and the winner was a council tenant from the Penyrheol area. In addition, a number of responses were received from external organisations such as Tai Pawb and the Royal British Legion. All responses received as part of the consultation exercise were reviewed by a small working group of officers who judged whether the draft policy required amendment. On points of law, advice was sought from legal services.

4.4   The common allocation policy has been produced in accordance with the relevant legislation and the Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness (Welsh Government, 2012). In April 2015, Welsh Government issued a revised code which has required a large-scale review of the draft policy to ensure that it continues to comply with guidance. In addition, Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 came into force in February 2015, which covers homelessness. The policy has been amended in light of the revised code and new legislation.

4.5   The council has a legal duty to assess the impact of its policies and services, to ensure that they do not adversely discriminate against groups of people with a protected characteristic, as defined by the Equality Act 2010. A small working group of council officers together with a representative from the housing associations and an officer from Tai Pawb (an organisation promoting equalities and social justice in housing) was set up to lead on the completion of an equality impact assessment. The assessment highlighted some minor changes and these have been made to the policy. In addition, it was highlighted that the quality of equalities monitoring data collected by the social landlords partner to the common housing register project varied considerably. Consequently, an action emanating from the assessment is to ensure that data is captured and used more robustly once the new policy is introduced. This action will be facilitated by the procurement of a new IT system, which is covered later in this report.

4.6   The policy will need to be formally adopted by the Council and discussions are on-going with committee services as to which committee the policy is presented. Prior to being presented to committee the draft policy has been sent to partners to advise them of the changes that have been made as a result of the consultation exercise, the equality impact assessment and changes required by the revision of the code of guidance. It is expected that the policy will be formally adopted by the end of October 2015, after which time housing associations will be requested to sign up to the policy. The policy will be introduced in 2016, jointly with the common housing register.

Procurement of new CHR IT system

4.7   A working group of officers from the council and housing associations was set up to fully assess the information and communication technology (ICT) requirements of the common housing register project. Taking direction from the common allocation policy working group, the ICT group produced a mini-specification for an IT system to maintain the common housing register. The key requirements which the group looked at were improving the customer experience and reducing the administrative burden on staff to free up their time to provide good quality housing advice. The current housing management system (Capita Housing) was assessed against the mini-specification. It was found that the system did not meet several of the key requirements, many of which were fundamental to the new approach to allocations and housing advice that was being developed by the common allocation policy working group. A recommendation was made to the Chief Housing Officer to replace the existing system, the cost of which will be covered in full by grant funding.

4.8   The purchase of the new system is subject to procurement rules. The working group has worked closely with procurement services and corporate IT to develop a full system specification and then undertake the procurement process. The procurement exercise was completed using the G-Cloud government framework. As part of this process staff from the council and housing associations attended a number of system demonstrations.

4.9   The contract to provide the new system was awarded by the council in August 2015 to Abritas, a market leader in housing IT solutions. Officers from the council are now working closely with Abritas to scope the project requirements, which will include the implementation of 3 modules – common housing register, choice based lettings (utilised solely by the council and housing associations for the ability to advertise new build and low demand properties) and homelessness.

4.10   It appears to be custom amongst local authorities in Wales that the initial capital costs of purchasing the IT system are funded in full by councils. On-going costs are then apportioned between the partners. The council proposes funding the cost of the new system using transitional homelessness funding, which it has received from Welsh Government for use during the financial year 2015/16.

4.11   The council intends to recruit a project manager to oversee the implementation of the project from the partners' perspective. This role will be responsible for working closely with their counterpart from Abritas to ensure that project deadlines and milestones are met.

4.12   The go-live date of the implementation of the common housing register has been amended from April 2015 to April 2016 to allow for the completion of the procurement process and a full assessment of the ICT requirements of the project. Abritas has advised the council that due to capacity reasons it is unable to commence the project until mid-September which would mean that the system may not be implemented and tested before the beginning of May 2016. Officers from the council will be working with Abritas in the forthcoming weeks and months to see whether the system can be implemented ahead of this time.

Staffing Arrangements

4.13   All partners agree that the council is best placed to take on the day-to-day management of the common housing register. This will involve creating a single list of applicants from those people currently on the council's and housing associations' waiting lists. It is estimated that the size of the list will be between 6,000-7,000 applicants. There are currently 5,000 applicants on the council's waiting list, including suspended applicants. A scoping exercise has been undertaken to assess the staffing requirement to manage the single list, taking into consideration all new working practices. A briefing paper on the funding of the common housing register, including staffing and IT requirements, is being produced. It is estimated that the current structure will need to increase by up to 6 members of staff (full time equivalent).

4.14   It is anticipated that the implementation of the common housing register will see an initial increase in work loads of the allocation team. This is due to the requirement to create a single list, remove the points system and replace with a band system, carry out a full registration of those applicants only on the housing association lists (as the information held by these organisations is inadequate for our purposes), where necessary carry out medical assessments for those applicants only registered with the housing associations and undertake a property assessment exercise to identify levels of accessibility for disabled people. Much of this work will need to commence prior to the system going live and it is anticipated that workloads will reduce once much of this work is completed. The council, therefore, proposes appointing a number of the new posts on fixed-term contracts, with a review carried out after 12 months to assess the on-going requirement to retain these posts.

4.15   The council also proposes to utilise transitional homelessness monies to part fund those eligible posts, whilst this funding stream is available. The effect of this will be to minimise the impact of increased costs on all parties, including the council which will be the largest

benefactor. In terms of the on-going funding of the common housing register, it is proposed in the funding paper that the current level of General Fund contribution is maintained, and that the remaining costs are apportioned between landlords on the basis of stock size. Once the funding paper has been finalised, second stage discussions with partners will be take place.

Next steps

4.16   Prior to the implementation of the common housing register in 2016 the following actions will need to be completed:

- Common allocation policy to be presented to relevant committee for formal adoption;
- Funding arrangements finalised and agreed by partners;
- Appointment of a project manager;
- The implementation of the new IT system will need to be completed and tested;
- Single list of applicants will be need to be drawn up and registration process completed;
- All applicants to be contacted in writing to explain the reassessment process, its impact on their application and provide them with the opportunity to review an adverse decision; and
- Associated procedures to be drawn up and, where applicable, equality impact assessed.

5.   EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

5.1   The council is working closely with Tai Pawb to identify any equality implications during the project.

5.2   The common allocation policy has been subject to an equality impact assessment, as outlined in paragraph 4.5. Where applicable all related procedures will be subject to this process.

6.   FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1   Budgets have been identified by the head of service and principal accountant (housing finance) to cover the capital costs of the new IT system (General Fund) and the councils contribution for the revenue costs of the new IT system and staffing costs (General Fund and Housing Revenue Account). Other financial implications have been covered in paragraph 4.15.

7.   PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

7.1   On-going consideration is being given to the additional staffing requirements within the allocation team, as outlined in paragraph 4.13-4.15, and the IT project manager, as outlined in paragraph 4.11.

8.   CONSULTATIONS

8.1   All responses from consultees have been incorporated into this report.

9.   RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1   This report is for information purposes only. Members of the CHTG are asked to note its content.

10.   REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1   This report is submitted to provide members of the Caerphilly Homes Task Group with an update on progress in relation to the establishment of a Common Housing Register and Common Allocations Policy and therefore the recommendation is that the report be noted.

11.   STATUTORY POWER

11.1   Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

11.2   Code of Guidance for Local Authorities: Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness 2015.

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