

Date:	21 September 2023
Title:	Establishing a One Stop Shop for Housing Enquiries
Purpose:	Provide an Update
Contact Officer:	Hedd Tomos, Assistant Head - Housing & Property
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Craig ab Iago

1. Introduction

- 1.1 As part of a report to the Care Scrutiny Committee on 17 March, 2022, an update on work to develop a service for Gwynedd residents relating to their housing enquiries was presented. In establishing a One Stop Shop, the Department is keen to introduce a system which responds to the needs of residents through submitting housing applications to one central point. This approach was discussed with the members of the Committee in the context of there being currently a number of contact points where the public access different services delivered by the Housing and Property Department which may mean that not all their needs are met.
- 1.2 In addition to improving customer experiences, establishing a One Stop Shop would enable a better understanding of our customers' general needs, together with the ability to highlight to internal managers if more resources need to be invested in specific areas.

2. Update

- 2.1 Several notable developments have taken place since the submission of the last report and the progress made is outlined in the sections below.
- 2.2 Engagement sessions with key partners (e.g. housing associations and third sector organisations) have been held over the last 18 months in order to identify if there were opportunities to strengthen the current arrangements and to note any potential impact on the nature of the contact which individuals have with the organisations. We consider that the process was useful in sharing information regarding the purpose and the referral process including, in some situations, ensuring that enquiries continue to go directly to external providers. Discussions are being held with all services within the Department and other relevant Departments to gain a better understanding of contact with our residents in relation to the enquiries that the One Stop Shop will support.
- 2.3 An initial consultation was held with the public in January 2023 to receive feedback regarding the general experiences of residents in relation to their contact with the Housing Department. 154 responses were received with the majority (over 50%) indicating that their experiences were generally good or very good and that their enquiry had received the appropriate attention.
- 2.4 The consultation highlighted that there is a clear expectation to be able to complete an online application form for social housing register applications with over 70% of responses indicating that this would be a positive development. This has already been identified as a priority by the Department, although there is no capacity within the current system to enable people to make applications online nor to enable staff to process the applications. As a result, hard copies of the applications must be provided, or a scan of the application needs to be sent as an email attachment. This is not the most convenient way for the customer nor the most effective way for staff to deal with enquiries.
- 2.5 Of those who answered 'yes' when asked 'is there anything we can improve?' (approximately 40%), over half of the responses highlighted the need to improve communication between the

Council and the customer. Specifically, in some situations, a lack of regular communication and lack of updates has been a problem and a better online presence to receive the information without having to call/email would have been beneficial. Although, on the whole, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the help and the consistency of the information received.

- 2.6 One of key steps for establishing the new system was the appointment of the One Stop Shop team leader in February 2022 which has enabled the Department to research how an appropriate structure could be implemented for the operation of the One Stop Shop.
- 2.7 Following the appointment of the team leader and as a result of an assessment of the nature of the enquiries received by the Department, it was concluded after internal discussions that it would be sensible to incorporate the Housing Options Team Unit into the One Stop Shop. This decision was taken following an assessment of the number of calls received by the Department and the number of visits to the Housing and Property Department web pages, which clearly showed that this work area received the majority of enquiries from the public. Therefore, as part of the induction process for new staff who are appointed to the One Stop Shop, full training for assessing Housing Options applications will be offered. The current staff of the Housing Options Team have also received training in dealing with general customer enquiries. The team structure is now almost complete, and a deputy team leader was appointed as part of this process in May 2023.

New system

- 2.8 It was noted in the previous report to the Scrutiny Committee that it was necessary to establish a new system to enable the Department to maintain comprehensive and current information in one central location. On the basis of the proposed changes to the internal staffing structure (as highlighted above), it was decided to also include requirements for the work of the Housing Options team and the Homelessness team.
- 2.9 As an initial step, research was completed on the kind of information the system will need to retain in order both to help residents and to collect information for key performance indicators. We also considered the opportunities to have a better online presence to facilitate the way that residents contact the Council and what effect this would have on the team (e.g. reducing the number of calls, and possibly changing the structure of the team). It is likely that an online presence would also lead to a situation where officers will be able to focus on the core nature of the enquiry rather than on administrative aspects.
- 2.10 A brief was prepared for the Corporate Category Team to identify systems which would meet our needs through the G-Cloud Framework 13. Subsequently, a tender process was held for the work and meetings were arranged with relevant companies requesting clarification that their systems would address the needs which had been identified and would align with our vision for the One Stop Shop. A shortlist of systems in the marketplace was drawn up based on set up costs, running costs, implementation schedule and system functionality. The successful company has been identified to complete the work for the Housing Options and the Homelessness system.
- 2.11 It is anticipated that the system chosen will modernise the service offered to the public. It will enable applicants to apply for social housing online and they will be able to see their application information including: band, property type, number of bedrooms and area preferences. It is hoped that it will be possible to notify officers of the One Stop Shop of updates to the application through the new system. To ensure that the system also meets the needs of the Housing Options elements of our external partners, an invitation was extended to representatives from the Housing Associations to attend sessions and receive their input.

2.12 The scheduled work is progressing including arrangements to set up the system, an operational trial period and dates for relevant training.

2.13 To ensure that there are sound arrangements in place for communication between the One Stop Shop and the internal systems of other departments, it was decided to use the internal FFOS system for the day to day administrative work of the One Stop Shop as it is already linked to the Council website and existing accounts on the website. These two new systems will be able to communicate with each other to facilitate the customer journey from the initial contact to the final one.

Single Point of Access (SPOA) Housing Support Grant

2.14 As stated in the previous Care Scrutiny Committee report, the Council has decided to establish a Single Point of Access (SPOA) for some of the projects and services which are funded through the Housing Support Grant. The internal arrangements are funded through the Housing Support Grant and the officers sit within the One Stop Shop. Generally, the purpose of the grant is to prevent homelessness and support people to have the ability, the independence, the skills and the confidence to obtain a stable and suitable home. The establishment of the SPOA will be a significant change to the current system. This will simplify the process for individuals who are referred to services and for providers who receive money from the Housing Support Grant. It will also enable a better overview of all the individual's needs when being referred to different services.

2.15 These arrangements will also enable the Department to have a better understanding of who receives support from the grant. Historically, it has been necessary to wait a period of 6 months to receive information about the results of the programme. The new system will mean that we can use this information to help commission new provision using current data rather than historical information.

2.16 The new SPOA system is currently being trialled by internal units and 220 Gwynedd residents have already benefited from receiving information and guidance with their relevant housing support needs.

3. Recommendations

3.1 To receive and note the report.

3.2 Officers to inform Committee members of the engagement process as the operational arrangements are implemented.