



Improving partnership working & customer service at North Ayrshire Council

North Ayrshire Council and three partner RSLs set up Scotland's first common housing register and allocations policy, using a fully integrated web-based Abritas system to streamline operations and improve partnership working and customer service.

Introduction

Covering an area of 342 square miles on the west coast of Scotland, North Ayrshire is home to 135,000 people (61,330 households) including two island communities on Arran and on Cumbrae, which account for 5% of the overall population.

North Ayrshire Council manages over 13,000 council homes, delivering services to tenants in conjunction with three locally based housing associations with approximately 5,000 properties between them, which takes the total to just under 18,000 social rented properties in the area.



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Challenges

Prior to implementing an Abritas system, the council and the three largest registered social landlords (RSLs) operated their own separate allocation systems and maintained their own waiting list. Applicants had to apply to each housing provider separately, which was confusing as each provider assessed housing need differently. It was also difficult to quantify the actual number of applicants looking for housing in the area as there was duplication since applicants could approach multiple different providers.

The council used Northgate IWorld to manage their rent accounts and allocate any properties that became vacant and the three RSLs all used IBS (each system set up differently) to manage their properties and allocate any vacancies. The partners still use their legacy system to manage the property and void work, as well as rent accounts, but all allocations are made in the new system.

As a result of Scottish Government directives promoting Common Housing Registers (CHRs) North Ayrshire Council, Cunninghame Housing Association, Irvine Housing Association and ANCHO agreed to work together as partners in a register. The other RSLs with property in North Ayrshire, which account for approximately 2% of the socially rented stock, decided that they did not have enough stock to justify taking part as core partners and agreed to become associate partners.

The council then went out to tender to assess suitable systems for setting up the North Ayrshire Housing Register and from six initial tender responses, which were scored in terms of suitability, a shortlist of three suppliers were invited to present on how their system could meet the partnership's needs. The presentations

were scored again and the top two suppliers then entered into a best and final offer negotiation where the partnership's vision of the new system was compared to what the supplier could and would be able to provide. These offers were scored once again and the supplier appointed.

Solution

Abritas was the top scorer throughout the tender process and their system also provided a close match to the partnership's vision of their register. It also offered what was wanted at a reasonable cost, so the partnership felt they were able to provide their client group with a very good service at an affordable price.

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Bill McGhee
Housing Project Manager, North Ayrshire Council

The council and locally based social landlords had started the complex process of setting up the register in 2004, with the procurement process finishing in March 2007 and the launch taking place in June 2009. The implementation took longer than expected after contract signing, partly because of changing requirements as the system specification was being produced and partly because the council was at the same time reviewing their allocation policy. Ultimately



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in what was quite a radical step for the partners, they decided to produce a common allocation policy which makes the whole system easier for applicants and users to understand. The result is a very good and effective housing register.

North Ayrshire Council has implemented the Abrisas Housing Register, Nominations Based Lettings, Mutual Exchange and Enhanced Housing Options (EHO) modules, although EHO has not yet been launched to the public. The council is also working with Abrisas to develop and implement a Scottish version of the Housing Advice & Homelessness software. Beyond that the next phase is to develop a new temporary accommodation module which includes a rent deposit scheme.

Bill McGhee, Housing Project Manager at North Ayrshire Council describes the support provided by Abrisas both during and post implementation in positive terms:

"Any issues raised during implementation were quickly resolved. We had produced a very detailed implementation plan, which allowed us to follow applications through the process of getting onto the register and we also had 'offers' ready to be processed. The system was fully tested during the first days of implementation."

Benefits

As a result of implementing the new system, the council now has a very strong partnership with the three core partners in the register, which covers 97.5% of the social rented property within North Ayrshire. All applicants' housing needs are assessed in the same way using the same criteria of need, which means

they benefit from improved advice. Customers find it easier to understand and staff are better able to provide a full picture of housing options within the region.

"Cost savings are difficult to quantify in common housing registers, however because we now have a register of all applicants that the partners share, there is no multiple handling of any individual applications so processing costs should be reduced. Although we have been unable to put a fixed financial figure on these savings so far, as we move to greater self-service by applicants, costs should come down."

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The council no longer has nominations to the partner RSLs as all draw applicants from the same register. The section 5 protocol for homeless applicant nominations is also a thing of the past as they have an agreed percentage of lets to homeless applicants, which each partner fulfils and the remaining allocations are completed to the landlords' individual lettings plan. Allocations are consistent across the partners and the length of time that applicants have to wait is falling for the groups in highest housing need.



The new system has enabled the council and its partners to develop a much more joined up way of working, with closer working practices and procedures, operating more like a single provider rather than four separate organisations with similar aims.

In terms of savings made, Bill explains:

"Cost savings are difficult to quantify in common housing registers, however because we now have a register of all applicants that the partners share, there is no multiple handling of any individual applications so processing costs should be reduced. Although we have been unable to put a fixed financial figure on these savings so far, as we move to greater self-service by applicants, costs should come down."

The new system has enabled the council and its partners to develop a much more 'joined up' way of working, with closer working practices and procedures, operating more like a single provider rather than four separate organisations with similar aims. They have also developed joint training which staff seem to like and they all know more about each other, how each operates and the pressures they all work under.

In response to the question 'What do you like most about the Abris system?' Bill explains:

"The system has a flow, extracting statistics is easy and providing you have gathered the information, reporting is simple and accurate. Having the central household number helps to tie everything together when you have more than one module operating."

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