**EXCELLENCE WALES**

**Case Study**

**Award:** Finalist for Excellence Wales Status

**Theme:** Our Housing- delivering good quality affordable housing

**Good Practice:** Dedicated Housing website [www.cardiffhousing.co.uk](http://www.cardiffhousing.co.uk)

**Local Authority:** Cardiff Council

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**Introduction**

In January 2010, Cardiff Council completed a four year programme to maximise available accommodation and ensure that good quality affordable housing developments address the variety of housing needs for its citizens, whilst ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.

This wide-ranging programme endeavoured to strategically address the issue of access to affordable housing in the city and as such has necessitated the involvement of a number of key partners including Registered Social Landlords, developers, other statutory services such as Probation and Social Services and the voluntary sector.

Three key objectives were addressed in this programme for change -

- Strategic Approach to Delivering Homes - An Evolving Housing Strategy
- Using Resources Creatively
- Ensuring Accessibility and Choice

Key elements to the programme which allowed Cardiff Council to realise the programme of change are:-

- An evolving Local Housing Strategy
- A Common Waiting List
- Common Exclusion Process
- Cardiff Accessible Homes
- Resettlement Strategy
- Cardiffhousing Website

This case study concentrates on our most recent innovation, the development and introduction of Cardiff Council’s dedicated housing website - [www.cardiffhousing.co.uk](http://www.cardiffhousing.co.uk)

The website is a multi agency project involving Cardiff Council and partner housing associations. Launched in June 2010, it provides interactive housing information for homelessness and support agencies and the wider public.
The website provides -

- Stock, lettings and turnover data for social housing
- Advertisements of available private rented properties
- Availability of home ownership schemes
- Information on schools, health, and other facilities
- A search function allowing people to consider their social housing position, including area choices and likely waiting times
- Colour coded maps of the city indicating the availability of all rented housing in different areas
- Dedicated information pages for advice and support workers
- Targeted information for private sector landlords
- Links to other websites

It was initially developed in response to research that was carried out into the housing advice that support workers across the city were giving as part of the resettlement process. Results showed that support workers did not have access to good quality, accurate information on different types of housing options. Residents were also often sceptical about information showing available social rented homes and continued to only consider the social sector. Finally residents were generally wary of the idea of the private rented sector as an alternative option.

It was further recognised through client feedback, that there was a need for all housing applicants to understand the scarcity of available social housing and
their relative position on the waiting list. Therefore, development of the website was expanded to allow the site to be accessed by the wider public.

**Key Challenges and how they were resolved**

The biggest challenge was translating the vision into reality without watering down the original aspirations. This was achieved by working closely with in house web specialists who demonstrated a proactive ‘can do’ approach. Issues included –

- Technical difficulties in the development of the site, particularly ensuring that the data accessed through the waiting time calculator was accurate.

- Working out the best way to display the information were key elements to the validity of the information being provided.

- Because the site was a stand alone development, careful consideration was also taken to ensure that the branding and design was independent but also inclusive of all partners.

- The importance of using plain English to remove all housing related jargon was also recognised.

- Raising public awareness of the new service and ensuring accessibility to all. This included tackling the ‘digital divide’ by particularly targeting those who do not have personal internet access.

- Internet access and assistance has been made available at support agencies, partner housing associations and all Cardiff libraries.

Training has been undertaken for support workers and Cardiff Libraries to ensure that staff are aware of the site and the wealth of information that can be accessed.

**Learning from or sharing with others**

The website has already been prioritised by the Welsh Local Government Association / Welsh Assembly Government sponsored national network of local authority homelessness services for roll-out to all local authorities in Wales in 2010/11 funded by a Welsh Assembly Government grant.

A simple template is currently being created to allow other local authorities to easily input area-specific data, so that it can be adopted as part of their housing advice service. It is anticipated that a high proportion of local authorities will implement it. Once set up, in-house officers will be able to easily update it, rather than relying on external web specialists.
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Making a difference - Outcomes

The advantages of introducing the website have become clearly evident -

- People can now easily gain tailored information regarding their housing options
- The search engines can cope with a range of scenarios which help inform choice
- Applicants are more willing to consider lower demand areas for social housing when presented with the lack of supply in the area of their choice
- Private sector landlord use increasing steadily
- Interest from leading Cardiff estate agents in using the website as a vehicle to promote their rental properties
- The website encourages applicants to look at the private rented sector, and offers landlords who are willing to accept Housing Benefit the opportunity to advertise free of charge (subject to relevant checks being made)
- Feedback shows that support providers are now able to offer information which is consistent across the city, helping to speed up the re-housing process
- Web site promotion on all Council housing related correspondence
- Dedicated kiosk in Housing Advice Unit
- Identified as best practice by WAG and funding obtained to roll out across Wales in 2010/11

It’s great that we will now have an up to date website that lets the people of Cardiff waiting for housing know exactly where they stand'. Support Provider Feedback, Official Launch (4th June 2010)

Future Plans - building on success

The site is an evolving service and client feedback / suggested improvements are taken on board, ultimately benefiting the end user. It is continuously being reviewed and is currently being expanded to include:-

- Training & Employment Opportunities
- Energy Efficiency & Fuel Poverty
- Financial Inclusion
- Additional Information targeted for young people
Lessons Learnt

At the heart of this project has been the partnership working and collaborative thinking between organisations, which has enhanced and maximised opportunities to develop the site. Thorough research has ensured greater understanding of existing problems, challenging our way of thinking and guiding limited resources more effectively.

The [www.cardiffhousing.co.uk](http://www.cardiffhousing.co.uk) website is demonstrative of our holistic approach to improving service provision, implementing good practice and providing sound housing advice and options to allow all applicants make informed choices.