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**Select Committee on the Environment 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007**  
**Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services**

**Dudley at Home (Choice Based Lettings) Update and Evaluation**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To provide an update on the Dudley at Home pilot for properties in Halesowen and Stourbridge.
2. To report back the recommendations as made by the cross party working group.

**Background**

3. Cabinet in September 2005 approved the introduction of Choice Based Lettings. Cabinet tasked this Select Committee to make recommendations on how Choice Based Lettings should be introduced and implemented in Dudley.

Select Committee established a Cross Party Working Group to work with officers to scrutinise proposals, oversee implementation of a pilot scheme (covering Halesowen and Stourbridge), evaluate the pilot and make recommendations back to this Select Committee on how to progress the full implementation.

**Progress**

4. The Dudley at Home pilot was launched on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2007. Customers who want to live in the Halesowen and Stourbridge areas need to use the Dudley at Home system. In addition to council properties the system includes RSL vacancies for which the council has nomination rights.
5. Properties are advertised in a weekly cycle with adverts running from midnight on Wednesday to midnight on the following Monday. The adverts include property details and photographs and are labelled to indicate which households are eligible to apply. In addition to the website a property newsletter is available from Area Housing Offices, Dudley Council Plus, libraries, and various other locations including Citizens Advice Bureaux, and Lye Community Project.
6. Customers are able to bid (express an interest) for up to three properties per cycle. Bids can be made via the web, automated telephone (available in six community languages), text or in person at Area Housing Offices, libraries, and Dudley Council Plus. Bids can also be made using kiosks located in Halesowen and Stourbridge libraries, Churchill Precinct Dudley, and, Ladies Walk Sedgley. It is anticipated that bidding by Digi TV will be available shortly.

7. Public access computers have been provided in Area Housing offices and both customers and staff have found the system easy to use.
8. Since the pilot commenced there have been nine advertising cycles with a total of 109 properties advertised. A total of 3,910 bids have been placed as follows:
  - Web 3,723 (95.2%)
  - Back office by staff on behalf of customers 62 (1.6%)
  - Automated telephony 53 (1.3%)
  - SMS text 62 (1.6%)
  - Kiosks 4 (0.1%)
  - Auto bids 6 (0.2%)

There have been approximately 800 newsletters handed out or posted to customers.

9. A total of 25 properties have been advertised for applicants over 60 years of age. These have included 17 bungalows, 3 flats, and, 5 flats in sheltered housing schemes. Staff are continuing to contact elderly applicants as part of the shadow allocating process to ensure that they are both aware of and able to use Dudley at Home. If necessary a referral is made to the Area Lettings team and there are currently 15 elderly applicants being case managed across the pilot areas. The Dudley at Home team are also working closely with staff in the Sheltered Housing Team to raise awareness of available properties in sheltered schemes.
10. There were approximately 5,061 live applicants on the Housing Register as at 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008:
  - 3,361 Waiting List
  - 1,621 Transfer
  - 79 Homeless

Since the start of the pilot bids have been made as follows:

- 2,969 Waiting List
- 796 Transfer
- 145 Homeless

93 applicants have been housed or provisionally accepted offers as follows:

- 60 Waiting List
- 18 Transfer
- 15 Homeless

Homeless applicants are being given advice on how to use the system by their case managers and as indicated are actively bidding for properties and being housed.

11. The Housing OT team have been involved in preparing property adverts for both adapted properties and properties which may be suitable for adaptation

(accessible properties). There have been 3 adapted properties advertised and these properties have been offered to applicants in need of this type of accommodation.

12. Staff in the central team are contacting customers who would have been top of the shortlist to ensure that they know how to use the system and are able to bid for properties should they wish to. Indications are that the majority of applicants are aware of Dudley at Home and able to access the system.
13. Lettings staff in the Area Offices are continuing to deal with customers' enquiries, dealing with requests for medical priority and providing case management support to enable vulnerable customers to access CBL. Examples of applicants requiring case management include customers who are elderly, disabled or have learning difficulties and would otherwise have difficulty accessing the service.
14. The vulnerable persons strategy is currently being developed in partnership with staff from Adult Social Care and other support providers so that measures are in place to ensure that vulnerable people are not disadvantaged under the Dudley at Home system. The strategy has been shared with the Working Group who will continue to work with officers on its development.

### **Business Process Review**

15. The pilot provides an opportunity to test new business processes associated with housing applications and void property management. This is to ensure that the lettings service is as efficient and effective as possible, and, that our void turnaround performance is not adversely affected by advertising vacant properties. The average turnaround time for properties in Halesowen and Stourbridge which have become void and been relet during the pilot is 18 days. This compares with an average of 24.5 days for properties let in December. This remains in the top quartile.
16. The verification of applicant details has been moved from the beginning of the application process to the point when an offer is made. This has led to an improvement in the time taken for an application to be processed with applications in the pilot area now being registered within an average of 5 working days. Staff have carried out visits to a number of applicants to verify their circumstances before making an offer and have amended those applications as a result. In these cases the information provided with the application was found to be incorrect and the applicants had been awarded points to which they were not entitled. Consideration will be given to increasing the number of visits made by staff to verify applicants' circumstances.
17. Staff have been consulted on revised procedures to improve the void process and it is anticipated that the number of pre-termination inspections taking place will increase. Proposals to advertise properties during the notice period are being considered.
18. Prospective tenants are being invited to view properties before repairs have been completed. This gives customers the opportunity to discuss the nature and extent of repair work, be offered a choice on items such as kitchen units and make an informed choice about whether the property meets their requirements. The

majority of the sign up process can also be completed before the property is ready to let.

19. The flow of work between the Area Lettings Teams and the centralised Dudley at Home team continues to be monitored. Regular meetings are taking place between the staff involved in the pilot, and minor amendments to procedures are being made as the pilot progresses.

## **Feedback**

20. Early indications are that the Dudley at Home system is easy to access and user friendly for both staff and customers. A survey will be carried out to evaluate customer satisfaction in the next month and it is anticipated that findings will be available for the Select Committee meeting and report to Cabinet in March.
21. The majority of customers are bidding via the web without difficulty. Public access computers provided in Area Housing Offices and libraries are being well used with minimal assistance required from front line staff.
22. Following suggestions from customers there have been some minor changes made to the property descriptions and marketing information provided.
23. The property newsletter has been well received although some minor amendments are required. This is being addressed with our IT provider.
24. A meeting with the Race, Equality and Communication Service will take place in early March to discuss access to CBL and feedback from BME communities. During the pilot 15% of new lettings in the Halesowen and Stourbridge areas have been to BME households compared with 15% from April to December last year.
25. There is a need to market more widely the availability of the multi-lingual automated telephony system and arrangements to do this are being made with the marketing and Information team.
26. There have been regular meetings with all lettings staff as the CBL project has progressed. A meeting was held on 15<sup>th</sup> January when all Lettings Teams had an opportunity to present their experiences of the Dudley at Home pilot so far. There was an extremely positive response from all areas and despite earlier concerns there appears to have been little confusion caused by running two systems.
27. As the pilot progresses there are concerns about managing customers' expectations. Some customers have been bidding regularly with little chance of being made an offer as there are many applicants ahead of them with higher priority. Those customers who have little prospect of being made an offer will be offered advice on other housing options.
28. Comments have also been received regarding the feedback provided to customers on the website and newsletter concerning recent lets. In particular how to handle delegation cases, and, if it is appropriate to display dates of application in the feedback.

29. The suitability of properties for applicants with an OT (Occupational Therapy) recommendation is considered by the Housing OT team both during the advert preparation, and, at the shortlisting stage. Concern has been expressed that applicants in this category are able to place bids but may then be bypassed for offers if a particular property is later deemed unsuitable for their needs.
30. The housing applicants' CBL focus group met in February to both review the pilot and discuss the Lettings Policy review. Feedback will be available for Members at the meeting.
31. A formal feedback meeting was held with Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association (DFTRA), who have already indicated that most of their initial concerns have been addressed. DFTRA support the proposal to roll out Dudley at Home across the borough.
32. Area Panels have been provided with updates and encouraged to give feedback. No particular concerns have been reported by the pilot areas, although there has been a view expressed that the pilot should run for a longer period prior to roll out across the borough. Stourbridge Area Panel requested that a member of the Choice Based Lettings team attend their next meeting to provide a full update on the pilot.
33. Other staff groups and partner agencies will be contacted during the next month to obtain feedback which will be used to inform the vulnerable persons strategy and equality impact assessment.

### **The Choice Based Lettings Working Group**

34. The Choice Based Lettings Working group has met on a number of occasions to undertake the work as directed by this Select Committee. It last met on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2008 and received an update on the pilot based on six cycles of advertising.
35. Members of the Working Party concluded that the issues raised by Select Committee relating to access to the system in general and in particular by vulnerable groups had been addressed. The pilot had served its purpose and the range of properties that became available to let allowed access to be fully tested. Issues raised through testing and/or consultation had been addressed and an example of this is the need to more actively promote the telephony system which offers community language options. It was accepted that, as with any service, it can and will be refined and improved. It concluded that the pilot had served its purpose and that the Working Group supported its roll out to the remaining areas of the borough.

### **Law**

36. The powers and duties of housing authorities in relation to the allocation and management of council housing are set out in the Housing acts 1985 and 1996 and the Homelessness Act 2002.

### **Equality Impact**

37. An impact assessment is being carried out during the pilot in order to ensure that all sections of the community are able to use the service.

### **Recommendations**

38. Members of Select Committee support the recommendation of the Working Group to roll out 'Dudley at Home' to the rest of the Borough in summer 2008.
39. The recommendation is reported to Cabinet on 19<sup>th</sup> March for formal approval.
40. Recognising the valuable work undertaken by the Working group it continues to meet and scrutinise the process with regular reports on progress being received by this Select Committee.



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**Linda Sanders**  
**Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services**

Contact Officer: Sian Evans/Wendy Massey  
Telephone: 01384 812021/01384 813504  
Email: [sian.evans@dudley.gov.uk](mailto:sian.evans@dudley.gov.uk)/[wendy.massey@dudley.gov.uk](mailto:wendy.massey@dudley.gov.uk)