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**Meeting of the Cabinet – 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2008**

**Report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services**

**Choice Based Lettings (CBLs) and Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To report on the evaluation of the Dudley at Home (CBLs) pilot and seek approval to roll out the scheme in accordance with the Select Committee on Environment recommendation.
2. To propose the introduction of a Bandings Scheme as the basis for the Councils Housing Allocations Scheme.

**Background**

3. Cabinet in September 2005 approved the introduction of CBLs and tasked the Select Committee on Environment to make recommendations on how it should be implemented in Dudley.
4. Further, Cabinet in approving the introduction of CBLs also directed that the existing points scheme should be reviewed with the intention of either simplifying the existing points scheme or replacing it. In undertaking this review it was not the intention of Cabinet to change the priorities currently afforded to the different housing needs but to identify a scheme that was easier to understand and more transparent. The review was to be overseen by the Select Committee on Environment.
5. To undertake the work as directed by Cabinet, the Select Committee on Environment established a cross party working group to work with officers, with reporting mechanisms in place to report back to the main Select Committee itself. This proved to be an effective way of undertaking the set tasks.

**Choice Based Lettings – Dudley at Home**

6. The Dudley at Home pilot was launched on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2007. Customers wishing to live in the Halesowen and Stourbridge areas needed to use the Dudley at Home system to bid (express an interest) for both Council and Housing Association vacancies.
7. Up to the end of February 2008 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.

8. Members of the Select Committee at the outset raised a number of issues. These were discussed in detail at the meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2008. Appendix 'A' to this report outlines the issues and the responses that were given by officers from the evaluation of the pilot.
9. Members of the Select Committee concluded that issues raised 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. 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 Select Committee supported its roll out to the remaining areas of the borough.

### **Review of Housing Allocations Scheme**

10. Select Committee on Environment considered two alternative proposals for the future of the Council's housing allocations policy.

Option 1 – to retain a simplified version of the existing points based scheme

Option 2 – to introduce a bandings scheme

11. In determining which option to recommend to Cabinet, Members of Select Committee had to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each option. To summarise the discussions, it was felt that there was perhaps a familiarisation with a points scheme which had served the Council well over a number of years. Even a simplified scheme did not overcome the issue of 'points chasing' and indeed the CBL pilot had intensified this as customers could clearly see what points properties had been allocated on. It was clear that the points scheme was not particularly transparent and this is what any allocations scheme should aim to achieve. The bandings scheme (an outline is shown Appendix B to this report) both simplifies the scheme and also makes it transparent and therefore more easy to understand. It would also assist in managing supply and demand and will more clearly identify those in priority need.
12. Members of Select Committee on Environment recognised that in supporting a change to a bandings scheme, this was the start of a lengthy process to include full public consultation and modelling of the scheme to make certain that it is sufficiently robust to ensure that those in priority need will not be overlooked or overtaken.
13. In considering the Housing Allocation Scheme it was also recognised that it was the right time to consider associated issues relating, for example, to eligibility rules and the impact of the Communities and Local Government new overcrowding standard for England.

## **Finance**

14. CBLs - the costs associated with Choice Based Lettings have been budgeted for from savings made elsewhere in the Housing Revenue Account.
15. Housing Allocations Scheme – there are no financial implications arising directly from this report. Budget provision has already been made for IT adjustment/ implementation.

## **Law**

16. 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 1966 and the Homelessness Act 2002.

## **Equality Impact**

17. CBLs – 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.
18. Allocations Review – the scheme will be fully tested prior to implementation to ensure that it has no adverse effects.

## **Recommendations**

19. That Cabinet approve the roll out of ‘Dudley at Home’ to the rest of the Borough in Summer 2008.
20. The Cabinet agree the recommendation that the banding model should be taken forward with the intention of it replacing the points scheme.
21. That Cabinet agree to the Select Committee on Environment continue to monitor ‘Dudley at Home’ and its full implementation and oversee the development of the banding model ensuring that it meets the needs of Dudley residents.
22. Receive a further report on ‘Dudley at Home’ in March 2009.
23. Receive a report in due course to approve the implementation of a banding scheme as the basis of letting properties in Dudley.



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**Linda Sanders**

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## **Notification to customers prior to the introduction of the Dudley at Home Pilot**

Letters were posted to all applicants on the housing register in October informing them of the proposed introduction of CBL and asking them to contact us if they had any concerns about using the new system. A further letter and a leaflet were posted immediately prior to the launch again asking applicants to contact us if they had any concerns.

Dudley at Home was featured in the Home Affairs magazine, and in the local media.

The Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (DFTRA) and the High Rise Living Forum (HRLF) were also consulted and advised of the changes as were internal divisions within the Council, and, external agencies.

## **Consultation**

In addition to internal divisions within the council and partner agencies the following were also consulted:

Area Panels

DFTRA

HRLF

Elected Members and MPs through briefing sessions held in November

Race Equality and Communication Service

Staff from the Dudley at Home team took part in a BME Consultation Event in November

The pilot scheme has been positively received and a number of suggestions have been made including the need to provide additional training on the Dudley at Home system to enable local community workers to advise and assist their communities. There was also a need to further promote the availability of the multi-lingual telephony system.

All suggestions are evaluated and incorporated where possible.

## **Access to the system**

Recognising that not everyone has access to a computer, public access pcs have been provided in Area Housing Offices where staff are available to provide help and advice. There are also public access pcs in libraries and at Dudley Council Plus. In addition to the website a property newsletter is also available.

Dudley at Home will shortly be accessible via Digi TV which means that everyone with digital television will be able to access the service.

A survey carried out to evaluate customer satisfaction with the Dudley at Home system found that 90% of customers found the system easy or very easy to use. For those customers who are experiencing initial difficulties we have introduced the facility of case management where designated officers in area teams keep in touch with the customer, let them know about suitable vacancies, and can place a bid on their behalf when

required. During the pilot, for example, staff have helped (case managed) 15 older people.

### **Protection for Vulnerable People**

Briefing sessions and demonstrations of the system took place to ensure that support providers were aware of Dudley at Home and could advise and support their clients. These providers included Dudley MIND, Cage and Warehouse, Age Concern.

The vulnerable persons strategy is currently being developed in partnership with staff from Adult Social Care and other support providers.

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

### **Reassurance that people in need can access the system and use it.**

The CBL project was chosen to pilot a new corporate approach to impact assessment. It was recognised that CBL could have a possible adverse impact on certain groups e.g. older people may be less likely to participate in bidding, people with disabilities may not understand the system and may need support, some BME communities may have language difficulties. It was recognised that there was a need to ensure that all applicants have appropriate information, advice and support.

Analysis of properties let during the pilot indicates that there has been no change in the needs groups being housed under the Dudley at Home system compared to the traditional allocation system. In particular there has been no impact on homeless lettings, and, no impact on BME lettings.

One of the safeguards in place is 'shadow allocating'. Every week staff look at who would have been allocated each property under the traditional allocation system. Applicants who have not bid are contacted by telephone or letter to check that they know about the Dudley at Home system and are able to use it. Applicants mainly appear to have chosen not to bid for a particular property as it did not meet their specific requirements.

### **People with disabilities**

Dudley at Home is widening the choice of properties available for people with disabilities. Properties which are adapted are advertised specifically for applicants with an Occupational Therapist's recommendation for this type of property. During the pilot 3 adapted properties have been advertised and these have been offered to applicants whose needs best matched the accommodation available.

In addition to adapted properties Dudley at Home advertises properties which are 'accessible'. These are properties which have no more than three steps to access and can be reasonably adapted with a ramp. Applicants who require an adapted property are advised by the Housing Occupational Therapist if they are eligible to bid for accessible properties.

Band	Includes	Priority within band
People we need to move	<p>People in clearance programmes/statutory rehousing</p> <p>People releasing family accommodation or two properties for one</p> <p>People releasing supported housing spaces/hospital beds</p> <p>People whose homes cannot be adapted to meet their disability needs</p>	<p>Best match for adapted/adaptable property</p> <p>Band date order</p>
People with urgent needs (time limited priority)	<p>People who are homeless</p> <p>People who are severely overcrowded</p> <p>People with Special Case decision for next available property</p> <p>People with urgent medical or disability need (40/50 point equivalent)</p> <p>People with a severe learning disability or mental health need</p> <p>People with approval for like to like move</p> <p>Referrals (witness protection programme, child protection, vulnerable adults, domestic abuse, corporate parenting, young parents etc)</p>	<p>Appropriateness of area and property type then band date order</p>
People with more than one need	<p>People with more than one of the needs described in the next row</p>	<p>Number of needs and then band date order</p>
People with one need	<p>People who are overcrowded including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lodgers aged over 21 sharing a room and</li> <li>• lodgers aged under 21 sharing a room with more than one person</li> </ul> <p>People with children in non family flats/maisonettes</p> <p>People with low/moderate medical or disability need</p> <p>People with a need to move into the borough (employment or support)</p> <p>People with Special Case decision to recognise a need</p> <p>Families with children who are unable to live together</p> <p>Family releasing family house</p> <p>Tenants of flats moving to more appropriate designation within the borough</p>	<p>Band date order</p>
People with need but who have less priority	<p>People in any of the above rows whose current/last address is outside the borough</p> <p>People in any of the above rows with sufficient equity to cover 12 months private rental</p> <p>People in any of the above rows who are required to demonstrate suitability</p>	<p>Band date order</p>
People with no recognised need	<p>Families in family flats/maisonettes</p> <p>Lodgers aged under 21 sharing a room</p> <p>Lodgers aged over 21 with their own room</p> <p>Anyone who is adequately housed</p>	<p>Band date order</p>
People with no recognised need and less priority	<p>People in the above row whose current/last settled address is outside the borough</p> <p>People in the above row with sufficient equity to cover 12 months private rental</p> <p>People in the above row who are required to demonstrate suitability</p>	<p>Band date order</p>