

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

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Subject:	Review of Property Age Designations
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Scrutiny Committee be briefed on the progress made to date in reviewing the age designations that currently apply to the Council's housing stock.
- 1.2 That the Scrutiny Committee be briefed on the proposals to take the current review forward.
- 1.3 That the Scrutiny Committee consider and comment on the information presented on the review of the Council's Age Designated Stock and the plans to take forward the review.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 The current volume of age designated properties acts as a disproportionate barrier for many seeking to access affordable housing and impedes the Council's ability to carry out its statutory functions, in particular regarding Care Experienced Young People, those who fall within the requirements set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and those seeking to move on from supported housing provision.
- 2.2 Removing the 25 years plus age designations from the properties set out in Appendix 1 will help in part to address the above issue, regarding one-bedroom properties where currently around 60% (3,018/4,883) are excluded from anyone below the age of 25.



3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	Best start in life for children and young people Increasing housing stock access to both young people and households with children will improve the life chances of those affected. A decent affordable home is a central component from which to build a stable life and to participate more readily in all forms of daily life.
	Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods Increasing housing stock access to both young people and households with children will improve access to quality homes.

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 Strategic overview

One of the commitments made by Cabinet on 26 February 2020 (Housing Allocations Policy Review) was to instruct officers to commence a review of the age designations currently applied to approximately half of the Council's flatted accommodation. This in part was triggered by responses to the Housing Allocations Policy Review survey, where 74% of housing applicants who completed the survey (630 in total) either strongly agreed or agreed that more flats should be available to people under the age of 40.

4.2 Following a trend that is replicated nationally, as a social housing landlord the Council over many years has steadily accumulated a significant number of properties affected by age designations that now excludes a disproportionate number of the customer base purely on age grounds. Locally two neighbouring authorities have recently concluded a review of their age designations, with Dudley removing them from all their low-rise stock and Wolverhampton removing them from all their general needs stock.

4.3 Excluding properties with a 50 plus age designation, in Sandwell just over half of the Council's stock portfolio of one and two-bedroom flats is affected by either a 25 plus, a 35 plus or a 40 plus age designation. Set against the customer base of applicants where 70% are below the age of 40, this situation does not support the principles of inclusion and leaves a significant imbalance between the supply and the demand for social housing.



4.4 **Current situation – stock base**

Excluding flatted units with a 50 plus designation, collectively around half of one and two bed roomed flats (4,586 / 8,828 units) have an age restriction. These restrictions are applied with three specific minimum ages of 25 (844 units), 35 (246 units) and 40 (3,496 units).

4.5 These restrictions mean that persons aged below 25 are excluded from 52% of the stock (4,586 units), below 35 from 42% (3,742 units) and below 40 from 40% (3,496 units). Furthermore:

- the spatial distribution of the age restricted stock is very uneven across the borough, ranging from just 2% of one bedroom units being designation free in Rowley, to a like figure of 58% in West Bromwich.
- Around three quarters of age restricted stock is in the low to medium rise stock base.
- 62% of one bedroom flats (3,018/4,883) are excluded from anyone below the age of 25 - this includes 548 flats whose age designation is 25 plus.

4.6 Focussing on units with a 25 plus age designation, when drilling down to individual blocks, the average age of the head of household rarely dips below 40, and typically lies in the 45 to 55 age range. Many blocks with a 25-plus age designation have a wide age variance, the following age profiles of three low-rise blocks in the borough are typical:

Property	Age of Head of Household								
	29	33	37	51	77	-	-	-	-
A	29	33	37	51	77	-	-	-	-
B	26	27	32	44	52	53	73	74	80
C	21x2	24x2	28	37x2	40	47	48	56	60

4.7 **Current situation – applicant base**

On 27 July from a register of 6,216 applicant households, 1,356 (22%) had a head of household aged 25 or under, 3,030 (49%) were aged between 26 and 40, and 1,403 (23%) were aged between 41 and 59. The remaining 6% are aged 60 plus.



4.8 With around 70% (4,386/6,094) of the housing register applicant base being below the age of 40, by default when a property with a 40 plus age designation becomes available for let, in effect it is only available to 30% of the applicant base. This supply and demand imbalance is highlighted by the sharp differences between the lower demand for age designated stock set against general needs stock with no age designation. Bidding week 21 commencing 21 July is typical, where none of the 40 plus units achieved more than 15 bids and with two-thirds not achieving more than five. This contrasts with the 25 to 65 bid range for properties without an age designation all of which will be let given the volume of bids:

Week commencing 21 July – Bids received for flats:

No. of bids	25 plus properties	40 plus properties	General Needs, no age designation
No bids	-	4	-
1 to 5	-	9	-
6 to 15	-	4	-
25 to 65	1	-	10
Total	1	17	10

4.9 **Proposed process for the Age Designation Review**

Due to the number of units involved in the review in May approval was given to adopt a two-phase approach to the review with Stage One focusing on units with a 25-plus restriction, and Stage Two focusing on those with a 35 and 40 plus restriction.

4.10 Stage One update

4.11 In June officers began exploring the review of the 25 plus age designations. By reducing the age restriction to applicants who are 18 years plus on these units, this would return 827 (531 one bed/296 two bed) flats back into general needs and would increase the one-bedroom unit stock access for the 18 to 25 age group from 38% to 49%. Because of the already wide age variance of many of these blocks the impact of bringing them into general needs would not have a significant impact on the overall average age of head of household.



- 4.12 On 21 July, consultation notices (copy enclosed as Appendix 2) were sent to 827 properties seeking views and opinions on the proposal to remove the 25-plus age restriction from their block. The consultation closed on 12 August 2021. In total 41 responses were received, representing a 5% response rate.
- 4.13 38 of the 41 responses opposed the removal of the age designation, all based on the concern/perception that removing the restriction would lead to increased incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB) together with community cohesion strains brought about by a clash of lifestyles. Sample data indicates that in reality, there is no significant difference in incidents in that for age restricted blocks over a two-year period (2019/20 and 2020/21) there was an average of 0.45 ASB reports per unit per year compared to a like figure of 0.54 reports per unit per year for general needs.
- 4.14 If the removal of the age designations goes ahead, once removed any issues will be monitored and managed sensitively. To achieve this and in line with current policy to facilitate tenancy sustainability all applicants are now assessed for any support needs required to maintain their tenancy. Options include the provision of floating support together with support from the Welfare Rights Team if required. It should be noted that the age profile of tenants in flats will only change gradually as it is dependent on voids becoming available in the blocks.
- 4.15 Post tenancy checks are also completed and scheduled based on a risk assessment, with a scheduled programme of regular visits to new tenants planned throughout the year and each tenant having a named neighbourhood officer to refer to. Where officers feel it is prudent to do so the option also exists to apply the Sensitive Lettings criteria as set out in Section E/10 of the Housing Allocations Policy.
- 4.16 Once Stage One is completed, Stage Two of the review can then commence supported by the learning gained from Stage One.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 There are no alternative options other than to retain the current level of age restricted properties.



6 Implications

<p>Resources:</p>	<p>This report has no adverse financial implications for the Housing Revenue Account. There is a likelihood that removing or changing age designations will make flats in some blocks easier to let, which will increase occupation rates and therefore increase rental income.</p> <p>In addition, reducing age restrictions will expand the housing options for persons in temporary accommodation who would otherwise be excluded and will reduce associated costs.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>Each age designation is in effect a Local Lettings Plan (LLP) that deviates away from the mainstream housing allocations policy. Section 166A(6)(b) of the 1996 Housing Act enables LLPs, whereby housing authorities can allocate geographically specific properties to people of a specific description, provided that overall the authority can demonstrate that the LLP does not adversely discriminate or prevent the authority's ability to house persons who qualify under the statutory reasonable preference groups.</p> <p>Section E/9 of the current Housing Allocations Policy caters for Local Lettings Plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where necessary and where they can be clearly justified, the Council will use Local Lettings Plans (LLPs). LLP's may be used to address a wide range of issues, including housing management and wider policy concerns. LLP's must not dominate a housing allocations scheme at the expense of the statutory reasonable preference categories and if used their nature and scope must be published alongside the relevant allocations policy. <p>It is proposed that the LLP's applicable to the properties outlined in Appendix One are removed at the local level to take effect three months after notice has been served. Officers from both the Legal Service and Democratic Services have confirmed that this approach would be complicit with policy.</p>



Risk:	Changes to age designation can be an emotive subject. Officers recognise that once implemented there is a potential risk for increased neighbour disputes if younger people move into flats previously occupied by older people and such a transition will therefore need to be managed sensitively and effectively. However, sample data indicates that there is a minimal difference in the number of ASB Reports for age restricted blocks against general needs blocks as identified in paragraph 4.14. Mitigations are also set out in Sections 4.15 and 4.16.
Equality:	Previous impact assessments have concluded that the current level of age designated properties set against the housing register profile has exposed age inclusion issues as the age designations currently apply. This review will address this issue.
Health and Wellbeing:	The health benefits of living in a decent sustainable home are well documented in improving a wide range of both physical and mental health determinants. Removing age designations will have a positive impact regarding Young People currently excluded from those properties affected by age designations.
Social Value	As set out above in this report.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Properties in Stage One review and served with consultation notice

Appendix 2 - Copy of notice served on properties outlined in Appendix One

8. Background Papers

None

