Minutes

RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

25 October 2023

Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	Committee Members Present: Councillors Colleen Sullivan (Vice-Chairman, in the Chair), Darran Davies, Scott Farley (Opposition Lead), Janet Gardner, Ekta Gohil, Sital Punja and Peter Smallwood **Others Present**: Melissa Blower (Housing Project Manager) Maggie Nelson (Head of Housing Needs) Liz Penny (Democratic Services Officer)
23.	**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** *(Agenda Item 1)* Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Wayne Bridges with Councillor Darran Davies substituting.
24.	**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING** *(Agenda Item 2)* There were no declarations of interest.
25.	**TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING** *(Agenda Item 3)* **RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 26 September 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.**
26.	**TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THOSE MARKED PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE** *(Agenda Item 4)* It was confirmed that all the items of business were marked Part I and would be considered in public.
27.	**THE LOCATA HOUSING SYSTEM** *(Agenda Item 5)* Maggie Nelson, Head of Housing Needs and Melissa Blower, Housing Project Manager, presented the Locata Housing System report. Members were informed that Locata was an online choice-based lettings (CBL) system which was available to anyone who wished to apply to join the social housing register. The Council's Social Housing Allocations Policy set out and governed how officers assessed and determined which applicants were eligible to join the housing register, which priority banding they were to be awarded and their bedroom size need. Locata was the most commonly used CBL system across all local authorities. The Committee heard that Locata was a computer-friendly system which could also be accessed via a tablet or mobile phone. It was easy to use, and applicants had direct

access to the system to check their applications at any time. Once a Locata application had been completed and submitted, the information was fed into the Council's 'Civica' system where a process to carry out the assessment was initiated. The application also fed directly into the 'Northgate' system which catered for all other housing elements such as rent accounts, tenancy details and estates.

It was confirmed that all applicants were expected to apply online and only needed to have an email address to register. The application form took approximately 20 – 30 minutes to complete. All applicants were expected to upload their documents as part of their application. All documents added or any identified changes were updated through the same account. Bids for properties and offers of accommodation were also communicated through this account.

In response to questions from Committee Members, it was confirmed that banding was based on level of priority with A being the most urgent. Most properties that became available would be allocated to band A applicants hence those in band B tended to remain on the housing register for longer and numbers were higher. The information was reviewed annually to ensure people still wanted to remain on the housing register. Bandings would only be reviewed upon receipt of new information or when an applicant was at the point of becoming shortlisted for a property.

Members requested further clarification in respect of the waiting times set out on page 10 of the agenda pack. It was confirmed that these numbers were based on an average and did not necessarily fully reflect the length of waiting times – for example, an applicant could wait in band C for a considerable period and then move to band B for a short period of time before being allocated a property.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding enhanced banding, it was confirmed that an applicant could be moved up to a higher band if they met more than one of the priority criteria (medical need, overcrowding, 10-year residency etc). The housing register was only for those who had a housing need – those who were already suitably housed did not qualify. Members learnt that, within band A, enhanced priority was afforded to those who were required to move due to decanting, were under occupiers or were management transfers.

Members heard that banding letters were sent out to all new applicants detailing likely waiting times and explaining that it was unlikely the Council could offer a property to all those who joined the housing register due to the level of demand. New people were joining the register all the time hence those in lower bands were less likely to be housed. Allocation would also depend on bedroom need – someone in band B waiting for a one-bedroom property was much more likely to be successful than someone in the same band waiting for a larger house.

Members noted that some residents were not computer literate or did not have English as their first language and enquired how these residents were supported. Officers stated that letters were generally sent in English but translation services and user guides in different languages were available if needed.

Councillors requested further information regarding urgent cases. It was confirmed that, as set out in the Council's Social Housing Allocations Policy, urgency depended on the severity of need. Those in band A tended to include applicants who had an urgent medical need, needed to move to enable fostering or adoption, were in fear of violence or were hospital bed blockers. The system did not allow for more than one criterion to

be allocated to a case. Where more than one criterion applied, applicants could go to a panel where their case would be considered individually. A higher banding was sometimes awarded if there were multiple reasons why that person needed to move. If the applicant was already in the highest band, officers tended to apply the criteria which might attract additional priorities.

In response to further questions from the Committee, Members heard that, once an application had been submitted, the applicant was given a list of the documents needed to support their application. Officers assessed each application individually and requested additional information as required. Applicants could provide new information at any time which would be reviewed accordingly.

Members queried how digital poverty was being addressed. It was noted that residents could access the Locata system in libraries. If necessary, systems were in place to automatically bid for properties on behalf of residents. Those who lacked literacy skills were sometimes referred to support agencies who could assist them in completing the application form.

Councillors observed that some residents had reported difficulties whereby their banding had been updated but this had not been reflected on the Locata system. Members heard that the Council used two systems – Locata was the front of house system but there was also a back-office system. Sometimes there was a delay in data loading which could result in the two systems not matching up for a while. At the request of Members, it was agreed that officers would explore this further in an attempt to resolve this anomaly.

Members sought further details regarding the Hardship Panel. It was reported that the Panel usually comprised senior management officers from the Housing Team, although other professionals working with families also attended on occasion.

In response to further questions from Committee Members, it was confirmed that officers would not normally review a case unless they were notified of a change. If a resident felt they had been awarded the wrong banding, a review process was in place to enable people to appeal against the decision. Officers would then review the case to ensure the correct decision had been made.

With regards to fraud, Members heard that a system was in place to ensure the appropriate checks were carried out when someone was shortlisted for a property; the counter fraud team was also requested to carry out an inspection.

At the request of Councillors, it was agreed that statistics showing the number of people on lower bandings who had been offered housing would be shared after the meeting. Members were informed that smaller households on band B were more likely to secure a property because there were less people bidding for these properties and a higher proportion of stock. Waiting times and statistics regarding numbers of lets were published annually. The Locata system also provided a feedback option and advised residents of any properties for which they had been shortlisted. Officers always attempted to be as realistic as possible to ensure residents understood that those on a lower banding were much less likely to be offered a property.

Members welcomed this approach but regretted the fact that residents in need of a larger family home were less likely to be offered anything. It was confirmed that, at the beginning of October, 3575 residents had been registered to place bids for social

housing on Locata – this figure was quite an accurate representation of the total number of people who approached the Council with a housing need. Anyone who approached as homeless and was owed a prevention Duty or relief Duty would automatically be added onto the housing register, albeit it in one of the lower bands initially until the full application had been assessed – ten year residency in the Borough was not essential.

It was confirmed that the specific criteria for each banding were set out in the Council's Social Housing Allocations Policy; this could be further clarified by officers if necessary.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was noted that, when a case was reviewed and an applicant was moved up a band, the priority date was reset at that point to reflect the change in circumstances and need. It would be unfair to retain previous waiting times at this point. When the Council had adopted the current Locata system, all existing cases had been migrated from the old system and priority dates / waiting times had been retained.

Members enquired how the Council ensured that all relevant criteria were considered in a holistic way. It was confirmed that this was the responsibility of the Hardship Panel. Officers also worked closely with colleagues in social services and other agencies and, when an applicant had a developing need, attempted to move them as quickly as possible.

Members were advised that applicants could place bids on Locata any day of the week. Most adverts for properties only stayed on the system for seven days, so residents were advised to log on the same day each week so as not to miss out on anything within a bidding cycle. New voids were added weekly and were only re-advertised if they had not been allocated in the first round which happened rarely.

Councillors reported that they had heard of cases whereby residents had been unable to bid on certain properties or properties had disappeared from Locata before the seven days had expired. It was confirmed that this sometimes happened when properties were withdrawn from Locata, either because the property was no longer becoming void or because an urgent need to move necessitated a direct allocation. It was also noted that, if residents did not log in to their individual accounts, they could see all the properties advertised on the Locata system including those they were not eligible to bid for.

Members enquired whether it would be possible for those residents who were unable to access the Locata system themselves and relied on automatic bidding, to be kept informed of the status of their bids and provided with feedback. It was acknowledged that this was not currently happening and applicants were only contacted when they were shortlisted for a property. **Officers agreed to explore the possibility of enhancing the Locata system to provide monthly feedback to those on automatic bidding.**

With regards to banding, Members learnt that, within band A, enhanced priority was afforded to those who were required to move due to decanting, people who were under occupiers and people who were management transfers.

RESOLVED: That the Locata Housing System report be noted.

| 28. | **FORWARD PLAN** *(Agenda Item 6)* |

	RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.	
29.	**WORK PROGRAMME** *(Agenda Item 7)* **RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.**	
	The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 7.50 pm.	

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer on epenny@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, officers, the press and members of the public.