



LONDON BOROUGH OF HILLINGDON

HOUSING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2004/05 Report

**CHOICE-BASED LETTINGS
Final Report**

Members of the Committee

Cllr Keith Burrows (Chairman)
Cllr Josephine Barrett
Cllr Janet Gardner
Cllr Margaret Grant (Vice-Chairman)
Cllr David Horne
Cllr Mike Usher
Cllr Elaine Webb



CONTENTS

Chairman's foreword	Page i
Executive Summary	Page 1
* * *	
1. Introduction	Page 3
2. The Committee's previous work on Choice-Based Lettings and Improvements to the Locata scheme	Page 5
3. Methodology	Page 7
4. Findings	Page 8
5. Closing word	Page 25
6. Acknowledgments	Page 26
7. Bibliography	Page 27
Appendices	
Appendix 1 - Audit Commission Inspection Report (June 2004)	Page 29

Chairman's foreword



The Housing & Overview Committee identified Choice-Based Lettings as one of its overview topics for the municipal year 2004/5.

This major review followed on the work already undertaken by the Committee during the previous year, but this time the review was more in-depth and included calling a number of witnesses to provide their views on how the Locata scheme has worked for them or the clients they represent.

What must be remembered of course is that Locata is the system that allows Hillingdon to provide choice in lettings. Take this away at this stage, and we would prevent choice for those residents looking for housing.

Since our work on Choice-Based Lettings last year the Locata system has improved significantly. For example, the Locata is now available in Braille, on DVD / video or audio cassette. It also uses, larger print. For these improvements I must congratulate the officers who worked closely with the community to achieve such changes.

Although there have been improvements the Committee believes that the Locata scheme needs to develop further. We have come up with a number of recommendations, which are highlighted in this report, that we feel can and will improve the current system further.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for their input and also the officers for providing the information required to enable us to make our decisions. Furthermore I would like to personally thank the witnesses for taking the time to provide us with their views and comments on the current system operated by the Council.

Cllr Keith Burrows

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 28th July 2004 the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified a review of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme as one of its overview topics for the municipal year 2004/2005. In making this decision the Committee were mindful that, for the following reasons, this is an important time for Choice-Based Lettings and the Locata scheme.

- That the Locata Choice-Based Lettings scheme has been in operation at Hillingdon Council since April 2002
- That it is central government policy that all Councils will move to Choice-Based Lettings scheme by 2010.
- That Cabinet considered the service provision in February 2004, and a decision was taken to extend the pilot until February 2005 when a final conclusion would be reached whether to extend the scheme
- That following this Cabinet decision in February 2004, the Locata scheme undertook an improvement programme, which sought to identify any problems with the new allocation system and close any gaps in the service provision. A process which the Committee had monitored as part of its work programme throughout 2004.

Due to the wide scope of the Choice Based Lettings scheme, the Committee decided to focus on 5 core areas which it considered key to both Locata users and Housing provision within the borough. These 5 focus issues were:

- (1) The Bidding Process
- (2) Current Data on Bidding Trends
- (3) Customer Service Information
- (4) Customer Survey Information
- (5) Providing the best allocation scheme for Hillingdon

On 21st October 2004 the Committee received evidence on the above points.

Then on 8th December 2004 the Committee received evidence from a number of local organizations and community groups representing bidders with disabilities and those from the black and minority ethnic communities. This helped inform the Committee about external experiences of the bidding process. Finally, the committee met on 20th January 2005 to review all the evidence and agree its final recommendations to Cabinet.

This report will include a narrative history to explain why the Committee selected the topic of Choice-Based Lettings for review, provide a summary of the evidence collected during the review, identify the three options available (regarding the adoption of the Locata scheme,) and a recommendation of the preferred solution.

The Committee present the following recommendations to Cabinet:

Recommendations to Cabinet on 10th February 2005

1. That Cabinet acknowledge the concerns of service users toward the bidding process and recognise the improvements made to the scheme as a result of extensive consultation.
2. That Cabinet make a corporate commitment to join the Locata Choice-Based Lettings scheme on a permanent basis.
3. That Cabinet give their support to further development and improvement of the Locata scheme as detailed in the Enhancement and Development Plan.
4. That Cabinet note that the Committee wish to continue receiving quarterly information reports to monitor progress in meeting concerns raised by Locata's users and their representative organisations.
5. That Cabinet note the Committee wish to be involved at an early stage in future consultation exercises.
6. That the Locata magazine is sent free of charge to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties.
7. That Cabinet endorse the need for officers to continue their work to improve awareness and understanding of Locata by voluntary agencies who carry out frontline work with housing applicants and to ensure changes and improvements are drawn to their attention.
8. That Cabinet accept the need for all Housing frontline staff to be trained in the issues facing people with disabilities and from vulnerable groups and welcome the offer of DASH to provide such training that is being attended by all the Council's Housing Needs Officers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Housing In Hillingdon

1 Housing is an important service that most members of the public will rely on at some point in their life. Within the London Borough of Hillingdon many people are able to secure the housing they need through the private sector despite the current average dwelling price of £212,587. The majority of home-owners live in the north of the borough where income levels are higher than those in the south. At present, 76% of dwellings are owner occupied and 8% are privately rented. For those who cannot afford to buy Council housing remains a vital option. Hillingdon Borough Council provides 11% of the social housing and 5% of dwellings are rented from registered social landlords.

Central Government Policy

2 It is central government policy that all councils will move to a Choice-Based Lettings system by 2010. This represents a fundamental shift in the way Council properties are allocated. Instead of the onus being on the Council to offer property to the individual seeking to be rehoused this is changed to the individual being responsible for actively pursuing their own housing needs by bidding to express their interest. As part of this process those seeking housing have information on the numbers, types and locations of properties available and also information on the priority and length of waiting time of those who are successful. It is possible to see what level of priority and waiting time will be required to bid successfully for certain types of property or certain areas.

The Locata Scheme

3 Locata has been introduced in Hillingdon as a provider of Choice-Based Lettings. Locata is an independent company set up and operated in partnership by several Councils and Housing Associations in West London to administer the scheme for tenants and home seekers. The scheme has also increased options for Hillingdon residents to find housing outside the borough. Locata produces fortnightly magazine to advertise properties that are available for letting and administers the [Locata web site](#) and the bidding process. One of the first such schemes to be developed in the United Kingdom, Locata has attracted substantial interest from other councils and housing associations and has won the e-Government Excellence Award for Strategic Planning and Achievement. Hillingdon is one of the shareholders in the company that runs Locata along with Brent, Ealing, Harrow and Hounslow councils. PCHA, Ealing Family and Paradigm Housing Associations also use the scheme. Other Councils and housing associations are interested in joining, the Locata scheme which has been in operation in Hillingdon since April 2002. Comprehensive information and guidance on the Locata scheme are provided on the website www.locata.org.

The Committee's review

4 During the municipal year 2004/05, the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee ('the Committee') undertook a review of the Choice Based Lettings Scheme in the Borough of Hillingdon, with particular attention to the Choice-Based Lettings monitoring information.

The terms of reference for the review were:

5 To conduct a Major Topic Review monitoring the Choice-Based Lettings scheme at Hillingdon Council and to consider the viability of that scheme beyond February 2005.

6 To undertake a full examination of the bidding process, with special interest to be paid to the availability, supply and access for those bidders with disabilities and in doing so, to address the key issues of;

Current Data on Bidding Trends
Percentages of Non Bidders
Reasons for Non Bidders
Effectiveness of the Bidding Process
Access for Applicants with a Disability

7 In February 2005 the Cabinet will need to make a decision on whether to permanently adopt the Locata scheme. Consequently, the Committee prepared an interim report on 20th January 2005. This provided a summary of the Committee's view of Locata and presented their final recommendations to Cabinet.

This is the final report of the Committee, which includes information from:

1. The officer report of 21st October 2004
2. The evidence provided by witnesses on 8th December 2004
3. The interim report of the Committee of 20th January 2005
4. Recommendations to Cabinet:
 - The creation of effective proposals to improve the Choice-Based Lettings scheme in the Borough of Hillingdon
 - On the basis of these proposed improvements and enhancements, to decide if the Committee would endorse the continuation of the scheme beyond February 2005

1. COMMITTEE'S PREVIOUS WORK ON CHOICE-BASED LETTINGS AND IMPROVEMENTS TO THE LOCATA SCHEME

8 In January 2004 the Committee considered an officer report entitled 'Review of Choice-Based Lettings and Locata' as part of its ongoing work programme. The main findings of this report were:

- Hillingdon had successfully achieved a major change in the way dwellings are let and the new scheme was popular with applicants and overwhelmingly preferred
- Locata was as successful as any other of the Choice-Based schemes and had enabled Hillingdon to meet the Government's targets
- A requirement for assistance to people who have difficulties with the biddings process was identified
- Cross-departmental working, especially with Social Services must be improved to ensure that vulnerable groups are rehoused as quickly as possible
- Advocates for people with disabilities have stated that the information provided on whether a property was suitable was often inadequate for the bidder to make an informed choice.
- A need to ensure that information about vulnerable people is collated so that assistance can be targeted in a more effective way.

9 Having considered the main findings of the review the Committee agreed the following recommendations to Cabinet on 6th January 2004.

- This Committee propose that Hillingdon's membership of Locata is extended for a further twelve months, and is reviewed again then, subject to this Overview and Scrutiny Committee receiving management information reports on a quarterly basis so the Committee can scrutinise progress of the system against the weaknesses identified by the current review
- That the Committee consider at the next meeting the type of management report they wish to receive.
- To ask that the Council does more to encourage greater use of Locata by black and minority ethnic residents.
- To ask that Members work with officers for proposals for consultation for future Focus groups.
- To ask that ways be considered to improve the readability of the Locata magazine and to ensure it meets Disability Act requirements (e.g. through larger font size) and that officers report back to the Committee on that and the feasibility of using digital cameras to provide photographs of properties, either in the magazine or on demand

10 These recommendations were incorporated in the Housing Department's Cabinet report and having considered the evidence Cabinet agreed that a series of improvements should be made to the Locata scheme.

Improvements to the Locata scheme

11 As a result of Cabinet decision in February 2004 to extend Hillingdon's membership of the Locata scheme for twelve months, the Locata scheme undertook an improvement programme which sought to identify any problems with the new allocation system and close any gaps in service provision. The Enhancement and Development Plan which Cabinet requested includes areas of improvement from this research, and addresses findings and recommendations from the Audit Commission's Best Value Inspection of the service, which was carried out in February 2004.

12 Due to conclude in February 2005, the Enhancement and Development Plan aims to achieve the following:

- Amendments to the Locata Home Magazine and Scheme User Guide to improve accessibility for applicants with visual or learning difficulties and applicants from black and minority ethnic communities
- Launch of the Customer Personal Bidding Service which supports applicants who experience difficulty in placing bids
- A review of the process surrounding adapted properties and an assessment of applicants with a disability or mobility needs
- Delivery of a series of advice and awareness sessions for agencies who work with disabled and black and minority ethnic groups
- Improvements to the information and literature given to customers about their application for housing
- Provision of feedback on allocations, including direct nominations, published through the Locata magazine
- Improvements to the property information provided in the advertising process
- Regular monitoring to identify applicants who are not bidding, bidding infrequently, or making ineligible bids
- Contacting applicants who may have difficulties with bidding, to offer advice and practical support
- Regular monitoring of cross borough properties
- Re-launch of the Assessments Team and Hillingdon Homes joint partnership meetings

13 The Committee accepted that the improvements to Locata had recognised the needs of bidders with disabilities and those from black and minority ethnic communities and were likely to have a significant impact. The Committee also anticipated that the improvements would assist them to monitor the Locata scheme better in future.

3. METHODOLOGY

14 The approach the Committee adopted to the review was influenced by the following:

- Hillingdon is one of the shareholders in the company that runs Locata along with Brent, Ealing, Harrow and Hounslow councils
- The Audit Commission's Best Value Inspection of the service was carried out in February 2004 and the findings were published in June 2004.
- Research and consultation activity to improve the Locata scheme was already under way as part of the ongoing Enhancement and Development Plan
- The Committee had already requested monitoring reports on Locata on 5th April 2004 as part of their ongoing work programme
- The Committee needed to make a decision before Cabinet met on 10th February 2005 to consider whether the Committee would endorse the continuation of the scheme beyond February 2005.

15 The Committee received reports and presentations from officers on each of the key issues. These enabled the Committee to determine where to recommend changes to current practice or to propose enhancements to the Locata scheme.

16 In addition, for the key issue of access for vulnerable bidders or those with disabilities – the Committee considered evidence from the following organisations.

- Age Concern Hillingdon
- Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH)
- Hillingdon Aids Response Trust (HART)
- Hillingdon Race Equality Council
- Hillingdon MIND
- National Forum of Wheelchair User Groups
- Social Services Asylum Team
- Social Services Interim Manager
- Citizen's Advice Bureau.

4. FINDINGS

17 This section of the report deals in turn with each of the key issues identified, and detailed in the following paragraphs 18 to 54.

An explanation and analysis of the issue

Reaction and recommendations of the Committee

How the recommendations are designed to address the issue

Where relevant, the legal, financial, equal opportunity and other implications of the recommendations.

The Bidding Process

18 The Committee were reminded that Choice-Based Lettings represent a fundamental shift in the way properties are allocated. Instead of the onus being on the Council to offer property to the individual seeking to be re-housed this is changed to the individual being responsible for actively pursuing their own re-housing by bidding to express their interest if they want to be considered for the property. Not all bidders go on to view the property. Only the first 1 to 5 applicants on the shortlist view the property and a final offer is made according to priority.

19 Every available property is advertised fortnightly through the Locata HOME magazine and housing applicants can bid for a maximum of 3 properties in four different ways. These are:

- By coupon
- On line via the website
- By telephone
- By mobile phone text message

20 In addition to these methods, the Committee were informed that the Council also offers a personal bidding service through its Housing Needs Reception. Customers can access this service in person or by telephone and the service clarifies both the details of the property and whether the customer is eligible to bid for the property, and then if appropriate place the bid.

21 Since the Cabinet decision in February 2004 to continue the Locata trial, the Housing Department has sought to enhance the bidding process in a number of ways to address the needs of vulnerable bidders. These improvements include the improved readability of the Locata magazine, the production of a Locata user's guide in a variety of formats and assistance with language barriers.

Conclusion

22 Having considered the evidence, the Committee identified that certain client groups required additional support and guidance in placing bids. These groups included disabled clients, those with medical or vulnerability concerns and applicants with learning difficulties. In response to the provisions required to meet these needs, the Committee endorsed the improvements already underway to the Locata bidding process, as part of the ongoing Enhancement and Development Plan:

- Changing the layout to Locata's - HOME magazine to help bidders with visual impairment or learning difficulties
- Introducing spoken and sign language DVDs in English and other languages to assist vulnerable and disabled bidders
- Making all literature available in large print, brail and on audio cassette to assist bidders with disabilities
- Introducing a translation facility to the Locata partner's website to assist bidders from black and minority ethnic communities
- Agreeing among the Locata partners a definition of vulnerability to ensure consistent assistance was made available across the partnership

Current Data on Bidding Trends

23 Analysis of data held by the Council shows the types of people who are most likely to use Locata and those who are least likely – 'bidders' and 'non-bidders' This information can be used to develop action plans to ensure that the Choice-Based Lettings scheme is accessible to all those eligible to do so.

24 The Committee were reminded that within the Locata scheme, all bidders are classified in one of the following bands:

- **Band A** – Emergency / Top Priority – For those bidders with a life threatening medical condition, which is seriously affected by their current housing, or some other emergency need to move.
- **Band B** – Urgent need to move – For those bidders with an urgent need to move for medical or social reasons, as approved by the bidders Landlord.
- **Band C** – Identified Housing Need – For those bidders with a need to move because of unsatisfactory housing conditions, such as overcrowding or unsanitary conditions.
- **Band D** – All other transfer tenants and home seekers not in the above priority bands A, B or C

25 Table 1 below, from the officer report of 21st October 2004, shows the profile of Hillingdon non-bidders, along with Hounslow and Ealing's non-bidders. Hounslow and Ealing were chosen for comparative purposes as they are neighboring Locata partner boroughs with comparatively sized housing registers.

TABLE 1

BAND	Hillingdon		Hounslow		Ealing	
	Total in Band	Non Bidders	Total in Band	Non Bidders	Total in Band	Non Bidders
A	186	79 (42%)	339	178 (52%)	301	186 (62%)
B	738	193 (26%)	1238	456 (37%)	662	304 (46%)
C	4029	1262 (31%)	3698	1366 (37%)	8459	3530 (42%)
D	4644	2670 (57%)	5064	3278 (65%)	7545	4688 (62%)
Total	9597	4204	10339	5278	16967	8708

Source: Locata Report sent to LBH 28.09.04

26 From the information provided, the Committee noted that in every category, Hillingdon has a lower rate of non-bidders than the other two boroughs. The Committee concluded that this suggested that in general terms, information is being communicated to Hillingdon applicants more successfully than in other boroughs and that bidders are in general terms receiving information and support on the Locata biddings process.

27 Further analysis of the report showed that a significant number of Locata users on the Housing Register did not make regular, or any, bids for properties. The Committee examined the non-bidders by Band category, and noted that there was a direct correlation between their level of housing need and of the likelihood of them being successful with a bid. Applicants in Band D (no identified housing need) who recognised that their priority for re-housing was significantly lower than those in other Bands, meant that 57% did not bid.

28 To help increase the proportion who bid in Bands A and B, the Committee felt that it was essential that individual contact was maintained via the Customer Services Team and that homeless families in temporary accommodation were encouraged to bid regularly. However, in respect of applicants with disabilities, the Committee were aware that a Choice-Based scheme did not necessarily reflect the needs of this group. From the

information provided in the officer report of 21st October 2004, the Committee noted that some Local Authorities used a direct allocations policy to address this housing need, but by doing so excluded a significant number of applicants from exercising choice and being treated in an inequitable way regarding their housing. To address these circumstances, the Committee agreed that in exceptional cases a direct allocation policy was necessary, but that this practice needed to be kept to a minimum.

29 In contrast, the Committee noted that applicants in serious housing need, such as those in either the emergency medical or statutory overcrowding categories, bid most frequently and were generally successful in attaining housing.

Conclusion

30 Having considered the evidence on bidding trends, the Committee drew the following conclusions and proposed the following enhancements:

- Hillingdon has a lower rate of non-bidders than its partner boroughs
- That emergency medical case monitoring could be improved by closer cross working with the Primary Care Trust, caseworkers and key workers from Social Services
- The Committee expressed concern about the under occupancy of dwellings – cases where the tenant had more bedrooms than they required – and what measures could be taken to ensure that the existing housing stock was used most effectively
- The Committee were concerned about the provision to enable the elderly to downsize properties without feeling disadvantaged
- The Committee also highlighted the need to do more to assist the survivors of domestic violence retain their current properties rather than force them to move and thereby exacerbate an already very difficult situation
- That further information is provided on the percentage of directly allocated properties that are held back in other Boroughs
- That officers provide information on cross Borough bidding, and the implementation of the new computer software to monitor this process.

Customer Service Information

31 An ongoing monitoring process of Locata not only enables the Council to improve the Locata scheme, but also affirms the commitment to the enhancement and development plan. The Housing Department's Customer Services Team provides frontline support to all applicants on Hillingdon's Housing register. Each member of staff holds a list of customers who require assistance with the bidding process, and these are contacted every two weeks to ensure that bids are placed on their behalf. An aspect of this role is for the team to correlate data to identify non-bidders and infrequent bidders. These

clients are then contacted to resolve any difficulties they may have and to ensure that advice and guidance is provided where necessary. From the information provided, the Committee noted the following main reasons for people being non-bidders and infrequent bidders:

Reasons for Sheltered Housing applicants

- Want ground floor or bungalow only
- Want a specific area or property in the borough only
- No urgency to move

Reasons for General Needs applicants

- Want a specific area of the borough only
- Limited to large size properties only (there may be weeks where no properties appear in Locata magazine)
- Unlikely to be successful in bidding (mainly Band C and Band D applicants)

Reasons for Disabled applicants

- Want a specific area of the borough only
- Limited to adapted properties only (there may be weeks where no properties appear in Locata magazine)
- Unlikely to be successful in bidding (mainly Band C and Band D applicants)

Conclusion

32 Having considered the evidence from the Customer Services Team, the Committee noted that:

- Applicants would usually only bid if they identified a property that fulfilled their choice
- The main reasons for not bidding were consistent across all categories of applicant, including General Needs, the Elderly and Sheltered and Disabled applicants wanting a specific area of the borough only or wanting a specific property type (i.e. house or bungalow).
- In some instances, their choice was further restricted by the desire to wait for particular roads or developments only. This was particularly true of elderly or disabled bidders which required access to modified properties.
- Applicants in Band D were less likely to bid regularly due to their understanding that their bid was unlikely to be successful.

Customer Survey Information

33 In addition to the monitoring information provided by the Customer Services Team the Committee considered feedback from a telephone survey

that was conducted in February 2004, which asked customers why they were not bidding or bidding infrequently.

34 The results from this survey showed that over 80% of applicants knew how to contact the Council for help with bidding, and over 80% found the Locata Scheme User Guide easy to understand. Furthermore, the majority of applicants also knew why they were in their particular Band and understood how each property was allocated.

Conclusion

35 Having considered the Customer Survey information evidence, the Committee concluded the following:

- That 20% of bidders were unaware of how to contact the Council for help and that a 20% of respondents did not find the Locata scheme User Guide easy to understand. This highlighted that there was scope to improve the scheme further and that accessibility initiatives needed to become more proactive.
- That the proportion who found information on Locata easy to understand this figure fell to 68% within the black and minority ethnic communities compared to 80% for all applicants
- That of the 80% which found information on Locata easy to access, this figure fell to 61% within the black and minority ethnic communities. Both of these statistics revealed, that despite the Committee concerns about black and minority ethnic bidding, first aired in January 2004, that the Locata scheme was not as socially inclusive as it could be.

Evidence from Witnesses – 8th December 2004

36 In addition to receiving the officer reports the Committee consulted with representatives from various frontline agencies to form an understanding of the issues that concerned applicants with a disability and/or those from the black and minority ethnic communities. A variety of stakeholders were invited to present evidence to the Committee on 8th December 2004. The letter of invite also included a series of questions. These questions had a dual function. They were used to guide the evidence gathering process at the Committee meeting and also ensured that organisations which were unable to attend the meeting could still present their views to the Committee. The Committee asked the following questions:

1. Have any of your client group approached you for help on the Locata Bidding Scheme?
2. If so, what were their problems and could you remedy them?

3. In what ways is the Council able to help your clients with regards to the Locata process?

4. Are your client group offered additional help by the Council with regards to Locata

5. What mechanisms, if any are in place to allow your client group to meet someone from the Council to discuss their personal requirements for the Locata process?

6. Are you satisfied with the provisions made for your particular client group by the Council with regards to Locata?

37 Of those organisations unable to attend, questionnaires were returned from:

- Age Concern Hillingdon
- Hillingdon MIND
- Social Services - Social Services Interim Manager
- Citizen's Advice Bureaux – Uxbridge

The meeting on the 8th December was attended by representatives from:

- Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH),
- Hillingdon Aids Response Trust (HART),
- Hillingdon Wheelchair Users Association,
- Hillingdon Race Equality Council Group
- Social Services' Asylum Team.

The following table summarises the responses to the Committee's questionnaire from all nine organizations contacted

Table 2 - Issues that were identified by attendees and the Committee.

	Issue	Proposed Solution
Organisation		
Age Concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of the Locata magazine • Lack of readily available information on Locata • Usability of the Locata magazine / uncertainty of terms eg 'bidding' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post the Locata magazine free of charge to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme • Improve the readability of the Locata magazine / publicised that help is available at the Civic Centre
Citizen's Advice Bureaux / Uxbridge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of how Locata works • Greater assistance required for elderly and non-English speakers with bidding • Lack of feedback after bids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to the Locata magazine • Use clear language to explain technical process, / font / icons / blue background • Provide training to frontline staff in the issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups • Improve the publicity of translation facilities / availability of magazine in different languages and formats • Improve bidding feedback to increase confidence in Locata

<p>Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usability of online bidding / Locata magazine • Accessibility of Civic Centre / Locata magazine for bidders with mobility problems / disabilities • Fluctuating medical conditions / medical assessment criteria too rigid and not sufficiently inclusive • Lack of readily available information on Locata 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the readability of the Locata magazine, / font / icons / blue background • Post the Locata magazine free of charge to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties • Provide training to frontline staff in the issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme • Welcome the offer of DASH to provide disability awareness training to all the Council's Housing Needs Officers
<p>Hillingdon Aids Response Trust (HART)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of incorrect housing banding • Lack of feedback after placing bids • HIV bidders face often other problems including, homophobia, racism and domestic violence • Disclosure of HIV diagnosis / social stigma / lack of trust between bidders and frontline staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to the Locata magazine • Use clear language to explain technical process • Improve bidding feedback to increase confidence in Locata • Provide training to frontline staff in the issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme • Consider starting a Locata helpline

Hillingdon MIND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of how Locata works • Bidders become disillusioned after several unsuccessful bids / adverse effect on medical conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to the Locata magazine • Use clear language to explain technical process • Improve bidding feedback to increase confidence in Locata • Provide training to frontline staff in the issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme
Hillingdon Race Equality Council Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion from Locata due to Language barriers • Accessibility to magazine / not delivered to Community Centres • Lack of understanding of how Locata works 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to Locata magazine • Improve monitoring to reduce exclusion • Improve cross-department working to reduce alienation / possible feelings of discrimination • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme • Improve publicity of translation facilities / availability of magazine in different languages and formats
Hillingdon Wheelchair Users Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readability of the Locata magazine • Accessibility of Civic Centre / Locata magazine for bidders with mobility problems / disabilities • Expressing disablement on forms / consistent cross department recognition of disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the readability of the Locata magazine, / font / icons / blue background • Post Locata magazine free of charge to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties • Provide training to frontline staff in the

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information on modified properties • RSL transfers / lack of modified properties 	<p>issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve information on modified properties / use of digital photography • Use Locata surgeries to promote awareness of the Locata scheme • Improve cross-department working to reduce alienation / possible feelings of discrimination
Social Services (PSSD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of how Locata works • Readability of the Locata magazine for elderly or bidders with visual impairment • Greater assistance required for elderly and non-English speakers with bidding • Lack of feedback after bids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to the Locata magazine • Improve the readability of the Locata magazine / font / icons / blue background
Social Services Asylum Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of how Locata works in the Social Services Department • Exclusion from Locata due to Language barriers • Ineligible bidding and lack of feedback on the bidding process • Managing Repair and maintenance costs of asylum team properties • Verification, and the 3 day deadline to register as an asylum seeker / missed opportunities to bid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training to frontline staff in the issues faced by people with disabilities and vulnerable groups • Improve publicity of translation facilities / availability of magazine in different languages and formats • Improve monitoring to reduce exclusion • Improve cross-department working to reduce alienation / possible feelings of discrimination

Conclusions:

38 Having considered the evidence the Committee identified the following common points of concern:

- That the availability of the Locata Home Magazine to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties needs to be improved.
- That those bidders with disabilities have difficulty in reading the magazine / layout of the magazine and that larger font sizes, blue coloured pages and icons could be used to improve its readability.
- That the Locata bidding process was confusing and that many applicants with disabilities or from the black and minority ethnic communities has difficulty in understanding which properties the applicant was eligible for.
- That greater provision needed to be made to ensure the availability of the Locata magazine and associated literature in other languages.
- That the availability of the magazine and associated literature in other formats Braille and audiocassette needed to be better publicised
- That the Council needs to provide training to improve the awareness and understanding of Locata for voluntary agencies who carry out frontline work with housing applicants.
- That the Council needs to provide dedicated disability training for staff.

39 The evidence gathering also revealed that Members, as well as many representatives, were largely unaware that Locata does currently produce information in all of Hillingdon's main languages, large type, Braille, audiocassette, signed and spoken DVD and other language DVD. Further information was provided on the development of a 'Hillingdon only' free sheet using adverts from the Locata magazine. This will be produced in larger font on a blue background, and split into three sections; General Needs, Sheltered and Elderly and Adapted, which should provide an easy to read format for applicants with visual or learning difficulties, and should reduce the possibility of ineligible bids.

40 The witnesses also noted that the Locata magazine is provided free of charge via a postal service for all applicants who are housebound or have mobility difficulties. However, the meeting highlighted that bidders had found the service difficult to access and receive. Housing staff made a commitment to monitor and improve the publicity of this service, as well as providing updates to the Committee as part of its ongoing monitoring.

41 The Committee were also assured that a number of advice and awareness sessions about Locata had been delivered to a number of agencies already including the Social Services Asylum Team, and that further sessions were scheduled for January and February 2005, to which the attendees of the meeting were invited.

42 DASH have agreed to provide disability training for Council Housing Needs officers. The first session is planned for January 2005.

43 On the basis of these discussions, the Committee agreed the following recommendations:

- That Cabinet acknowledge the concerns of service users toward the bidding process and recognise the improvements made to the scheme as a result of extensive consultation.
- That Cabinet give their support to further development and improvement of the Locata scheme as detailed in the Enhancement and Development Plan.
- That Cabinet note that the Committee wish to continue receiving quarterly information reports to monitor progress in meeting concerns raised by Locata's users and their representative organisations.
- That Cabinet note the Committee wish to be involved at an early stage in future consultation exercises.
- That the Locata magazine is sent free of charge to housebound applicants or those with mobility difficulties.
- That Cabinet endorse the need for officers to continue their work to improve awareness and understanding of Locata by voluntary agencies who carry out frontline work with housing applicants and to ensure changes and improvements are drawn to their attention.
- That Cabinet accept the need for all Housing frontline staff to be trained in the issues facing people with disabilities and from vulnerable groups and welcome the offer of DASH to provide such training that is being attended by all the Council's Housing Needs Officers.

44 These recommendations address the issues identified in the terms of reference and propose improvements to enhance the availability, supply and access to the Locata scheme for those bidders with disabilities and or from the black and minority ethnic communities.

Across-Borough Initiative and additional information

45 In addition, to the evidence provided by witnesses, the Committee also received information on the Locata cross borough initiative, which it had requested on 21st October. The information provided by officers revealed evidence that there were some difficulties with the monitoring of properties, in that losses and gains across the partner boroughs were unstable and had resulted in an overall loss for Hillingdon. The report highlighted that this 'loss' had already been addressed by the decision of Hillingdon to withdraw temporarily from the initiative until losses had been recouped and / or computer software had been implemented to correct this problem.

46 The Committee were reassured to learn that to date Hillingdon has successfully gained back its losses, however there are still unresolved issues surrounding the activity of partner boroughs with direct allocations which may reduce the true number of properties available for cross borough lettings. The issue over satisfactory levels of monitoring gains and losses of properties is also outstanding, but this, and the direct allocation inequity, is being actively progressed through regular Locata partners - Ealing, Harrow, and Hounslow as well as with partners, Paddington Churches, Ealing Family and Paradigm Housing Associations.

Allocation Scheme Options

47 Having considered the officer report of 21st October 2004 and the evidence provided by the witnesses on 8th December the Committee reviewed all the information they had received on 20th January before taking a view on whether Hillingdon Council should continue with the Locata scheme after 2005.

48 The Committee were reminded that there are three main options available to Hillingdon concerning the allocation of social housing and that it is not possible to revert back to a traditional points-based scheme, as Central Government have issued a directive (see reference - http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_609026-09.hcsp) that all local authorities must move to choice-based lettings with 100% of local authorities using this method by 2010.

The options and the implications of each option are listed below :

- Option 1 - Develop an in-house choice-based letting scheme
- Option 2 - Become a member of an alternative existing choice-based letting scheme
- Option 3 - Continue with the Locata Choice Based Letting Scheme

49 Option 1: To move away from the Locata scheme and consider options such as developing an in-house scheme or joining another existing scheme has massive financial and resource implications. Financial costs would include major new research, widespread consultation, (re)design and publication of literature (policy documents, application forms, supporting document forms), training costs, possible web-site design and facilities. Staff resources would be severely stretched, or would need expansion, to deliver borough wide awareness and knowledge of a new scheme to applicants, voluntary agencies, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), key partner agencies and other Council departments.

50 Option 2: Evidence points toward the likelihood that Hillingdon would also reduce the availability of housing stock from partner sources. This is namely because Locata consists of neighbouring boroughs where movement is more realistic for Hillingdon residents. Locata also continues to expand and provide additional local authorities and housing associations at a much faster rate than any other scheme.

51 Option 3: There are significant implications for the Council's reputation if Locata is disregarded in favour of a new or alternative scheme. This is likely to be perceived as a lack of sufficient research and consultation when the scheme was originally agreed, and may imply that the Council is unable to make sound decisions on, and commitment to, the services it provides to the community.

Conclusions:

52 Having considered both the commitments made to improve Locata, the Committee considered both negative and positive aspects of the overall scheme.

Negative Factors

- Withdrawal would have significant financial and resource implications.
- Withdrawal would damage relationships with neighbouring Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords.
- Withdrawal would impact severely on partnership working not only within Housing but also other Council Departments.
- Withdrawal would impact would impact on the Council's reputation.

Positive Factors

- Audit Commission Inspection. Hillingdon's allocation scheme was inspected in February 2004 – please see Appendix 1. The Locata scheme was identified as:
 - (1) Clear and challenging
 - (2) Providing reasonable levels of satisfaction
 - (3) A strong performance management system, incorporating action plans
 - (4) Having an overall fair assessment with excellent prospects for improvement
 - (5) Having been selected by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for inclusion in the Good Practise Handbook
 - (6) As expanding the partnership of Locata with other South East Local Authorities.
 - (7) Having won the E-Government Excellence Award for Strategic Plan and Achievement

53 On the basis of these discussions, the Committee agreed the following recommendation:

- That Cabinet make a corporate commitment to join the Locata Choice-Based Lettings scheme on a permanent basis.

54 This recommendation addresses the issues identified in the terms of reference, takes account of the evidence collected from witnesses and the issues highlighted within the review and propose improvements to enhance the availability, supply and access to the Locata scheme for those bidders with disabilities and or from the black and minority ethnic communities.

5. CLOSING WORD

55 The Committee's intention was to produce a report to Cabinet to determine the following:

- What improvements could be made to the Locata Choice-Based Letting scheme
- Whether Hillingdon should continue to participate with the Locata scheme after February 2005.

56 The recommendations included in this report are the outcome of the Committee consideration of the evidence provided on each of the key issues. The recommendations to Cabinet are that Hillingdon should join the Locata Choice-Based Lettings scheme on a permanent basis, incorporating the improvements and enhancements identified.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

57 The Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee sincerely thanks all those who participated in this review, especially those who attended voluntarily to share their experiences of the Locata, Choice-Based Lettings scheme.

Thanks to:

- Jeff Maslen
- Neil Stubbings
- Dianne Carter
- Beatrice Cingtho

The Committee issues a special vote of thanks to those witnesses that shared their experiences of the Locata, Choice-Based Lettings Scheme:

- Angela Wegener, Eugene Martin and Jas Johal (Disablement Association Hillingdon),
- Roger Elliot (Hillingdon Wheel Chair Users Forum / Disabled Tenants),
- Abey Ismail (Hillingdon Race Equality Council),
- Tracey Barnes (Hillingdon Aids Response Trust),
- Dimple Patel and Hemal Vaid (Social Services, Asylum Team).

And those witnesses that responded by e-mail questionnaire

- Lynn Francis (Age Concern Hillingdon)
- Madeline King (Hillingdon MIND)
- Interim Manager (Social Services Department)
- Service Manager (Citizen's Advice Bureaux)

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Major Topic Review – Choice-Based Lettings – First Report 21st October 2004

Choice-Based Lettings Service – Hillingdon London Borough Council – Audit Commission Inspection Report (June 2004)

Evidence Gathering on Choice-Based Lettings Bidding Process from Witnesses - Notes of the meeting held on 8th December 2004

Major Topic Review – Choice-Based Lettings – Information on Cross Borough Bidding and computer monitoring software – 8th December 2004

Locata Scheme Users Guide

Decision Sheets of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated:

6th January 2004

11th March 2004

5th April 2004

28th July 2004

21st October 2004

8th December 2004

20th January 2005

Choice-based lettings service

Hillingdon London Borough Council

[< Previous Section](#)[Summary](#)[Next Section >](#)[Appendices](#)[Back to Contents](#)

Report[Context](#)[How good is the service?](#)[What are the prospects for improvement to the service?](#)**Context**[^ Back to Top](#)

14 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

15 The London Borough of Hillingdon is an outer London borough situated on the north-western edge of the capital. The population is 243,006, living within 97,000 households. Around 21 per cent of the population belong to non-white ethnic groups, with the largest being the Indian community of 23,234 [Footnote 1](#).

16 Although Hillingdon is a relatively prosperous borough, there are areas with high levels of deprivation, especially in the south of the borough, where single regeneration budget (SRB) funding in Hayes and West Drayton has resulted in investment of over £22 million.

17 Unemployment is relatively low, with 2.4 per cent of the population claiming Job Seekers' Allowance, compared to the London average of 3.5 per cent.

The council

18 The council comprises 65 councillors, representing 22 wards. No party currently has overall control. Since the election in May 2002, the Conservative Party with 31 councillors has formed the administration. The Labour party has 27 councillors and the Liberal Democrats have 7. The council has adopted a leader and cabinet model of governance.

19 The council's revenue budget for 2003/04 is £270 million, an increase of £16 million from 2002/03 [Footnote 2](#). The council agreed a local public services agreement with the Government in 2002.

20 The Audit Commission judged the council to be 'fair' in its 2002 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), but revised this to 'weak' in 2003. The reason for this revised rating was a deterioration in the council's social care service for children. The 2003 assessment noted that the council had invested in its capacity and arrangements to deliver improvements.

21 The council's 2003 community plan agreed by the local strategic partnership shows the following objectives:

- a borough of learning and culture;
- a safer borough;
- a cleaner and more pleasant borough;
- a borough with improving health, housing and social care;
- an economically prosperous borough; and
- a borough where opportunities are open to all.

22 Following this agreement, the 'Leader's statement' 2003 has added a further objective:

- a borough with improved provision for youth and elderly.

Housing in Hillingdon

23 Over 76 per cent of homes in the borough are owner-occupied. Around 11 per cent of homes are rented from the council, 5 per cent are rented from registered social landlords (RSLs) and 8 per cent are privately rented. The average house price of £212,587 is below the London average of £260,658 [Footnote 3](#).

24 The council has a housing stock of 11,420 rented homes, plus 2,500 leasehold properties. There is one tenant management organisation (TMO), the Rabbs Mill Co-operative, which manages 78 homes.

25 In January 2004 there were 6,734 people on Hillingdon's housing register, of which 2,308 were homelessness cases. There were a further 1,865 tenants on the transfer list.

26 In 2002/03 there were 243 'low demand' homes within the borough, but this was reduced to zero following bedsit conversion works.

27 The council restructured its rents, in line with government requirements, in 2001. The average council rent for 2003/04 is £74.33 per week.

28 The council set up an arms length management organisation (ALMO) called 'Hillingdon Homes' to manage its housing stock in May 2003.

29 Hillingdon's latest housing strategy and business plan have both been assessed as 'fit for purpose' by the Government office. The service also has 'Investors in people' (IIP) accreditation.

30 Although the Audit Commission judged the council to be 'weak' in 2003, the housing service was given a score of three out of a possible four. The Commission's 2003 'scorecard noted' that:

Housing services, which are good... have been maintained at last year's level.

31 Audit Commission inspections have made the following assessments of Hillingdon's housing services:

- **Housing Needs** (report published November 2002). A 'fair' one-star service with promising prospects for improvement;
- **Repairs and Maintenance** (report published November 2002). A 'good' two-star

- service with uncertain prospects for improvement;
- **Housing management, elderly services, caretaking** (report published July 2003). A 'good' two-star service with promising prospects for improvement; and
- **'Hillingdon Homes' ALMO** (inspected November 2003 – report due to be published in April 2004). A 'good' two-star service with promising prospects for improvement.

Background to choice-based lettings and the service inspection

32 The Government's housing green paper [Footnote 4](#), published in April 2000, set a priority of offering more choice to applicants who apply for council or RSL rented housing. This followed the development of choice-based lettings schemes in the Netherlands over the preceding ten years and in particular the model operating in Delft. Three 'pre-pilot' schemes began operating in England and Wales in 2000 [Footnote 5](#).

33 Following the green paper, the Government made £13 million available to fund 27 pilot schemes throughout England, to test different methods of providing choice in the lettings process. The pilots ran from April 2001 to March 2003, although all the schemes continued to operate after the pilot stage, without government funding - one scheme is now about to close [Footnote 6](#).

34 The West London choice-based lettings scheme was one of the 27 pilot schemes funded by the ODPM. The scheme involves eight West London partners: the London boroughs of Hillingdon, Ealing, Harrow, Brent and Hounslow, together with Paddington Churches Housing Association, Ealing Family Housing Association and Paradigm Housing Group.

35 A company called 'Locata' was formed by the partners to administer the scheme, which went live to applicants in April 2002. Hillingdon's membership fee for Locata was £80,000 in 2002/03 and £107,000 in 2003/04. The fee for 2004/05 is projected to be £103,000.

36 The Locata choice-based scheme is now the main route for letting council homes in Hillingdon, although some properties are allocated outside the scheme, for example cases where there is an urgent need to move due to violence or harassment.

37 Our inspection focused on the delivery of the choice-based scheme to Hillingdon's housing applicants, but also considered the scheme's role within the council's allocation policy and within the wider context of housing supply and demand in the borough. We also looked at the administration of the scheme provided by Locata.

How good is the service?

[^ Back to Top](#)

Are the aims clear and challenging?

38 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.

39 Aims need to be challenging, address local needs and support national objectives. This requires the council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.

Supporting national objectives

40 The Government's housing green paper [Footnote 7](#) set a priority of offering more choice to applicants.

Most public-sector tenants have been denied choice, offered housing on a take-it-or-leave-it basis and charged rents that are not comparable for comparable homes. The most disadvantaged have often been concentrated in the poorest housing. [Footnote 8](#)

41 The green paper set out the Government's proposals for offering choice to new applicants and existing tenants in the allocation process. These proposals included [Footnote 9](#):

- choice should be free, as wide as possible and well-informed;
- there should be simple and accessible systems for applicants;
- there should also be choice for homeless people, although this may have to be 'more limited... in certain circumstances';
- systems should be 'sensitive to local needs', although local lettings policies, which restrict individual choice, 'need to be well justified'; and
- information on the outcome of any advertising system (i.e. how many people applied and who was successful) would enable applicants to make more informed decisions and judge their own chances of success.

42 The Government has set targets that 25 per cent of local authorities will have choice-based systems by 2005, and that all authorities will have choice-based systems by 2010.

43 The 2002 Homelessness Act, which took effect in January 2003, requires local authorities, in their allocation schemes, to:

... include a statement of the authority's policy on offering people... a choice of accommodation; or, the opportunity to express preferences about the housing accommodation to be allocated to them. [Footnote 10](#)

44 We found that Hillingdon responded quickly and comprehensively to these national objectives. In December 2000 the council agreed to revise its allocation rules and to make a bid to the (then) DETR for pilot status and funding to examine the potential for a West London choice-based lettings system. This bid was successful and led to the present 'Locata' scheme.

45 The scheme addresses the principles of the Government's proposals (summarised above) and has been clearly communicated to service users. The scheme also contributes to the council's corporate aims, including the community plan objective of: A borough where opportunities are open to all people.

46 The council's allocation policy includes details of its approach to offering choice, as required by the 2002 Homelessness Act.

47 The housing strategy 2003 states the council's strategic housing objectives under each of the six corporate objectives in the 2003 community plan (listed above). Under 'A borough where opportunities are open to all' the housing objectives are:

- focus resources and activity on our most disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods and excluded groups;
- work to reduce homelessness, increase the availability of suitable housing and reduce the use of non-self-contained temporary accommodation; and
- ensure equality of opportunity for all our service users.

48 The housing services performance plan 2003 – 2006 includes the following objectives which most closely relate to the allocations service:

- offer people choice across tenure in the borough;
- modernise our services to ensure access for people who need them;

- ensure equality of opportunity for all our service users; and
- increase the capacity of service users to participate and be involved in the planning and delivery of services.

49 In our view these are clear and challenging higher-level aims. The choice-based scheme has a very direct role in meeting each of these objectives; how well it does so is discussed in the next section of this report ('Does the service meet the aims').

50 There is an annual action plan for the allocations service, including Locata. The 2004/05 action plan contains a number of detailed activities under the following broad headings:

- implementation of policy/review of scheme - including an evaluation of the choice-based scheme by January 2004, to provide information for overview and scrutiny committee and Cabinet;
- IT requirements - including amendments to systems to deliver improvements;
- security - a review of processes with regard to security of information;
- managing demand/customer care - including targeting vulnerable people who require assistance with bidding;
- training/awareness - including training for social services and other agencies; and
- communication with clients. Including a review of information.

51 We found the allocations action plan to be clear and to contain target dates for each activity. The plan for 2004/05 was being finalised at the time of our inspection, taking account of the decision of Cabinet in February 2004 to continue the scheme.

52 There are sets of service standards for different parts of the housing service, those relevant to the allocations service are summarised and discussed in the next section of this report (see 'Does the service meet these aims?' below).

53 In summary, we consider that the establishment of a choice-based lettings scheme is addressing national priorities and local aims and objectives, and that the aims of the service are clear and challenging.

Does the service meet these aims?

54 Having considered the aims that the council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the council is meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets, and the council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it set out to do.

55 Choice-based lettings represent a fundamental change in the way properties are allocated. Instead of the obligation being on the council to offer a property to an individual, this has changed so the individual is responsible for actively pursuing their own rehousing by 'bidding' for advertised properties. The following section outlines the choice-based lettings procedure that is operating in Hillingdon, to provide a context for the more detailed examination of the different parts of the process later in the report.

Summary of how the Locata choice-based lettings scheme operates

56 Hillingdon is a member of 'Locata', the West London choice-based lettings scheme, involving five councils and three housing associations. These eight partners set up the Locata company to administer the scheme from 25 April 2002.

57 A common allocations policy was agreed between the partners and implemented for all applicants in 2002, but with some discretion for partners to meet local requirements.

58 The government-funded pilot was introduced on a phased basis. Initially, in April 2002, Hillingdon only included applicants for one-bedroom properties. This was extended to include all applicants on the housing register in November 2002.

59 People seeking rehousing, apply to their local council in the usual way. Hillingdon operates a register of people who want to be considered for rehousing into council or RSL accommodation. Applications are assessed and put into one of four bands (A-D) which reflect the level of priority for rehousing.

60 All people on the housing registers of the eight partner organisations, including homeless people and transfer applicants, are automatically members of Locata and are given a Locata identification number (LIN).

61 Each fortnight, on a Friday, Locata publishes a freesheet called 'Locata Home' which advertises all the properties available from the eight partners. The list also includes properties from other RSLs which the councils have rights to nominate applicants to. The information in the freesheet is also published on the Locata website.

62 A small number of properties are held back and allocated outside the Locata system for management reasons, such as urgent transfers for victims of violence or harassment.

63 Following publication of the list of properties on Friday, applicants have until 2.00 p.m. the following Wednesday to 'bid' for up to three properties they are interested in. Applicants can generally only bid for properties advertised by their own council, but ten per cent of each council's properties are available for cross-borough bids.

64 Some properties are designated specifically for either transfer applicants or 'homeseekers', and some are restricted to people over a certain age (i.e. sheltered housing) or with mobility problems.

65 Bids can be made by post, telephone, text message, or through the Locata website. Once the bidding closes, Locata produces a list of applicants for each property, broken down by the needs banding and the date of registration for rehousing.

66 The landlord of each property then contacts the person in the highest band who has been waiting the longest, to invite them to view the property. Some landlords hold multiple viewings, with the property allocated to the highest ranked person who wishes to accept the offer.

67 One of the key principles of the choice-based system is that people are not generally penalised for refusing an offer – the property is simply offered to the next highest bidder, and the first applicant can bid again for properties the following fortnight. However, there is provision in the scheme for landlords to take 'measures' [Footnote 11](#) against people who refuse several properties – this is discussed later in this report (see 'Refusals').

68 In 2003, Hillingdon placed 640 advertisements for properties through Locata and 581 properties were let. Fifty-six were re-advertisements of properties that had not been let, and three properties were withdrawn after being advertised.

69 Between 1 April 2003 and 27 January 2004 there were 2,562 properties let through the overall West London choice-based lettings scheme, of which 502 (19 per cent) were let to Hillingdon applicants and 539 (21 per cent) were Hillingdon properties.

Structure of the service

70 The council's housing needs service has a housing assessment team of five staff who register new housing applications and answer enquiries (plus a team manager). There is also a customer services team of seven staff which was recently established with a primary objective of helping customers to access the choice-based scheme. Both teams are based at the Civic Centre in Uxbridge.

71 Housing management staff from Hillingdon Homes deal with void properties, arrange for property viewings and sign-up new tenants.

Access, customer care and service standards

72 Using choice-based lettings is a very different method of letting properties to the traditional approach taken by social landlords. The fundamental difference is that the applicant must actively find out what properties are available and apply, or 'bid', for them. Applicants who do not bid, even those in the highest need, will not be invited to view properties or be made any offers. It is therefore crucial that all applicants understand how the system works, have easy access to it, and are offered help if necessary.

73 There are two groups of people who are likely to be most at risk of losing out under a change to a choice-based scheme. Firstly, there are those who had tended to receive priority under the traditional 'points based' lettings schemes such as homeless people, those who are vulnerable or have a high medical priority, or who live in the poorest housing conditions. Secondly, there are those who do not understand or do not for some other reason feel able to use access the bidding process. This is again likely to include vulnerable people, as well as people who are illiterate or do not have information in their own language. People from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are likely to be over-represented in both these groups.

74 In this section of the report we look at the general issues around access to the scheme. How the scheme addresses the specific needs of vulnerable people, hard-to-reach groups and BME communities is discussed later in the report (see 'Diversity, hard-to-reach groups and support for vulnerable applicants').

Applying to the housing register

75 Applicants who wish to bid for properties through Locata must first be on Hillingdon's housing register of people who want to move into council or RSL accommodation.

76 The register includes homeless applicants and existing tenants seeking transfers. Applicants must be over 16 and there is a six-month residence requirement for new applicants, although legislation prevents this from being applied to homelessness cases.

77 At the time of our inspection the council had two separate application forms, a 'Transfer request form' and a 'Housing services form' for non-transfer applicants. These forms were developed over two years ago and precede the choice-based scheme. Therefore they do not mention Locata or refer applicants to the Locata scheme user guide – although a separate 'Housing register leaflet' handed out with the forms explains the banding system and applicants do receive a Locata user guide.

78 In February 2004 the council produced a draft of a single 'housing register application' form to replace the previous two forms. Although this form was not yet in use, we found it to be generally clearly written and easy to read. The form includes the Locata logo and refers applicants to the Locata user guide. It has a tick-box list of other housing options that people may wish to consider, however not all the options available, such as moving into private rented housing, are listed.

79 The housing register application forms are available from the housing assessment team which is based within the housing service at the Civic Centre in Uxbridge. The forms are also available from the district housing offices and the council's one-stop-shop. They are available by post on request.

80 The new application form will also be available on the Internet. The West London partnership is planning to pilot a common application form that can be completed on-line, and it is likely that Hillingdon's draft form will be adopted for this pilot.

81 The existing and draft forms contain useful checklists to enable staff to address

special needs, with questions such as 'Do you prefer to be helped by someone of your own sex?' and 'Does anyone need a signer?' A paragraph offering assistance is translated into eight community languages.

82 The housing assessment team deal with the registration of new applicants. Housing assessment team managers carry out a ten per cent quality check of all new registrations.

83 People with rehousing enquiries, including those who need help with filling in their housing register application form, or who wish to discuss their banding or the Locata scheme, can telephone or visit the housing service at the Civic Centre. They can also contact their local housing office, where Hillingdon Homes' staff can provide information, although more complex queries will be referred on to the council's staff at the Civic Centre.

84 The housing assessment and customer services teams will see people without an appointment between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. weekdays and are available by telephone during the same hours. Each service can also be contacted by e-mail.

85 There is currently a single reception desk at the Civic Centre for all visitors, including members of the public with housing enquiries. However, a separate housing reception desk is due to open in March 2004.

86 All elderly applicants who are registered for sheltered housing are visited at home to assess their ability to live independently and any other support needs.

Medical assessments

87 The banding system used by the choice-based scheme (as with traditional schemes) prioritises people whose housing is affecting their health.

88 The housing register application forms ask whether the health of the applicant or anyone they live with is affected by their housing. There are a number of more detailed questions to gather information. This information is then assessed by the council's medical adviser. We found the questions on the forms to be clear and comprehensive.

89 The medical adviser used by Hillingdon since summer 2003 is a general practitioner who also assesses cases for other London boroughs, including four of the five Locata boroughs. This has the benefit of providing some consistency of assessments across the scheme.

90 The medical adviser assesses cases against the four priority bands. If necessary, the adviser may contact an applicant's doctor, but written permission has to be given for this on the application form.

91 Until summer 2003 there was a large backlog of medical assessments and benchmarking found that Hillingdon's assessments were not in line with those of the other Locata boroughs. The backlog has now been removed, although there are cases awaiting responses from applicants' own doctors. Hillingdon's assessments are also now in line with those of the other boroughs. We found the medical assessment procedures to be clear and efficient.

92 One of the other Locata boroughs has an occupational therapist based within the housing service, which provides speedier and more consistent assessments, by working regularly with the banding definitions. This may be an option which Hillingdon wishes to explore.

Service standards

93 There are published service standards for seven different areas of the housing service. These are currently set out in a series of leaflets produced in 2002, although there are revised drafts of the leaflets to take account of recent changes. The standards in the revised drafts were developed by an independent consultant working with groups of applicants awaiting rehousing.

94 All of the service standards leaflets contain sections on personal information and

confidentiality, the right to equal treatment, the right to complain, and sources of further information.

95 Five of the leaflets contain paragraphs giving information in eight community languages, however, the 'Bed and breakfast accommodation' and 'Temporary housing' leaflets do not. Also, there is no English translation of the paragraph and the eight languages are not named in English – making it difficult for staff to know what the paragraph says and what languages it is available in. The revised drafts that we saw did not address these weaknesses.

96 We also found that none of the current leaflets make reference to Locata or to the choice-based scheme. The draft leaflets on homelessness and bed and breakfast do refer to Locata, but the other drafts do not – including the draft leaflet entitled 'Rehousing by the council and registered social landlords (housing assessment)'.

97 We found other inconsistencies between the service standards leaflets. For example, the housing advice leaflet has a service standard of aiming to complete enquiries and make a homelessness decision within 30 days. However, the homelessness leaflet does not mention this. These inconsistencies need to be addressed in the revisions that are underway.

98 Some standards apply across the housing service, such as aiming to reply to written enquiries within seven working days, answering telephone calls within three rings and providing an interpreter or signer if needed. However, these are not uniformly included in the current service standards leaflets or in the draft revisions.

99 Performance over the last year on replying to written correspondence was under six days, against the seven day target.

100 Telephone answering is measured by mystery shopping. An exercise carried out on the customer care team during November and December 2003 awarded scores for the speed and quality of the greeting. A score of 70 per cent or more was given in eight out of ten cases. We did not receive data to show how this compared with other services, or with the performance over time within housing needs. Nevertheless, we consider that this is an area that should be improved.

101 All staff have been given targets in relation to good practice in customer care and the council's 'Customer care promise'.

102 Examples of service-specific standards include:

Homelessness service

- aim to interview you within 15 minutes of your arrival for your interview; and
- conduct your interview in confidence in a safe environment.

Rehousing service (housing assessment)

- aim to see all visitors within 15 minutes; and
- come to a decision about housing register applications within three weeks, or six weeks where third-party reports (such as medical reports) are submitted.

Housing advice

- if homeless, aim to complete enquiries and decide whether the council has a duty to provide accommodation within 30 days; and
- carry out regular surveys to give you a chance to make your views about the service known.

103 As part of Hillingdon's performance management system, each member of staff

has a 'professional and development action plan' (PADA). The PADAs for housing staff contain targets for dealing with telephone calls promptly, responding to letters and enquiries within given timescales, completing housing assessments within given timescales and collecting information on ethnicity.

104 We found that the housing needs staff that we spoke to generally had a clear understanding of the service standards they work to.

105 We found that the 15 minute target was being met in the vast majority of cases. Names are logged in a book with the time of arrival and time seen; this information is monitored by the performance and review team leader.

106 The council is generally meeting target times for housing assessments. Applications should be assessed and entered on the housing register within 21 days of being received. Where a case involves medical factors then the time scale is extended to 42 days to allow for the medical assessment to take place. Performance is monitored weekly and the service is achieving 100 per cent of non-medical registrations within 21 days. We consider that this target should be reviewed as it does not appear to be sufficiently challenging.

107 Where cases involve medical issues, performance has been more variable. Performance has improved and the target had been met for the ten weeks prior to the inspection. Overall, the target has been met in 27 weeks out of the preceding 42 weeks. Delays are most commonly due to awaiting third party medical reports (see also 'Medical assessments' above).

108 Officers and councillors expressed concerns about the ability of people to access the scheme if they are vulnerable, or speak little English, or have literacy problems. We found that the council recognises the importance of this issue and has taken steps to address it – although it also recognises that there is more to be done in this area.

109 To address this issue, the council has recently established a customer services team, with a primary objective of helping customers to access the Locata scheme. The team of seven (including two posts yet to be filled) is based at the Civic Centre and provides help to customers on both a pro-active and reactive basis (see 'Diversity, hard-to-reach groups and support for vulnerable applicants' below).

110 We visited the reception area, sat in on interviews and spoke to members of staff in the housing assessment team and the customer services team. We found the staff of both teams to be well-informed and efficient. The support offered by the customer service team is evidenced by approximately 12 per cent of bids from Hillingdon being made by the team on behalf of applicants – a higher ratio than is found in the other boroughs.

111 The service users in our focus group were generally positive about the choice-based scheme overall and the information, advice and support available.

112 We also held a focus group of 11 frontline council staff. Their view was that there is more transparency in the choice-based scheme for customers and the operation of the scheme is clearer. Overall, they considered that the scheme works well and is positively received by new applicants, although there are areas where further improvements could be made, such as providing more detailed information on advertised properties.

113 The service has carried out a range of activities to measure customer satisfaction. Hillingdon is part of a syndicate of local authorities that use a 'mystery shopping' service. The service also uses exit interviews, customer telephone interviews and customer focus groups. Recent results from these exercises show that:

- 83 per cent of customers found housing officers helpful and polite;
- 80 per cent found opening hours convenient;

- 70 per cent of visitors were satisfied with how quickly they were seen; and
- staff in many cases do not give their name when answering the phone.

Priority bands

114 The housing assessment team will help people to fill in the forms if asked to do so. The team puts each application into one of the four priority bands (A-D) agreed by the partners. Below is a summary of the bands.

115 **Band A: (Emergency/top priority)**

- life-threatening medical condition;
- homeless, in priority need and in temporary accommodation (TA) that is coming to an end or is unsuitable, and further suitable TA is not available;
- social services recommendation for fostering or adoption;
- council or RSL tenants whose lives are threatened by violence if they remain in the home;
- ex-service tenants who the council has a contractual obligation to rehouse;
- tenants who need to move (imminently) due to demolition or redevelopment;
- tenant who need to move to a property with adaptations, and tenants with adaptations who no longer need an adapted property;
- tenants with two or more bedrooms who are willing to move to a one-bedroom home or to give up two bedrooms; and
- an occupier of a property subject to a compulsory purchase order (CPO) and/or the council has a statutory duty to rehouse.

Band B: (Urgent need to move)

- urgent need to move for medical or social reasons;
- council or RSL tenant with urgent need to move because of harassment or threat of violence;
- homeless people the council has accepted a duty to rehouse who are in bed and breakfast accommodation or hostels or temporarily with friends or family;
- living in insecure accommodation with a dependent child and having no bedroom and sharing facilities;
- rehousing agreed under a special quota for moving on from care or from supported housing;
- tenants willing to give up a bedroom but who will still need two or more bedrooms;
- tenants who need to be moved for demolition, redevelopment, statutory overcrowding or other management reasons;
- successors to council tenancies approved for a move to smaller accommodation; and
- former tenants who, at the time the tenancy was relinquished, the council undertook to rehouse.

Band C: (Identified housing need)

- a need to move for medical reasons, or because of unsatisfactory housing conditions such as overcrowding or unsanitary conditions;
- a need to move as identified in a social services care plan or agreed with social services to relieve hardship;
- elderly person moving to sheltered housing; and

- homeless people who do not qualify under bands A or B.

Band D:

- all other transfer tenants and home seekers who do not fall into priority bands A, B or C.

116 At the time of our inspection, of 8,801 live cases, 159 (two per cent) were in band A; 754 (eight per cent) in band B; 3,703 (42 per cent) in band C; and, 4,185 (48 per cent) in band D.

117 The vast majority (82 per cent) of band A cases are transfer applicants who are under-occupying. Homeless people accounted for 51 per cent of band B and 43 per cent of band C cases, while 77 per cent of band D were general housing register cases.

Complaints, appeals and reviews

118 We found that the corporate complaints procedure was clear and well advertised. For example, all the service standards leaflets make reference to it. We found that complaints are monitored by the strategy team and issues arising are fed back to the housing management team to aid service improvement.

119 The largest percentage of formal rehousing and allocations complaints are from applicants who are not happy about their priority banding. A total of 75 formal complaints were received concerning the housing register and allocations during the two years January 2002 – January 2004. Of these, four were upheld. From the start of the Locata scheme in April 2003 until January 2004 there were 39 complaints, none of which were upheld – 17 of these complaints were about banding. A number of enquiries about banding and allocations are however resolved before reaching the stage of a formal complaint.

120 We found that some information on appeals and reviews of decisions was confusing. There is a service standards leaflet entitled 'Homelessness and rehousing: appeals and complaints'. This contains an explanation of the procedures following an appeal or a request for a decision to be reviewed. It does not, however, explain the circumstances in which an appeal can be made or a review requested.

121 For example, if an applicant is removed from the housing register they have a legal right to be notified and advised of the right to request a review of the decision [Footnote 12](#). This is not mentioned in the 'appeals and complaints' leaflet or in the 're-housing by the council' leaflet, or in the draft revisions to these leaflets.

Locata information and the bidding process

122 All people on the housing registers of the eight partners are given a Locata identification number (LIN) and a copy of the Locata 'scheme user guide', which is also available from the Civic Centre and district housing offices.

123 The user guide is updated regularly - most recently in December 2003. It contains a five-stage guide to how the scheme works, covering membership, registration, choosing and bidding, offers, and feedback. The guide also includes an explanation of the four priority bands and a list of places where the fortnightly 'Locata Home' magazine can be obtained.

124 We found the scheme user guide to be generally clear and comprehensive. It also contains two paragraphs in six community languages, although the type size of one of these sections is very small and difficult to read. The full guide is, however, available in translation in 16 community languages from the council's housing service or from the Locata website.

125 The 'Locata Home' magazine is published fortnightly on a Friday, with around 25,000 copies distributed throughout West London free of charge. It is available from

30 locations in Hillingdon which are listed in the scheme user guide and include all the borough's libraries. The magazine is posted free of charge to all out-of-borough temporary accommodation residents and to 58 other vulnerable customers. Other applicants can receive the magazine by post for a fee of £7.50 a year. The council is currently assessing the costs and benefits of posting Locata Home to all band A and B applicants free of charge.

126 The magazine contains details of how to bid and brief details of all the properties available from each partner, plus a 'cross-borough' section. The property details include:

- a series of symbols showing: who can bid (homeseeker or transfer applicant or both); any age limits (such as '60+'), floor level, and any mobility rating (from '1' for wheelchair users, to '3' for people who can manage one or two steps);
- the name of the landlord council or RSL. This might be an RSL from outside the scheme which a council has rights to nominate to;
- the location: the street, area and borough, but not the number of the house or flat;
- the weekly rent and any service or support charges; and
- 'features', for example: 'garden, gas central heating, no pets allowed'.

127 Locata is planning to pilot the inclusion of advertisements for private rented properties in the magazine in spring 2004 through one of the partner boroughs.

128 The magazine also includes a feedback report on properties advertised in recent issues. This shows the number of bids received, the priority band of the successful applicant, whether they were a homeseeker or transferring tenant and their registration date. This provides extremely useful feedback for future applicants on their chances of success when bidding for properties of particular sizes in particular areas.

129 We identified a weakness with the availability of the magazine in translation. A paragraph on the back page in six languages states that '...you can request a translated version from your housing department.' In fact it is the user guide that is available in translation and not the fortnightly magazine. This is not made clear.

130 Some changes have been made to the magazine since it was launched to improve the layout, to give better feedback on bids and to highlight sheltered properties. However, there are still a number of people bidding for properties for which they are not eligible. Recent reviews of the scheme by Locata and by Hillingdon have identified a number of areas for improvement within the magazine which should help to improve the clarity of information and the appropriateness of bids.

131 Users attending focus groups that took place during the Locata review, and in our own focus group of applicants, suggested improving adverts by use of photographs, providing room sizes, providing all or part of the magazine in large print, and grouping all sheltered properties together. An interest was also expressed in providing information about local facilities such as schools, shops and local transport.

132 These suggestions have been discussed by the Locata partners and it has been agreed to explore their introduction. We were shown a draft of a new design, including photographs, which was due to be discussed at the next meeting of the West London Allocations and Lettings Group. Other improvements have been built into Hillingdon and Locata's action plans.

133 Each fortnight's properties are also advertised on the Locata website and this is becoming an increasingly popular way of searching for properties and bidding. In January the number of bids via the website exceeded telephone bids for the first time. Computers in Hillingdon's libraries can be used to access the website and there are

plans to install two terminals for public use in the new housing reception area at the Civic Centre.

134 There is a web-link from Hillingdon council's website to Locata's. We found the Locata website generally useful and easy to use, with a good explanation of how the scheme works and feedback on allocated properties. Internet access to Locata was welcomed by people attending our users focus group, and was felt to be particularly useful for disabled people.

135 Each applicant can bid for up to three properties each week. The bids must be received by 2.00 p.m. on the Wednesday following publication of the magazine.

136 Telephone bids are made using an automated 'press button' process. Postal bids are made on free tick-box coupons, similar to lottery tickets. Bids can also be made by text message from a mobile phone or via the website (www.locata.org).

137 An advantage of internet bidding is that it gives an indication of how many other people have bid for that property electronically, although this will not include those bidding by post. Bidders without access to the internet can find out how many people are bidding electronically by contacting the customer services team at any time.

138 We carried out a telephone survey of representatives of all the tenants and residents associations (TRAs) in the borough. Representatives said that they and other tenants were generally satisfied with the information provided concerning Locata and with the ease of the bidding process.

139 Feedback from some tenants attending our focus group was that there is some confusion about the scheme and that older people are having more difficulty in bidding by phone because they do not like the automated call centre approach.

140 We also carried out three postal surveys. These were of people on the housing register (50 respondents), applicants who had made successful bids (100 respondents), and applicants who had bid unsuccessfully (60 respondents). These showed mixed levels of satisfaction, including:

People on the housing register

- 16 per cent of people on the register said they were not aware what priority band they were in;
- 70 per cent had made bids for properties; and
- 87 per cent of those who had bid found the process easy; 13 per cent did not.

Successful applicants

- 75 per cent thought there was sufficient information in the adverts, 18 per cent thought there was not;
- 55 per cent had made bids by phone, 26 per cent through the internet, 21 per cent by post and nine per cent by text message;
- 82 per cent found the scheme easy to understand; and
- 69 per cent were very or fairly satisfied with the overall allocations service, 12 per cent were very or fairly dissatisfied.

Unsuccessful applicants

- 75 per cent thought there was sufficient information in the adverts, 23 per cent thought there was not;
- 62 per cent found the scheme easy to understand and 90 per cent found it easy to bid for properties; and
- 27 per cent were very or fairly satisfied with the overall allocations service, 50

per cent were very or fairly dissatisfied.

141 A meeting of sheltered housing stakeholders held in February 2003 put forward the view that the Locata system was 'not user friendly' for older people and that they were not always able to understand the procedures. The council responded by focusing the work of the customer services team on improving access for a range of customers, in particular vulnerable and older people.

142 Two customer satisfaction surveys have been carried out by Locata, in 2002 and 2003. These show that satisfaction levels with Locata are increasing and results around accessing the scheme are generally high.

143 Hillingdon also undertakes its own customer surveys. It carried out a random survey of 109 customers on the housing register in September 2003. This showed some positive results in terms of understanding and accessibility, but also indicated that there is a significant minority who do not have a good awareness of Locata. The service now uses a regular 'Locata registration questionnaire' to monitor trends in satisfaction.

144 In addition, the council carried out a survey of tenants who had been successfully re-housed and the same number of active bidders not yet re-housed in January 2004. There appear to be good levels of satisfaction with the system by those who are using it, i.e. active bidders. The service has therefore focused on contacting high priority non-bidders to help and support them to access the scheme if required.

Cross-borough bidding

145 Each borough has agreed to advertise a minimum of ten per cent of its properties as available for cross-borough bids. Boroughs tend to select their less popular properties for cross-borough availability. Some editions of the magazine will have more properties from a particular borough than others, but need to balance out over the year. Statistics are reported back through the West London Allocations and Lettings Group and any shortfalls are then rectified.

146 In addition to the ten per cent minimum, Hillingdon places a number of voluntary adverts, in particular for hard-to-let sheltered accommodation. In 2003 Hillingdon advertised 81 properties for cross-borough bids.

Viewings and lettings

147 When the bidding closes on a Wednesday, Locata compiles a list of the bidders for each property in order of banding and registration date within each band. Locata then forwards this information to the partners the same day. We found this process to be effective and efficient.

148 Some lettings, particularly in new RSL developments, are subject to 'lettings plans'. All new RSL developments have had to have lettings plans since 2001, with the primary aim of ensuring that new developments are sustainable. The plans generally include targets designed to ensure mixed and sustainable communities, for example a percentage of working people, child density, vulnerability and support, and ethnic mix. These schemes are advertised in the usual way, bidders are selected from the shortlist in descending order, but in line with the lettings plan. The council told us that in practice, RSLs have accepted minor deviations from lettings plans to allow the shortlist of bidders to be followed in strict order.

149 As there are far fewer people in band A than in the other bands, it is common for properties to be viewed by and let to people in bands B and C. Of 23 recent Hillingdon lettings [Footnote 13](#), only three went to band A applicants, 12 went to band B, eight to band C and none to band D. Seven of the 23 were transfer applicants and 16 were homeseekers. The number of bids per property ranged from seven (let to an applicant in band C) to 356 (let to an applicant in band A).

150 This bidding information is available to applicants through the feedback page of Locata Home. We found this to be a very useful method of communicating to applicants the prospects of a successful bid and the realities of supply and demand for social housing in the borough. Hillingdon is considering developing this feedback to provide applicants with more detailed information on the prospects of their particular requirements being met. We would support this and other opportunities for developing the feedback by, for example, including statistics for applicants on all properties let over the past year.

151 Before people are invited to view properties, the council carries out a verification check to ensure that they meet any other requirements. For example, people with current rent arrears are not generally transferred under Hillingdon's allocations policy.

152 If, following the close of bidding, applicants contact the council or Hillingdon Homes, they can be told whether they are within the 'top ten' bidders, but not their specific position, as their application would not yet have been verified. This was agreed at a voids and allocations meeting in 2003, following differing practices between the two services. The council assured us that this approach is consistently applied, but we were told by applicants and staff that council staff are still on occasion giving out exact rankings.

153 Until January 2004 only the top bidder was invited to view each of Hillingdon's properties and viewings were usually unaccompanied, although staff will accompany applicants on request or where vulnerability may be an issue. Since the beginning of January the council has piloted multiple viewings in the Uxbridge housing area. Under the terms of the pilot, applicants receive at least 48 hours notice of the viewing. A maximum of five applicants attend any one viewing, accompanied by a housing officer. Applicants are given 24 hours in which to decide whether to accept the offer. The highest person on the list who wishes to accept is then granted the tenancy.

154 We shadowed two multiple viewings and found that the viewing procedures were followed and the estate officers were helpful.

155 Where possible, allocations officers seek to verify applicants before the multiple viewings take place. However, failure to verify will not prevent an applicant from viewing a property during the multiple viewings pilot, to ensure the process is not delayed. An analysis of the pilot will take place at the end of March 2004 and will include voids performance, refusal rates and customer survey feedback. A decision will then be made on whether to introduce multiple viewings in other areas of the borough.

156 The empty property management procedures followed by Hillingdon Homes contain a detailed checklist to follow at the time of letting. This includes checking any translation or interpreting needs, explaining rights and responsibilities under the tenancy agreement, details of how to pay rent, completion and verification of housing benefit claims, issuing gas safety certificates, and advising the tenant that an estate manager will visit in four to six weeks.

Refusals

157 The refusal rate fell from 33.4 per cent in the nine months prior to the Locata scheme, to 31.2 per cent in the nine months after its introduction. We consider these to be relatively high rates and to show a surprisingly small reduction, given that applicants are now choosing which properties to bid for.

158 If an offer is refused, Hillingdon Homes' allocations officers are required to record a code for the reason for refusal for monitoring purposes. We found that, although there was some analysis by Hillingdon Homes early in 2003/04, there has not yet been systematic analysis of the reasons for refusal, or attempts to collect more detailed information by, for example, surveying applicants who have refused offers. The refusal information that is collected has also not been passed on to or analysed by the

council's housing needs staff. However, a draft monitoring agreement has recently been drawn up between the council and Hillingdon Homes under which the reasons for refusal will be reported.

159 The general principle of the choice-based scheme is that applicants are free to choose, with no penalty for refusing an offer, but the scheme does make provision for bidders to be penalised in limited circumstances. If someone to whom the council owes a rehousing duty refuses several suitable offers there is provision for them to be made a 'direct' final offer which the council will regard as discharging its legal duty.

160 The Locata scheme guide and website state that:

You do not automatically get penalised for refusing properties you have chosen, although measures might be taken if you refuse several properties, especially if you are in a high 'priority band' and need to move urgently.

161 However, the 'frequently asked questions' section of the website states that you will not be penalised, although checks will be made. This information needs to be clarified for applicants.

Void turnaround times

162 Choice-based schemes impact upon the speed of the reletting process at various stages. The need to produce advertisements and allow time for bids can lengthen the process, as can the principle of allowing people to refuse offers without generally being penalised. On the other hand, the fact that people have 'chosen' a property should limit the number of refusals and withdrawn offers, and multiple viewings should also speed up the process.

163 Hillingdon's conclusion after the first 21 months of offering choice for one-bedroom properties and 14 months of the full scheme is that, overall, the introduction of the choice-based scheme has not affected void-turnaround times.

164 In 2003 the council noticed a deterioration in void turnaround performance.

Turnaround times stood at 24 calendar days in the nine months prior to the Locata scheme in April 2002. In 2002/03 turnaround was 29 days. In the month of April 2003 there was a turnaround of 48 days and in May 2003, 44 days. Hillingdon's local performance target for 2003/04 is 32 days.

165 The council commissioned a report from Hillingdon Homes to establish the reasons for this and the impact of the Locata scheme. The delays were found to be due to the following factors:

- letting of a number of sheltered properties which had been vacant for some time (which had the perverse effect of worsening the turnaround figures [Footnote 14](#));
- delays in key stages of void management;
- the nature of works included in the refurbishment process; and
- poor performance of the repairs contractor for Hayes and Harlington area.

166 An improvement plan was put in place and action was taken, including a change of contractor. Performance has since improved to 32 days in January 2004 and 31 days in February 2004.

167 Since January 2003, Hillingdon has had a procedure to enforce the contractual four-weeks notice period required of vacating tenants. There was publicity about this change of practice. The report analysing void turnaround times found that further staff training and effective enforcement of this procedure were required and a number of steps were taken in summer 2003 to address this. A sample audit was undertaken at each area office in January 2004 to ensure that the empty property procedure was being fully implemented, including enforcement of the four week notice period.

168 One area of the Locata process which could deliver improvements in void turnaround would be moving from fortnightly to weekly advertising of properties. This would incur extra costs for the Locata partners, mainly for advertising and printing, although this should be offset by reduced rent loss as the speed of lettings should improve, particularly where properties just miss the fortnightly deadline. We found managers and staff in Hillingdon open to the possibility of a weekly scheme, but this would need further research and agreement with the other partners.

RSL lettings

169 Initially RSLs had concerns about Locata increasing their reletting times, but these have not been realised. There is a target that, once the council is notified of an empty RSL home, the property should always be advertised in the next issue of the magazine. This target is being met.

170 There is also a target for the council to nominate to RSL voids within five days of the Locata shortlist of successful bidders being published. This target is written into the PADA of the council's nominations officer. Performance on this is monitored. Between October 2003 and January 2004 three of the 34 nominations were outside the five-day target, with an average performance of three days.

171 Some RSLs conduct multiple viewings, but most have single viewings.

172 A new RSL development of 22 homes at Grand Union was about to be completed at the time of our inspection. As a new innovation, this was to be advertised in Locata magazine with an 'estate agent style' advert for the whole scheme, with a photograph and general information about the locality, inviting bids by bedroom-category for a number of properties.

173 Reciprocal lettings with RSLs still take place. RSLs who are members of Locata can advertise properties in Locata Home and reserve them for their own tenants. RSLs who are not members will let properties outside of Locata. Where the RSL needs to reciprocate, they will let the council nominate to a property that would otherwise have been let to their own tenant.

Confidentiality

174 We asked how the council is dealing with confidentiality issues arising from the greater transparency of lettings. With a limited number of properties let and advertised each fortnight (often around 15) and the details (other than house number) printed in the adverts and on the feedback page, it may be possible for people who are moved due to, for example, threats of violence, to be located. This will be a higher concern if photographs of properties are to be included. In response to this query, the council told us that it will be reviewing the possibility of not reporting the letting of properties where the new tenant has been the victim of harassment or is an offender.

Re-housing outside the choice-based scheme and prevention of homelessness

175 All allocations are now made using the choice-based scheme except for three limited circumstances. These are homeless households in band A whose temporary accommodation is time-limited and coming to an end, time limited cases in move-on accommodation, and allocations made as a result of police or social services recommendations.

176 The housing assessment team's written procedures include 'direct allocations and refusals'. The procedures outline the limited circumstances where a direct allocation outside the choice-based scheme is permitted. At the time of our inspection there had been no cases where a discharge of duty had resulted from a refusal of an offer. The council accepts that this may change in the future as private sector temporary accommodation leases come to an end, with the possibility of direct allocations arising.

177 We found that the council has developed and promotes a wide number of schemes

to offer people alternatives to social housing, or to social housing outside the borough, or moves to smaller properties.

178 The council promotes a number of options for moving out of the borough, such as the LAWN scheme, 'Homeswap', 'Homes mobility', and the 'Seaside and country homes' scheme.

179 The council operates a cash incentive scheme for people willing to give up their council tenancy and buy on the open market. It also offers advice and information on shared ownership, housing for key workers (through Keystart Housing Association) and a 'Homebuy' scheme run by a local RSL.

180 The council set up a 'housing advice and options team' (HAO) within its housing advice centre in August 2003 with a remit of the prevention of homelessness in response to the 2002 Homelessness Act.

181 The HAOs early initiatives include a 'Finders Fee' scheme for private landlords, launched in December 2003. Fees of between £800 and £1,500 are paid to private landlords who are willing to grant a tenancy for a minimum of 12 months to a homeless person, or someone about to become homeless. Homeless people can also find their own letting and tell the landlord about the scheme. The scheme is voluntary on both sides, but if accepted, the letting is regarded as a discharge of the council's homelessness duty. All properties are inspected and approved by environmental health officers prior to letting. Ten properties had been let at the time of our inspection. The costs of the scheme to the council are offset by savings in temporary accommodation costs. The scheme also helps to meet government targets on limiting the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

182 An insurance scheme for private landlords was also launched in December 2003, in association with a private insurer. This offers landlords insurance for contents and rental income and is free for the first year (funded by the council). The scheme is offered as an alternative to the 'Finders Fee' scheme. Two landlords have taken out policies so far.

183 The HAO is also looking to develop other initiatives to prevent homelessness. These are, a court advice scheme with Hillingdon Law Centre, a domestic violence prevention scheme, with the police and other agencies, and a pilot pre-eviction advice service to RSL tenants.

184 Advice to single people under 25 who are not statutorily homeless, is outsourced under contract to the Navigator advice centre, and for over-25s to the Citizens Advice Bureau. The council can also refer young people who are faced with family evictions to an independent mediation service.

Diversity, hard-to-reach groups and support for vulnerable applicants

185 A key requirement for ensuring the success and fairness of a choice-based scheme is that there should be access and support for all potential applicants. The research carried out by the ODPM into the 27 pilot schemes found that:

The weakest part of the CBL pilot activity overall was the provision of support to vulnerable households. [Footnote 15](#)

186 We found that Hillingdon has recognised this requirement and has put a number of measures in place to provide access and support for vulnerable tenants and others who might have difficulty accessing the scheme (see also the comments under 'Access, customer care and service standards' above). However, the council recognises that further improvement is still required in this area.

187 Organisationally, the council has addressed these issues by establishing the customer services team in 2003, with a primary objective of helping customers to access the scheme.

188 The team is currently assisting around 12 per cent of people who are bidding for properties. In particular, Hillingdon staff are bidding on behalf of people in BME groups, with almost 20 per cent of bids from the Asian community being made by staff on behalf of applicants.

189 The team has a work plan to support vulnerable bidders, which it has recently begun to implement. The work plan includes:

- contact all non-bidders in bands A and B to offer assistance with bidding (monthly);
- contact people in bands A, B and C who are making ineligible bids to offer assistance (monthly);
- contact all sheltered applicants who are not bidding or bidding incorrectly to offer assistance (bi-monthly); and
- contact all time-limited band A and B cases (e.g. those in temporary or move-on accommodation) from three months into their time limit, to offer assistance (starting April 2004).

190 The customer services staff carry caseloads of vulnerable people that have been referred or identified as needing assistance with bidding, and these are contacted regularly. The team also has an ongoing remit to maintain contact with voluntary groups on any issues arising from the Locata scheme, so that the groups' clients can be kept well-informed.

191 We found evidence that the council recognises the need to monitor the impact on customers of both the change in the allocations policy and the move to choice based lettings. It has carried out considerable monitoring in order to identify any trends or distortions. This has included monitoring of bids and lettings by type of applicant (homeseeker or transfer), ethnicity, household size, property size and priority banding.

192 An analysis report was produced in January 2004, which found that:

- The 2001 housing needs survey established that housing need is presently disproportionate within BME communities in Hillingdon. Twenty-three per cent of the borough's households needed rehousing, but this rose to 33 per cent amongst BME households.
- An analysis of data in January 2004 shows that 40 per cent of households on the housing register were from BME communities. The breakdown of this showed that 48 per cent of homeless applicants were from BME communities, 42 per cent of the general waiting list, and 23 per cent of existing council tenants.

193 The council then compared these demand figures with lettings to BME households in the year to date 2003/04. The results are set out in table [1](#) below.

Table 1 - BME demand and lettings April 2003 – January 2004

[Click here to view table](#)

194 This comparison shows that a lower proportion of lettings are being made to BME applicants than is shown in the profile of demand. The council has carried out further analysis to establish the reasons for this discrepancy. This analysis found that:

- It is unlikely that BME applicants are receiving a lower level of prioritisation, as analysis of priority banding by ethnicity shows that 41 per cent of households in bands A and B are BME applicants. This matches the proportion of BME applicants on the housing register.

- BME applicants appear to be bidding to the same extent as non-BME applicants as 43 per cent of the total bids received are from BME applicants.
- The profile of vacancies in terms of property size does not match the profile of BME demand. Generally speaking, there is a higher demand from BME applicants for larger properties and a lower demand for smaller properties. But the profile of vacancies shows a high number of smaller dwellings (358 one bedroom vacancies so far this year, compared to 124 three bedroom or larger vacancies out of a total number of 712 voids).
- On the current homelessness list, 38 per cent of BME households need three or more bedroom properties, compared with 21 per cent of non-BME households. Only 21 per cent of BME applicants need one bedroom properties, compared with 31 per cent of non-BME households. Similar trends are evident on the transfer and general waiting lists.

195 The report concludes that, given the higher demand for smaller dwellings by non-BME households, it is highly likely that this is the reason for a lower proportion of lettings to BME households when compared with demand.

196 We welcome the monitoring and analysis work that the council has undertaken in order to understand the profile of BME demand and supply. This is work that will need to continue to identify changes in trends. It is also important that the council considers what actions it can take to address the shortage of larger properties, for example via the development programmes of RSLs (see 'The council's broader strategic approach to supply, demand and allocations' later in this report), and that it ensures that there are no other factors limiting lettings to BME households, such as access to information or advice.

197 The council has also completed a BME housing needs survey and a report from the survey results is currently at draft stage.

198 Homeless people are more likely to have a medical priority or other vulnerability than other housing applicants. It is important that they too are enabled to access the choice-based system, particularly those in temporary accommodation.

199 The council has a team of six temporary accommodation visiting officers. A programme of three-monthly visits to everyone in temporary accommodation was introduced in August 2003 – the team is currently achieving 77 per cent of visits within the three-month target. All visiting officers have been trained on the Locata scheme and part of their role is to advise residents on the choice-based process. More detailed enquiries are referred to the customer services team.

200 A focus group of advocates for vulnerable people was held in December 2003. This highlighted the need for clearer information and more assistance for vulnerable applicants.

201 The housing assessment team has worked with MIND and Age Concern to develop support for vulnerable people.

202 Locata maintains a database of vulnerable tenants, so that partners can be notified of any vulnerability of new tenants and the impact of the scheme on vulnerable tenants can be measured. However, a report by the Locata operations and development group in January 2004 found that there was poor use of the vulnerability codes and therefore no vulnerability data on 90 per cent of people being rehoused, which does not accord with partners' own knowledge of the number of people they are rehousing. The group has put forward proposals for improving data recording and using it to ensure that vulnerable applicants are not disadvantaged.

203 The housing overview and scrutiny committee considered the council's continued participation in the Locata scheme on 6 January 2004. The committee noted its

concern about the extent of take-up by vulnerable and minority ethnic groups. It sent a proposal to Cabinet for continued membership of Locata for 12 months, at which stage it should be reviewed again, subject to the committee receiving quarterly management information reports. It also recommended that the council does more to encourage greater use of Locata by BME residents.

204 The council's Cabinet met on 12 February 2004 and agreed the continuation of the scheme for a further 12 months, when it will be reviewed again. It also agreed that, in conjunction with other Locata partners, officers should continue to develop and improve the scheme as outlined in a 12-month enhancements plan (see 'A sustained focus on what matters' later in this report).

User involvement

205 One of the objectives of the council's housing services performance plan 2003 – 2006 (see 'Are the aims clear and challenging' above) is to:

Increase the capacity of service users to participate and be involved in the planning and delivery of services.

206 We found that the council has a well developed participation structure for tenants and it has consulted with applicants, particularly during the review of Locata.

207 The council has a participation structure which includes 15 tenants associations, a sheltered housing forum and three tenants associations in sheltered schemes. There is a housing consultative forum which consults with tenants and leaseholders. There is also a BME forum and a disabled tenants and residents association.

208 The council has held specific events to inform and consult people, including potential service users, on its allocations policy and the choice-based scheme. These have included a 'housing solutions' day in 2002 attended by over 1,500 people, a choice-based lettings consultation day, a mobility workshop, and sheltered housing meetings.

209 Locata has carried out surveys of service users across all partners. However, there is no ongoing forum for user involvement or consultation on a Locata-wide basis.

210 Between October and December 2003 the council carried out a review of all aspects of the implementation of choice based lettings and the new allocations policy. This included two focus groups, one for service users and one for advocates representing vulnerable people. The review also examined enquiries and complaints received from service users.

211 The main finding of the review was that the new scheme is popular with applicants and overwhelmingly preferred. Areas for improvement were identified and included in an 'implementation action plan' which addresses issues raised by service users, such as the need for more detailed information in advertisements.

212 However, we found from our own focus groups and interviews that Hillingdon tenants and applicants do not believe they are well informed about the overall progress of the Locata scheme or the outcomes of the review of Locata.

213 Our telephone survey of tenants' representatives found that, although they were generally satisfied with the Locata scheme and the ease of the bidding process, they felt that there was only limited consultation prior to the implementation of the scheme and that area panels do not receive sufficient information about its progress. However, in response, the council highlighted a series of seven reports and events involving tenants and tenants' representatives between June 2000 and September 2002.

Working with partner agencies, internal and external

214 The success of the West London choice-based lettings scheme depends upon effective joint working between the eight partners and the Locata staff.

215 We found evidence of considerable consultation and joint-working by Hillingdon with the partner councils and RSLs, and also with other RSLs, statutory and voluntary organisations within the borough. For example, the housing assessment team has worked with MIND and Age Concern to develop support for vulnerable people.

216 The customer services team is developing links with external agencies to promote the scheme and develop the agencies' knowledge of the scheme, so that this can be passed on to agencies' clients.

217 Much of the joint-working with the Locata partners is on an ongoing basis, and through the regular Locata board meetings and meetings of the Locata operations and development group. We reviewed the minutes of these meetings. We particularly found the operations and development group to be an effective forum for the partners to monitor, develop and improve the scheme.

218 Meetings and training sessions take place between the partner organisations and a useful 'good practice guide' was produced in May 2003 as a method of sharing good practice between the Locata partners. Benchmarking on a range of performance measures is also shared between the partners with the objective of improving performance.

219 Other boroughs from outside the choice-based scheme are working with the Locata partners on associated activities. For example, Locata is developing a quarterly publication advertising mutual exchanges for tenants. It is also developing a system for monitoring RSL nominations, for which an e-government grant of £150,000 has been made to Hillingdon and Ealing on behalf of the West London partnership.

220 During the government-funded pilot (April 2001 – March 2003), the ODPM convened regularly at a forum for all the pilot choice-based schemes. This was seen by officers we spoke to in Hillingdon as a useful opportunity to exchange learning and good practice, and there was regret that the forum no longer meets. The ODPM published the results of its research on the pilot schemes in February 2004.

221 Locata has some informal links with other schemes – particularly the East London Lettings Company – and has discussed the possibility of some properties being advertised between the two schemes, if partners agree. In our view, in the absence of any forum for choice-based schemes, the council (or Locata) would benefit from seeking out learning and good practice from the other schemes around the country.

Performance management

222 We found that there are effective performance management systems in place.

223 Hillingdon has a council-wide staff management and appraisal system (also adopted by the Hillingdon Homes ALMO) which includes professional and development action plans (PADAs) for individual staff. The housing service has 'Investors in people' (IIP) accreditation and the PADA system was noted by the IIP assessors as a particular strength.

224 The council has implemented the 'Hillingdon framework for improvement', which is a systematic approach to using information and feedback to ensure that service delivery is to the appropriate standard. The framework is used to ensure that housing needs processes meet the council's objectives, the required levels of performance and service-planning demands. This approach is supported by the PADA system. There is a set of performance indicators for housing needs which is monitored to measure the standard of service delivery. We found a good staff awareness and understanding of the publicised service standards.

225 Housing assessment team managers undertake a ten per cent quality check of new registrations. There is also a performance and review team (PRT) within the housing needs department, which is responsible for dealing with appeals, complaints,

members' enquiries and monitoring of performance. The PRT undertakes some internal quality assurance work and has an action plan to extend this. The housing service also buys in external mystery shopping to test service standards. However, this form of quality assurance work is not yet comprehensively applied across the housing needs service.

226 Managers hold regular, generally monthly, one-to-one meetings with staff. In some cases targets from PADAs are linked into monthly targets, an example of this was target-setting on the reduction of use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Staff at our focus groups also gave us examples of how their individual targets linked in to the council's overall priorities, for example, links between the reduction in the use of bed and breakfast temporary accommodation contributing to the 'healthier borough' objective.

227 We found that the PADA system was implemented consistently across the services we looked at and that the system was clearly understood and welcomed by the staff that we spoke to. The process is a robust method of linking corporate objectives, through the departmental plans, to the targets that are set for individual staff. This is reinforced by a rolling programme of staff meetings and the director spending time with the individual teams.

228 Progress towards targets, including against the leader's statement and community plan, is reported up to the housing senior management team and on to the corporate management board, the portfolio holder and Cabinet.

229 The council accepts that reporting performance to customers is less well developed. It is planning to use newsletters, including the temporary accommodation newsletter 'Tempin', to publicise the outcome of the Locata review and keep customers informed. It is also planning a series of information and feedback sessions for customers.

230 There is a service delivery document between the Locata partners and the central Locata organisation. This is in the form of an agreed plan of action, rather than a service level agreement (SLA), but an SLA is being developed and should be in place by the end of April 2004.

231 We were told that some backbench councillors consider that, under the new leader and Cabinet system of governance, they do not receive sufficient information on service delivery in some areas, including choice-based lettings. To address this, one outcome of the council's 2003 review of the scheme was that the housing overview and scrutiny committee has requested and will receive quarterly performance information on the scheme. This formally begins in April 2004, although reports have been presented to two recent meetings of the committee and a briefing seminar on the scheme was held for all councillors before the meetings.

232 A report on the scheme was considered by Cabinet in February 2004, which concluded that the scheme had been successfully introduced and had increased options for residents. Cabinet will review the scheme again after a further 12 months.

233 The council's own improvement plan for the choice-based scheme is regularly monitored by the senior manager. There is also an improvement plan signed up to by the Locata partners and this is monitored by the operations and development group and, at a higher level, by the Locata board.

234 Now that the scheme has become well-established, other councils and RSLs have expressed an interest in joining. There are also a number of opportunities for Locata to expand its remit and activities. Decisions on these issues are a matter for the Locata board, which consists of a representative from each partner.

235 The creation of the Locata company has delivered some benefits to the eight partners in terms of information management. For example, Locata's dedicated IT

systems can track the levels of bids and produce profiles of applicants and bidders. It is also planning to track the level of council nominations to RSL properties, which continues to be a difficult issue for some councils and RSLs.

236 We found that the IT systems for monitoring performance and producing reports were generally satisfactory, as evidenced by the high number of reports generated to provide a breakdown of applicants, bids and lettings. Some staff found that systems run slowly when reports are being generated - the council is installing additional server capacity to address this.

Value for money

237 The Government allocated £1.1 million of funding for the development of Locata from April 2001 to April 2003. The council initially agreed to continue its membership of the scheme until March 2004. Following a review, Cabinet decided in February 2004 to extend membership for a further 12 months, to be followed by a further review. If the council had decided to withdraw from the scheme in March 2004 it would have remained liable for the next year's contribution of around £84,000 and the costs of re-establishing an independent allocation scheme.

238 The ongoing costs of Locata are shared between the partners according to their size of stock. Hillingdon's membership fees were £80,000 in 2002/03 and £107,000 in 2003/04. The fee for 2004/05 is projected to be £103,000, predicated upon a new member joining the partnership. There is interest in joining the scheme from other local authorities and RSLs, which would deliver further cost savings through economies of scale.

239 The council is aware that there are increased costs across the housing needs service, which includes membership of Locata. One of the objectives of Locata is to reduce membership costs over time by, for example, increasing membership.

240 The council's review of Locata did not include an assessment of the value for money provided by the choice-based system. Senior managers told us that it is accepted that an assessment should be undertaken at a later stage.

The council's broader strategic approach to supply, demand and allocations

241 This section of the report considers the council's broader strategic approach to allocations, particularly in the context of supply and demand for social housing and responding to homelessness.

242 Hillingdon is in the same position as other London boroughs, with far higher demand for social housing than supply. The council has a housing stock of 11,420 rented homes and makes around 600 lettings a year. In January 2004 there were 6,734 people on Hillingdon's housing register and a further 1,865 tenants on the transfer list.

243 A housing needs survey was carried out in 2001 and there was further analysis of the waiting list and lettings in 2002 and January 2004. Reports on the housing needs of older people and of BME communities have also been produced.

244 There is an increasing problem of diminishing supply, due partly to the sub-regional agenda, whereby fewer RSL properties are likely to be developed within the borough. In 2002/03, 203 new affordable homes were provided in the borough, 124 of which were for rent. The council expects 130 new affordable homes to be provided in 2003/04

[Footnote 16.](#)

245 The council is working to increase the supply of affordable housing. It has an HRA capital programme of £11 million which will provide 67 permanent, affordable homes for rent over a five-year period. So far, 23 street properties have been acquired, and a further 6 will be purchased by 31 March 2004. The remaining 38 dwellings will be built on small brownfield HRA sites and through the redevelopment of an obsolete

residential home.

246 The council has also recently set up a 'void housing stock trickle transfer' with the Chiltern Hundreds Housing Association. The agreement is to transfer 499 vacant council homes to the association over a five year period, with the association carrying out works to meet the lettable standard and investing in environmental and community initiatives. The council will continue to allocate to these homes through Locata. The first 100 homes to be transferred in year one will enable the RSL to procure 70 additional homes, the numbers for following years will be agreed annually but are expected to be similar. The homes to be transferred will be from a range of property sizes, selected to reflect the geographical spread of voids and the range of property conditions.

247 The council's BME strategy for RSLs requires ten per cent of the RSL development programme to be either managed or owned by BME RSLs. This is achieved by either direct allocations or by mainstream RSL partners transferring ten per cent of their output to BME RSLs.

248 Through RSLs, the council is aiming to provide a mix of different sized homes to meet needs. In 2003/04, 31 per cent of the RSL approved programme was for three- or four-bedroom homes. For example, the development at the former Knightscode older peoples home, due to complete in March 2004, has three four-bedroom and six three-bedroom rented homes specifically to help meet the need for larger homes.

249 Other examples of initiatives to increase housing supply include:

- Hillingdon and other west London boroughs are working with the developers of terminal five at Heathrow airport to eventually acquire properties occupied by contractors for social housing.
- The council is developing a range of initiatives to encourage under-occupiers to move to smaller accommodation and others to move to properties outside the borough to free up family-sized homes. There are already some incentives in place, but the main difficulty is a lack of suitable move-on properties becoming available.

250 Although sheltered housing, in general, remains popular, there continue to be some specific units within some sheltered schemes that are unpopular and difficult to let. Hillingdon Homes have adopted a planned approach to 'remodelling' sheltered schemes which contain bedsits and shared facilities with a view to providing self contained accommodation. Work has been completed at two schemes and disposal of another is being considered, with use of the capital receipt for a replacement scheme.

251 The move to choice-based lettings has particular implications for how the council accommodates homeless households. Under the previous system, homeless households would be entitled to one reasonable offer of accommodation. If they refused this offer, the council could claim to have discharged its housing duty towards them. The choice-based system depends on homeless households in temporary accommodation choosing to bid for properties and, if bidding, having a high enough banding and waiting time to receive an offer. Households can also refuse offers without automatic penalty, although the council reserves the right to make a 'direct' allocation if offers are persistently refused or in other limited circumstances.

252 The council is addressing the level of demand for social housing by placing an increased emphasis on the prevention of homelessness by, for example, the creation of the housing advice and options team in August 2003 (see 'Re-housing outside the choice-based scheme and prevention of homelessness' earlier in this report).

253 The council's approach so far has been, as far as possible, to treat homeless people in the same way as other homeseekers. However, the banding of homeless

people is now being reviewed.

254 People in temporary accommodation which needs to be returned to the landlord or is unsuitable are currently in band A, people in bed and breakfast hotels, hostels, and those 'homeless at home' are in band B, other homeless people (primarily those in privately leased accommodation) are in band C.

255 There has been some concern from councillors about these priorities, in particular the higher priority given to people homeless at home (generally those accommodated temporarily by family or friends) compared to people in private sector leased (PSL) temporary accommodation. The council plans to review whether the waiting time for band C cases is unacceptable and the impact that this may have on the temporary accommodation strategy. It may then decide to move those in PSL properties from band C to band B.

256 The council reviews its portfolio of 1,600 PSL dwellings and 100 council hostel bed-spaces each month to ensure it is making best use of the properties.

257 It is still relatively early to assess the long term impact of the new allocations policy on homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation. These issues are also affected by the council's temporary accommodation strategy, which includes meeting the Government's target to end the use of shared bed and breakfast accommodation for families, except in short-term emergencies, by April 2004 [Footnote 17](#).

258 There needs to be a continuation of the monitoring of the percentage of applicants successfully bidding for properties, their priority banding and how long they have waited. This is necessary both to ensure that there is no discrimination in the system and to measure the impact of the choice-based system on homeless families and on the council's procurement strategy and costs for temporary accommodation.

259 Overall, senior managers believe that the scheme takes account of needs that were not picked up under the previous allocations process and people have been given greater control over their future housing. They see a particular strength of the scheme to be the common system used by partners, but one that allows sufficient flexibility for local policies. For example, Hillingdon operates a policy of not housing families with children above the fifth floor in blocks of flats, but the other partners do not have this policy.

260 The establishment of the choice-based scheme has addressed the Government's housing green paper (2000) priority of offering more choice to applicants and its objective that all authorities should be offering choice by 2010. The work with partners across west London also fits in with the Government's agenda for a more regional approach to social housing policy, particularly in terms of RSL investment and development. The Locata experience has put Hillingdon and its partners in a stronger position to work and lobby together to achieve their affordable housing objectives.

How does the performance compare?

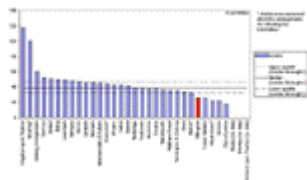
261 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required. Where possible, we have compared the council with other London boroughs.

262 Choice-based letting is a relatively new method of allocating social housing and is only being delivered by certain councils. Also, those councils that have choice-based schemes are operating a range of different systems. Direct comparisons between councils are therefore difficult to make. There are also no 2002/03 best value

performance indicators directly in this area.

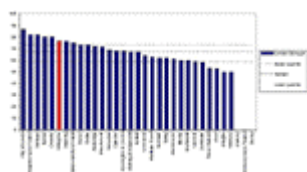
263 In 2001/02, performance on void relet times was collected across London. This showed that Hillingdon took an average of 25.8 days to relet council properties, compared to a London average of 39.3 days – this places Hillingdon in the top 25 per cent of London authorities. However, no comparative data was collected in 2002/03. Hillingdon's performance in 2003/04 to date has declined to 33 days and this is discussed earlier in this report.

Figure 1 - BVPI 68: Average relet time in calendar days 2001/02



264 Tenant satisfaction with Hillingdon's overall housing service was 77 per cent in 2002/03 (up from 74 per cent in 2001/02), this was in the top 25 per cent of London authorities. The council has recently received the results of the 2003/2004 'status survey' which shows a further increase in satisfaction to 79 per cent.

Figure 2 - BVPI 74a: Tenant satisfaction with the overall housing service 2002/03



265 The satisfaction of BME tenants with the overall housing service was 74 per cent in 2002/03, the fourth highest level in London. The 2003/04 'status survey' shows an increase in Hillingdon's figure to 81 per cent.

Figure 3 - BVPI 74b: Satisfaction of BME tenants with the overall housing service 2002/03



266 The Locata partnership provides the opportunity for sharing, reviewing and agreeing good practice among its members. The operations and development group reviews the day to day operation and the effectiveness of the scheme. This includes considerable benchmarking work across the eight partners. However, most of this work compares differences in procedures and practices, rather than measured outcomes such as void turnaround.

267 There are currently four London choice-based lettings schemes. This inspection did not seek to look at the other schemes or to compare Locata with them. However, the Locata scheme was compared favourably to other London choice-based schemes by an external consultant commissioned by the council to review the scheme in 2003. Some brief information on the three other London schemes is given below:

- **Get London Moving:** A partnership of five councils and five RSLs. This scheme aimed to increase mobility by building tenants' choices about where they want to move into 'mobility chains'. The scheme found that the high demand and lack of supply in London meant that there were insufficient empty larger properties to

complete the chains. Only 15 lettings were made since January 2003 and the scheme announced its closure in October 2003. Two of the members are considering seeking membership of Locata.

- **Home Connections:** A partnership of five councils and two RSLs. The partners do not operate a shared system to prioritise applications and there is no cross borough movement. One of the councils is now seeking to join Locata.
- **East London Lettings Consortium:** A partnership of three east London boroughs. This scheme is similar to Locata but bids are by telephone or using the web, with no postal option available. Each partner has retained its own allocation scheme and there is no cross borough mobility.

268 The ODPM commissioned research into the outcomes and experiences of the 27 pilot schemes which ran between April 2001 and March 2003. Summaries of the results of the research were published in February 2004, but the main detailed reports have yet to be published. The summary reports are generally positive about the outcomes of the choice-based pilots, but do not identify strengths or weaknesses of individual schemes or organisations.

269 There has not been any benchmarking by Locata with other choice-based schemes or with authorities that are not offering choice. There is however a choice-based lettings website (www.choicemoves.org.uk) funded by the ODPM and run by the Centre for Comparative Housing Research at De Montfort University. The site provides information on the different schemes and a forum for exchanging information and good practice.

Summary

270 We conclude that the service is a good, two-star service.

271 The service is addressing a national objective and has clear and challenging aims. The council has worked successfully with its partners to set up and implement the scheme and to form the Locata company. Properties are widely advertised through Locata Home magazine and the Locata website, and there is feedback on lettings from past advertisements.

272 The scheme has operated efficiently and there are reasonable and improving levels of customer satisfaction. The scheme also compares favourably with other choice-based schemes.

273 There has been considerable consultation with service users and the results have been built into plans for service improvement. The council has also effectively monitored the impact of the scheme and acted upon the outcomes of that monitoring.

274 However, there are areas where improvement is needed. For example, some information materials are inconsistent and in need of updating. Refusal rates are high and there has not yet been a comprehensive analysis of the reasons for this or the actions needed to address it. More work is needed to encourage participation in the scheme from all applicants.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

[^ Back to Top](#)

275 Inspectors use the following four building blocks to judge the service's prospects for improvement:

- Ownership of problems and willingness to change.
- A sustained focus on what matters.
- Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement.
- Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management.

Ownership of problems and willingness to change

276 In good and excellent councils, senior managers and councillors are committed to continuous improvement. They are willing to tackle difficult problems, take difficult decisions and stick to them. They are open about their performance and problems and welcome internal and external challenge.

277 We found that in this service area the council has demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement and a willingness to make major changes in order to tackle problems.

278 The prime example of this was the council's willingness, at an early stage, to take part in one of the pilot schemes for choice-based lettings. This necessitated a redesign of the council's allocations and lettings functions and a willingness to work in partnership with other councils and RSLs to deliver the scheme.

279 The partnership successfully formed the Locata company to administer the choice-based scheme and Hillingdon provided much of the early support to the scheme, in terms of premises and IT support. The Locata scheme has been compared favourably to other choice-based schemes by an external consultant commissioned by the council to review the scheme in 2003.

280 We found a commitment from councillors and senior managers to the principle of offering choice to applicants and to making further improvements to the scheme. A view from staff was that the council was committed to 'getting things right' in housing needs and that it is a supportive environment to work in, in terms of suggesting and achieving improvement through change.

281 We found a recognition by councillors, managers and staff of the difficulties and potential shortcomings of a choice-based procedure. In particular, the council has recognised the need to ensure that applications, bids and lettings are accessed equally by all members of the community, including vulnerable residents. The council and Locata are monitoring these areas and the council has taken steps to improve access for vulnerable and hard to reach groups, as outlined earlier in this report.

282 There is more that needs to be done in this area, but the council and Locata have recognised this and have action plans that address these issues. We found Hillingdon's action plan to be SMART [Footnote 18](#). The actions plans also address the most of the areas for improvement identified in the earlier sections of this report.

283 The council has also recognised the potential impact of the choice-based scheme on homeless applicants and the use of temporary accommodation. However, it has not yet made an assessment of the likely long-term impact of the scheme on the demand and procurement of temporary accommodation and has yet to reach decisions on whether to re-prioritise some groups of homeless applicants.

284 The council has demonstrated that it is open to challenge in this area. For example, its review of the scheme included a detailed assessment by an external consultant. Weaknesses identified in its own review and Locata's review have been addressed by actions in the improvement plans.

285 The council, with its partners, has modified the scheme to reflect learning from the pilot period. Further changes have been agreed and included in the improvement plans, for example providing more property information and photographs.

A sustained focus on what matters

286 In high performing councils, senior managers and councillors know what matters to local people and use this information to set clear and consistent priorities. They focus on achieving impact in priority areas and concentrate effort and resources in proportion to priority.

287 The council carried out a 'quality of life' survey in December 2003 and received 1,273 responses. The results showed that the highest concerns of residents were crime (78 per cent), clean streets (59 per cent) and health services (48 per cent). Affordable decent housing was the most important concern of 33 per cent of respondents, placing it seventh out of the 21 issues listed.

288 The council has consulted service users on the development of the choice-based scheme. The results of Locata's surveys of bidders and non-bidders fed into its action plan, and Hillingdon's own survey and focus group consultation has fed into its own improvement plan.

289 The service has also used the results of customer satisfaction surveys to focus its plans for improvement. For example, it has prioritised contacting high priority non-bidders to help and support them to access the scheme.

290 The council's 12-month 'enhancements plan' includes:

- working with Locata and Hillingdon Homes to develop monitoring reports to allow those applicants who are not bidding to be identified;
- quarterly reports including the percentage of people bidding and rehoused by priority group and ethnic origin, to identify any imbalance in the process and enable early corrective action to be taken. The reports will also assist in targeting help to those facing difficulties with the bidding process;
- working with Locata to identify people who are bidding incorrectly and to offer advice and assistance to enable them to bid correctly;
- on a trial basis, develop a series of advice and information sessions where translators are available for specific BME groups;
- twice a year, contact those in priority bands A and B who have not bid in the previous six months to see if they require assistance with the bidding process;
- working with Hillingdon Homes to program a regular annual review of all sheltered housing applicants to see if they require advice or assistance with the bidding process;
- review the way vulnerability information is defined and entered on housing IT systems and develop guidance and training for staff on entering this information;
- working with Hillingdon Homes, social services and other support providers, ensure that systems and protocols are put in place to ensure that children leaving care or people awaiting move-on accommodation are correctly bidding for properties and that they receive an offer of a property within a reasonable time scale;
- review how mobility information about properties is recorded and how the priority of an applicant with a disability is assessed; and
- in discussion with Locata partners, seek to improve the accessibility of the scheme guide and the Locata magazine. Key issues to consider include the font size and the layout of sheltered and mobility properties.

291 We found that the action plan reflects service users' concerns and the issues they raised during the review of Locata.

292 However, the council will also need to ensure it maintains focus on the high rate of refusals and the increase in void turnaround times highlighted earlier in this report.

293 In developing the choice-based scheme, the council has responded to a national objective and to its own local priorities, which have been consulted upon with local people. For example, the scheme contributes to the council's corporate aims, including the community plan objective of: 'a borough where opportunities are open to all people'.

294 There is a high demand for social housing from local people, but a low supply. The choice-based scheme offers more choice for applicants, but does not increase the overall supply. However, we found evidence that the council is pursuing a number of initiatives to increase supply (see 'The council's broader strategic approach to supply, demand and allocations' earlier in this report). The council's membership of Locata also means that it is well placed to respond to the increasingly sub-regional agenda for housing investment decisions.

295 The council has carried out considerable consultation with the BME communities, particularly in the qualitative nature of surveys to inform the development of its BME housing strategy.

296 Comparison with other London choice-based schemes indicates that Locata is a well-developed scheme which new partners are currently negotiating to join.

The capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement

297 Successful councils have sound performance management systems and effective financial management including flexibility to move money and people to tackle the most important problems. They have clear lines of accountability for action and have the skills to build effective partnerships to help bring about improvements.

298 We found that the council has demonstrated that it has the capacity and systems in place to deliver performance and improvement in this service area.

299 At a corporate level, although the Audit Commission judged the council overall to be 'weak' in its 2003 Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the housing service was found to be good, scoring three out of a possible four. The Audit Commission also noted that the council had invested in its capacity and arrangements to deliver improvements.

300 We found evidence of sound performance management systems within the service. Staff performance is managed effectively through the council-wide staff management and appraisal system. In particular, the PADA system was being applied consistently and effectively and provided a link between the corporate and service aims and targets for individual staff. The housing service has IIP accreditation and the PADA system was noted by the IIP assessors as a particular strength.

301 Staff are positive about the benefits of the choice-based scheme and show an awareness of the need to work to improve the scheme by, for example, maximising access for vulnerable applicants.

302 The 'Hillingdon framework for improvement' is used to ensure that service delivery is at the appropriate standard and that housing needs processes meet the council's objectives.

303 Appropriate performance information is produced to enable managers to monitor the performance of the service. There are also some procedures for checking the quality of services, although these are not yet applied across the whole housing service.

304 The council's improvement plan for the scheme is regularly monitored by the senior

manager. There is also an improvement plan signed up to by the partners to the scheme and this is monitored by the Locata operations and development group and, at a higher level, by the Locata board.

305 Until recently, there was no systematic reporting of the scheme's progress and performance to the housing overview and scrutiny committee or to other backbench members. The committee will now receive quarterly performance information on the scheme. This formally begins in April 2004, although reports have been presented to two recent meetings of the committee and a briefing seminar was held for all councillors. Councillors receive a large number of housing enquiries at surgeries and through other channels and we consider that it is therefore important that they are kept well informed about the choice-based scheme.

306 We found that there are clear lines of accountability within the housing needs service. There are also regular allocation liaison meetings between the relevant managers within housing needs and those within the Hillingdon Homes. A draft monitoring agreement has recently been drawn up between the council and Hillingdon Homes under which issues such as the reasons for refusals will be reported.

307 There is a service delivery document between the Locata partners and the central Locata organisation. There is not a service level agreement (SLA), but one is being developed and is scheduled to be in place by the end of April 2004.

308 The council allocated resources to enable the choice-based scheme to continue following the ODPM-funded pilot period. The council has also focused resources on the areas it has identified for improvement. For example, it has established the customer services team to encourage the involvement of those not currently bidding for properties and to assist people who have difficulties in bidding. It has also focused resources on the prevention of homelessness, through the housing advice service and new schemes to provide alternatives to social housing.

309 Although resources have been invested in the choice-based scheme, there has not yet been a full assessment of the value for money provided by the scheme, when compared with other schemes or with other methods of allocating properties. We recommend that the council should consider how best to carry out a value for money assessment, either on its own or with partners.

310 We found that the IT systems for monitoring performance and producing reports within the council were generally satisfactory. The partners' investment in Locata has also provided an effective service with automated bidding systems by telephone and through the Locata website.

311 The council has worked effectively in partnership with the other Locata members (see 'Working with partner agencies, internal and external' above). It is also working with voluntary organisations within the borough to develop support for vulnerable people. There is however scope to learn more from the good practice being generated in other choice-based schemes around the country.

The integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management

312 Continuous improvement should be seen as part of the day job, with best value integrated with other council performance management processes, not treated as an add-on.

313 We found that, since Hillingdon introduced choice-based lettings in April 2002, the council has monitored the scheme and identified areas for improvement. Improvements have been built into the service as it has developed, for example, the customer services team has been appointed to help and encourage those not bidding to access the scheme. A multiple viewings pilot is underway and a draft of a new format for property advertisements has been produced.

314 A full review of the scheme was carried out in 2003 and reported to Cabinet in February 2004. The areas for improvement identified during the review have been built into an action plan. There was also a Locata-wide review which has also fed into an improvement plan for the scheme.

315 We found an openness from staff and managers to potential changes. For example, a willingness to explore the possibility of a weekly advertising and bidding system.

316 We found that complaints are monitored and issues arising are fed back to the housing management team to aid service improvement.

317 The choice-based lettings service has not been subject to a best value review. However, we found that the principles of best value had, in general, been applied to the development of the scheme. An exception to this is that the council has yet to carry out an assessment of the value for money being delivered by the service. There is also scope for the council to compare its performance and exchange learning and good practice with other choice-based schemes and councils.

Summary

318 We conclude that the service has excellent prospects for improvement.

319 The council, and Locata, have carried out comprehensive reviews of the scheme and drawn up robust plans for further improvement. Service users have been consulted during these reviews and their views have been incorporated into the plans for improvement.

320 The council has shown a willingness to make changes to the scheme in response to learning during the pilot period. Some changes have already been implemented.

321 The council is aware of the broader strategic challenges and is pursuing a number of initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing.

322 The council has demonstrated an ability to work effectively with its partner councils and RSLs both in the development of the choice-based scheme and on broader housing issues.

323 There is a commitment from staff, managers and councillors to develop the service, and there are strong performance management systems to ensure that plans are delivered.

324 However, the council will need to ensure that its plans for improvement succeed in addressing all the issues identified in this report, including the high rate of refusals and the increase in void turnaround times. It should also look to learn from the experience of other choice-based schemes.

1 All statistics in this paragraph are taken from the 2001 Census.

2 Best Value Performance Plan 2003/04.

3 Land Registry figures for sales from October to December 2003.

4 'Quality and Choice: A decent home for all - The housing green paper'. DETR

5 The three pre-pilot schemes in 2000 were operated by Harborough District

6 The 'Get London Moving' scheme which aimed to create mobility chains

7 'Quality and Choice: A decent home for all - The housing green paper', DETR

- (now ODPM), April 2000.
- 8 Ibid. Summary and key proposals.
 - 9 Ibid. Paragraphs 9.17 and 9.24.
 - 10 Section 16 (2) Homelessness Act 2002.
 - 11 'Locata scheme user guide, version 5', 12.12.03, page 5.
 - 12 These rights are now contained in section 167(4A) of the 1996 Housing Act , following amendments introduced by the 2002 Homelessness Act
 - 13 Feedback in edition 48 of Locata Home magazine, 20 February 2004.
 - 14 Turnaround figures are based on how long a property that is let has been empty, with the effect that letting long-term voids will produced poor turnaround figures in the short-term.
 - 15 'Piloting choice-based lettings: An evaluation', ODPM Housing Research Summary 208, 2004.
 - 16 Best Value Performance Plan 2003/04.
 - 17 S.I. No. 3326, 2003. The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003.
 - 18 SMART = specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.