

TITLE OF REPORT**Local Authority Searches Performance****AUDIT COMMITTEE
MEETING DATE 2017/2018****17 January 2017****CLASSIFICATION:****Open****If exempt, the reason will be listed in the
main body of this report.****WARD(S) AFFECTED****All Wards****GROUP DIRECTOR****Kim Wright, Neighbourhoods & Housing**

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

- 1.1 Members of Committee have raised concerns based on their casework about the length of time taken to complete local authority searches during house sales. Members wanted to see if there are problems in this area and, if there are, to be assured that there is work in progress to get performance back to acceptable levels. This report responds to those concerns, and sets out the current position of the Land Charges (local authority search) team.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 Members note the content of this report with regard to the implementation of a new ICT system for local authority searches in accordance with the recommendations of the 2015 Audit of Land Charges.**

3. REASONS FOR DECISION

- 3.1 To update Members on a key recommendation of the 2015 Audit of Land Charges relating to the implementation of a new ICT system.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 A 2015 Audit Report into the local authority search process identified significant inadequacies in the existing IT operating system (Headway) and strongly recommended that a new system be procured which would make the existing manual processes more efficient. The Planning Service and ICT had already commenced the process of procuring a new system, given Headway was significantly out of date. This was communicated to the Audit team who placed a deadline for the change to happen. This process was further accelerated by confirmation from the software provider that Headway would no longer be supported by its supplier from April 2017, and that in any case the system was not capable of implementing new VAT requirements placed on local authority searches from 2017/18.
- 4.2 The local authority search function was subsequently migrated to the M3 system (provided by Northgate) at the end of March 2017. M3 was already used by the Planning Service to process both Planning and Building Control applications, and the migration of local authority searches enabled all three functions to be integrated onto a single system. This was beneficial given that M3 is an existing system with a dedicated searches module, and will also be advantageous in the

future should Planning wish to procure a new ICT system given all functions are integrated on a single platform.

- 4.3 The outdated and manual nature of Headway resulted in a complex and less than straightforward migration of data to M3. As a consequence no local authority searches were processed during the transitional period in March 2017, and a backlog of searches was generated. Initial processing of searches on M3 was very slow, with an average turnaround time in April and May 2017 of 40 working days, in comparison to the usual 10 working days. By the end of April 2017 there were over 600 outstanding searches.
- 4.4 In anticipation of the problems caused by migrating to a new ICT system the Planning Service employed additional staff in the land charges team to help process searches during this transitional period, and prioritised urgent searches where a property transaction was close to the exchange of contracts. Where such cases were escalated to the Council, the search was completed within 48 hours of the escalation. These measures led to all outstanding searches submitted in April and May being completed in June, with dedicated staff also processing June and July searches to achieve an average of 15-20 working days turnaround times throughout the summer (although this was not always achievable during times of high volume submissions or where search requests were of a complex nature). Information was posted on the Council's website informing solicitors/search agents of delays, and letters were also sent to Search Agents informing them of delays and the Council's willingness to prioritise urgent requests.
- 4.5 By October 2017 92% of local authority searches were being processed within the usual 10 working days, and this performance improved further to 98% in November and 99% in December.
- 4.6 Whilst the Planning Service has apologised for the temporary disruption and responded to escalated queries and complaints diligently, the new system was a key recommendation of the 2015 Audit and will enable a higher quality of service to be sustained over the coming months.

Report Author	Ian Rae, Ext.8051, ian.rae@hackney.gov.uk
Comments of the Group Director of Finance & Corporate Resources	n/a
Comments of the Group Director of Legal	n/a