

Contract Award for Advice Services



Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	19 March 2025
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Danielle Brown, Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing
Lead Officer:	Rebecca Farrant, Assistant Director – Corporate Services and Improvement (01279) 446811
Contributing Officer:	Leah Callan, LGA Graduate Programme
Key Decision:	Yes
Forward Plan:	Forward Plan number I018095
Call In:	This item is subject to call in procedures
Corporate Mission:	Protect our communities
Wards Affected:	None specifically

Executive Summary

- A** The council supports the provision of quality welfare advice and support services. The three-year contract that is currently in place for this provision is set to end on 31 March 2025 and therefore, a new contract is required to avoid any interruption of this key service provision in line with the council's corporate mission to 'protect our communities'.
- B** Officers have commenced an open market process to engage with local operators with a view to awarding a new three-year contract with annual contract value of £90,000 with strict performance measurements in place to ensure that local residents are receiving the level of advice and support that the council is commissioning.

Recommended that:

- A** Delegated authority is given to the Assistant Director - Corporate Services and Improvement, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing, to award an in-budget contract following the completion of a lawful procurement process to avoid any such delay in the provision of service.

- B** Delegated authority is given to the Assistant Director Corporate Services and Improvement, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing, to extend the contract beyond the initial period, in line with contract provision for an extension of up to one year.

Reason for decision

- A** To ensure, through a legal process, that a new contract is awarded to enable continued delivery of this support for Harlow residents in line with the council's corporate mission to 'protect our communities'.

Other Options

- A** The council could decide to not award a contract and instead consider providing financial support for advice services via grant funding. However, this would result in no appropriate oversight and performance measurement of outcomes.

Background

1. The council invited bids for the provision of advice services to be delivered to the residents of Harlow in 2022. The specification for this contract was set to respond to economic challenges residents faced at the time and aligned to the council's aims to support post covid recovery. This contract has run for a period of three years and ends on 31 March 2025.
2. The council set a Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2023 using an evidence-based approach to address wider determinants impacting health and wellbeing in Harlow. The data on socio-economic factors impacting Harlow show that income levels is one of the major factors that need action to reverse some of the key health and wellbeing inequalities in the town.
3. The specification for a new advice services contract has been set to address specific advice needs for residents in Harlow as well as providing support for those areas identified by data supporting the health and wellbeing strategy around fuel, food and data poverty, as well as the need for debt management and income maximisation advice.
4. A procurement process commenced in February 2025 to engage with the local market. Suppliers were contacted and invited to consider the opportunity. Officers provided a comprehensive service specification, together with a contract for services and a list of mandatory requirements for the purposes of due diligence.
5. The council wishes to procure and commission legal advice and support to Harlow residents in regard to:
 - a) Housing;
 - b) Welfare benefits;
 - c) Money management/debt advice; and
 - d) Income maximisation.

6. The core services to be delivered include the provision of information on the above, and signposting to other organisations who can help and support individual cases. Information and advice are to be provided over the phone and face to face, with a Harlow based location for in person visits to ensure the service is accessible to residents. The service to be provided will also include advocacy and tribunal representation where appropriate.
7. Contract management of the contract will sit within the Culture and Community directorate and Key Performance Indicators will include:
 - a) Number of cases where financial or housing crises resulting from the impact of fuel poverty is averted by the successful Bidder as a direct result of appropriate advice.
 - b) Number of cases where food poverty is identified.
 - c) Number of cases where child poverty is identified.
 - d) Number of cases where data poverty is identified.
 - e) Number of debt cases where a payment of arrears plan is agreed.
 - f) Number of cases where homelessness is prevented through appropriate advice and casework.
 - g) Customer satisfaction rate - % of customers responding to satisfaction monitoring who rate the service good or very good.
 - h) Innovation, e.g. additional funding from alternative (non-council) sources and plans to maximise this year on year, partnership work, developing new service delivery models.

Issues/Proposals

8. The closing date for bid submissions is midday 19 March 2025, immediately following which the officer evaluation team will review and score the bids against the published criteria.
9. Subject to a compliant in budget bid being received, officers will proceed to contract award under delegated authority from Cabinet.
10. The council's procurement processes are being followed to ensure a robust process has been undertaken in procuring suitable tender returns and will be evaluated by appropriate qualified and experienced officers.
11. The council set its 2025/26 budget in February 2025 and included a budget of £90,000 to support the provision of an advice services contract for three years.
12. It is therefore recommended that delegated authority is given to the Assistant Director - Corporate Services and Improvement, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for

Community and Wellbeing allow for onboarding for the provider whilst mitigating service interruption.

13. Furthermore, it is recommended that delegated authority is given to the Assistant Director Corporate Services and Improvement, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing, to extend the contract beyond the initial period, in line with contract provision for an extension of up to one year if this is deemed appropriate.

Implications

Equalities and Diversity

The Equality Act 2010 has been carefully considered by officers as part of the specification and service user requirements. Bidders are required to provide full details of their equalities processes and policies as part of the mandatory information for due diligence.

Climate Change

There is no direct impact to climate change as a result of this contract and opportunity.

Finance

An annual contract value of £90,000 is approved within the Medium Term Financial Plan to support the council commissioning advisory services.

Author: Jacqui Van Mellaerts, Assistant Director – Finance and Section 151 Officer

Governance

The council has commenced a robust procurement process, taking into account the nature and form of the services sought. The council will significantly reduce the risk of successful legal challenge by complying with the relevant procurement requirements.

Author: Rebecca Farrant, Assistant Director – Corporate Services and Improvement and Monitoring Officer

Appendices

None.

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

None.