

Meeting:	Cabinet
Date:	6 April 2006
Subject:	Housing Advice Centre
Responsible Officer:	Executive Director (Urban Living)
Contact Officer:	Laurence Coaker, Housing Needs Manager
Portfolio Holder:	Planning, Housing and Development
Key Decision:	Yes
Status:	Public

Section 1: Summary

Decision Required

- To extend the current 3 year Tendered Partnership Contract between the council and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide a free and independent housing advice service for Harrow, without proceeding to tender service until 31 March 2008.
- To agree the variation to the current waiver of Contract Procedure Rule(s) (CPR) (WA364) signed September 2005.
- To note that a waiver to CPR will be required post August 2006

Reason for report

The existing Tendered Partnership Contract ended on the 1st August 2005 and arrangements need to be in place for the CAB to continue to provide a free and independent housing advice service for Harrow.

Benefits

In the 10 years that the Harrow CAB have been providing a housing advice service in Harrow they have built up a valuable insight and understanding of the Harrow model of housing assessment, which has contributed to Harrow's success in tackling homelessness, culminating in Harrow achieving Beacon status in tackling homelessness in 2003/04 and being awarded Regional Champions status in 2004/05.

Cost of Proposals

There is budget provision in the 2006/07 budget of £120,670.00. Any further increases to the running costs will be negotiated annually (eg. to reflect rent increases, etc.).

Risks

If there were a significant change in demand for housing advice over the next three years, this service may become surplus to requirements and an alternative use would need to be found.

Implications if recommendations rejected

Homelessness legislation provides a strong duty on councils to provide advice and assistance to prevent homelessness. Independent housing advice is seen by the ODPM as an important part of any homelessness strategy and provides an important safety net by ensuring that independent checks are made for the councils' homelessness determinations. If these recommendations were rejected the council would have to enter into a full tender procedure, to secure a new housing advice service provider, which will be costly in terms of resources and possibly detrimental to Harrow's model of homelessness assessment.

Section 2: Report

2.1 Brief History

2.1.1 In March 1995, the then Harrow Council Housing and Social Services Committee agreed to the development of an independent housing advice service to be run by the Harrow CAB who had been established in the borough since 1940.

2.1.2. The service would be free, impartial, confidential and independent and would be open to anyone residing or working in the London Borough of Harrow and provide advice on all housing queries with a strong emphasis on the prevention of homelessness.

- 2.1.3. A 3-year Tendered Partnership Contract was raised between Harrow Council and Harrow CAB initially terminating in August 2001 and subsequently renewed for a further 3-year period. The current Tendered Partnership Contract expired on 1st August 2005, and a draft service specification has been amended and updated to reflect the current identified need for independent housing advice and the strategic direction of Harrow Council.
- 2.1.4. A waiver to CPR (ref WA364) was signed on the condition that the service will be re-tendered by August 2006. However, the Housing Service is currently undergoing a full review of how it delivers its services to become more customer focused. The current service being delivered around housing advice is considered to be one of the areas with-in housing that is already performing to a high standard. It is therefore not considered to be a good use of resources to re-tender the service for a new contract to start in August 2006, when there are other areas that need urgent attention. We are therefore recommending that a re-tendering exercise for this service will take place before March 2008.
- 2.1.5. The Housing Advice Centre (HAC) is focused to meet the housing advice needs of Harrow community and reflect the emphasis on homelessness prevention. In 2004/05 the HAC advised over 3,200 housing related enquiries and 1,290 clients who were either homeless or threatened with homelessness. Over 60% of the clients seen were living in private rented sector with landlords/tenants problems commonplace.

2.2 Options considered

The option of tendering the contract now has been considered and rejected due to the reasons stated above.

A comparison exercise with other West London Housing Advice Services has been undertaken (please see appendix 1). This proved to be a difficult exercise to undertake as the West London boroughs have different Housing Advice structures and do not measure the same outcomes. However we were able to confirm that the current service we are receiving is value for money.

We pay the lowest salary costs in the sub region, as the HAC Managers post is paid by the CAB. Unfortunately, there was only one borough (Kensington & Chelsea) where comparative data was available for "cost per case". However this showed the cost per case to be equal in Harrow and K&C.

The data that was available on outcomes showed the Harrow HAC to be the best performer in the sub region, especially in preventing homelessness.

The option to provide an "in house" Housing Advice service has also been considered and rejected due to the costs and resources that would be required to implement such a service, and also the fact that it would not be a truly independent service.

2.3 Consultation

The HAC have conducted regular customer satisfaction surveys that have consistently reported high levels of satisfaction with the service that is provided.

2.4 Financial Implications

There is budget provision in the 2006/07 budget of £120,670.00. Any further increases to the running costs will be negotiated annually (eg. to reflect rent increases, etc.).

2.5 Legal Implications

Housing Advice Services are not subject to the full EU procurement regime, as they are what is called a "Part B Service". We are therefore not legally obliged to tender for this service.

Contract Procedure Rule(s) have been waived, and there is evidence in this report that the duty to achieve Best Value has been met. Best Value will be monitored throughout the life of the extended arrangements via performance management of the Housing Advice Service.

Housing authorities must ensure that in certain cases applicants are provided with advice and assistance in any attempts that they make to:

- a) Secure that accommodation becomes available for themselves (in cases where they are homeless), or
- b) Secure that accommodation does not cease to be available for themselves (in cases where they are threatened with homelessness).

Housing authorities also have the power to provide further assistance to applicants who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, unintentionally, and do not have a priority need.

The Housing Advice Service provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau fulfils the council's statutory obligations in this area.

2.6 Equalities Impact

Failure to ensure that a free, quality, housing advice service is available to the residents of Harrow borough, will have a detrimental impact on the welfare and social well being of the homeless households, and those threatened with homelessness. Statistics indicate that a disproportionate percentage of homeless households are from ethnic minorities.

2.7 Section 17 Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Considerations

Provision of a quality housing advice service for homeless households, and those households threatened with homelessness, contributes to community cohesion.

Section 3: Supporting Information/Background Documents

Appendix 1 – Housing Advice Service Comparison

Background Documents:

Housing Act 1996 Part VII

Any person wishing to inspect the background papers should telephone 020 8420 9630