



**Report for: Cabinet**

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	25 July 2024
<b>Subject:</b>	General Information and Advice Service
<b>Key Decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	Shumaila Dar, Assistant Director of Corporate Strategy
<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	Councillor Janet Mote, Community and Culture Portfolio Holder
<b>Exempt:</b>	Public with exempt Appendices 2, 3 and 4 under paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of the Council and Bidders.
<b>Decision subject to Call-in:</b>	Yes
<b>Wards affected:</b>	All wards
<b>Enclosures:</b>	Appendix 1 - Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)  Exempt Appendices: Appendix 2 - Specification Appendix 3 – Pricing template Appendix 4 - Tender Evaluation Model

## **Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations**

This report sets out the recommissioning of the General Information and Advice service and seeks Cabinet approval to commence the procurement exercise and to award a new contract for the service under delegated Authority.

### **Recommendations:**

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Authorise the extension of the current service by three months, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 to align the new service to the start of the financial year and to maximise the mobilisation period.
2. Authorise the commencement of a competitive procurement for the General Information and Advice service for an initial contract term of three years from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2028 with the option to extend for a further period of up to two years until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2030.
3. Following the tender process, delegate authority to the Assistant Director of Corporate Strategy and the Director of Finance (S151 Officer) following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Culture and the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Highways to award the contract for the service.
4. Delegate authority to the Assistant Director of Corporate Strategy following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Culture and the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Highways to allow any changes ahead of the final publication of the Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents.

### **Reason: (for recommendations)**

The value of the contract to deliver the service is in excess of £500,000. Therefore, Cabinet approval is required to re-procure the service to ensure the continuation of the general information and advice service to Harrow residents.

## **Section 2 – Report**

### **1. Introductory paragraph**

- 1.1. This report set outs the recommissioning arrangements for the general information and advice service. The current service, while responding to local, national and international challenges, has been in place for seven years. Recognising the change in landscape, in recommissioning this service, we have revised the service specification to ensure dynamic and innovative ways of providing information and advice to Harrow residents. The new service, led by the Council's priority of putting residents first focuses on ensuring greater access to

support through multi-channel approaches such as face to face provision, digital engagement, online provision and outreach.

## **2. Options considered**

### **2.1. Option 1: Do nothing**

The service which has been delivering since 2017 will draw to an end on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2024. Discontinuing the service will create a gap in how residents access information and advice, which will negatively impact vulnerable residents. This option is therefore not recommended.

### **2.2. Option 2: Bring the service in-house**

The provision of providing information and advice requires lengthy casework and a holistic approach in addressing residents' issues. It would be challenging to expect such level of resources and staffing additional to the services the Council is currently providing. This option is therefore not recommended.

### **2.3. Option 3: Agree extending the current contract and to recommission the service**

This option ensures continuation of the general information and advice service until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, as well as recommissioning through an external provider as organisations have necessary expertise and resources to deliver the service and can provide significant benefits to local communities. Commissioning this service also encourages engagement of voluntary and community sector organisations to collaborate with the Council in delivering the Council's strategic priorities. This option therefore is recommended.

## **3. Current situation**

3.1. The borough's General Information and Advice service was procured in May 2017, and was awarded to Citizens Advice Harrow, for an initial period of three years, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> August 2017 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020. The original contract included an option to extend for a further two years to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022. Following the extension, to ensure continuity for residents and in managing the Council and VCS partners capacity to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, a direct award for two additional years was awarded until 31<sup>st</sup> July 2024. To ensure the recommissioning aligns to the timeline of the new Information and Advice strategy being drafted, this contract has been extended for five additional months, until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024 through a waiver. This is so the key principles from the strategy inform the recommissioning of the contract and the service responds to the needs within the community. Extending the current contract for an additional three months, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 as per the recommendation will align the new service to the start of the financial year and will maximise the mobilisation period during the procurement exercise.

3.2. The General Information and Advice Service is a crucial universal service that is open to any Harrow resident in need of information or advice. The service supports residents in relation to housing, benefits, debt, employment immigration, well-being, as well as family and personal matters (counselling, bereavement etc.) and other matters. Since the start of this contract, data shows that client demand remains robust with benefits, debt advice and housing support continuing to be key drivers. With the cost of living and rental crisis, this service provides a critical service to residents who are most in need.

#### 4. Why a change is needed

4.1. The recommissioning of the service is in response to the findings and key principles of the Council's Information and Advice strategy 2024 – 2027. This is to ensure for a clear and co-ordinated approach in providing residents with access to a free, comprehensive and joined-up information and advice service. While these are broad principles applying to all Information and Advice provision in Harrow by the council and partners, it is intended that these key principles also inform the delivery by the provider of the service.

1. **Improving resolution at point of access** – Removing barriers experienced by residents at the point of contact is vital for enhancing the resident experience and ensuring equitable access to support. This includes improving the range of face-to-face support and integrated tech-based solutions at point of contact.
2. **Mitigating demand through a partnership approach** – Addressing the increase in demand for information and advice requires an effective partnership approach in the commissioning of services and service delivery by council and partners.
3. **Improving Referrals and moving towards a 'no wrong door' approach** – In order to reduce ineffective referrals, cross-sector collaboration such as 'warm transfer' arrangements that ensures referrals are effective and seamless and resolves issues rather than ineffectual signposting is critical to improving residents' customer journey and establishing a person-centred approach.
4. **Integration of Information and Advice into ongoing structural redesign** by the council and partners – Ensuring the availability of and access to a joined-up information and advice service as part of the redesign work involving Family Hubs, Neighbourhood Resource Centres and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams is important to provide a seamless and holistic family-oriented offer to residents.
5. **Prevention and Early Intervention** – Information and advice is a key cog in the prevention agenda i.e., to ensure that residents know how to access early intervention offers in the community that prevents needs from becoming acute and increasing demand on services.
6. **Outreach into Communities** – Reaching communities experiencing the greatest need in their own geographical areas is critical to supporting the most vulnerable residents. Information and advice integration into programmes such as Conversation Café is important to successfully deliver this.

- 7. Capacity Building among Information and Advice providers including drawing in external funding** – Ensuring that the information and advice sector in Harrow is joined up and working together to address sector-wide issues and collectively raise standards is vital, while focusing on empowering organisations to draw in external funding into the borough.
- 8. Future-proofing via technological solutions** – Given the rapid advancement in the field of Generative Artificial Intelligence, it is pertinent that the council looks to futureproof our information and advice provision, in line with the UK government’s National AI Strategy, by scanning this field for potential technological opportunities like AI integrated chatbots that can produce efficiencies, reduce cost and mitigate demand as the tech matures and becomes more reliable.

## **4.2. Market engagement**

- 4.2.1. The market engagement completed in the lead up to the recommissioning has indicated several potential service providers with the capacity and interest to engage in the procurement process. The first engagement session was a market warming exercise to understand the current provision of information and advice in the borough, this session was attended by 19 voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations supporting a wide cross section of residents providing information and advice for adults, children, and carers. Their feedback indicated that there needs to be better and more coordinated referral processes amongst VCS organisations. Many organisations are able to refer onwards due to their personal relationships with other organisations, but smaller, less connected organisations struggle to make referrals for their clients or are unable to follow up on referrals due to resource challenges. This can therefore mean residents have to reshare their story with several providers before being provided with a resolution. A better-connected VCS network can ensure warm referrals are made and can ensure capacity building and networking across the VCS.
- 4.2.2. Following this, one to one meetings were set up with six organisations interested in the scope of the recommissioning. These organisations varied in size, expertise and experience. All organisations recognised that there is a need to raise awareness of services delivered in Harrow to improve referral pathways and to deliver in a dynamic approach to meet the needs of Harrow’s diverse communities. Feedback from this engagement also identified limitations with the budget envelope as the budget envelope had not changed from 2017 and did not recognise increased demand on the service to respond to the emerging needs of Harrow residents. This engagement also highlighted the ability of potential providers to bid for external funding and facilitate collaborative partnership working.
- 4.2.3. It was also important to hear directly from service users, so a focus group consisting of residents supported by the current

provider was conducted. Through this focus group, it was realised the positive impact the incumbent's holistic approach has had on addressing residents' issues but also their overall wellbeing. While generally residents felt supported at point of contact, they did share that information and advice services need to be better promoted as often residents don't know where to go for support or question the quality of information being provided. A service commissioned by the Council would alleviate such concerns, which further emphasises the need of continuing such services in the community.

### **4.3. New service**

4.3.1. We are recommissioning a new service for an initial contract term of three years, commencing on 1st of April 2025 to 31st March 2028. The contract duration will be for 3 years with the option of extending for a further 2 years, subject to budget availability and the provider(s) performance. We will be commissioning through an open tender process where the incumbent as well as wider VCS organisations can bid for the tender opportunity, maximising the number of bids. The contract is also open to individual or consortium bids.

4.3.2. The service will include delivery of general information and advice through a multi-channel approach focusing on digital channels, email, mobile friendly, website, and face-to-face. This includes:

- delivery of the general information and advice service.
- delivery of general information and advice via Family Hubs Network.
- delivery of general information and advice for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- delivery of general information and advice integrated within Council led initiatives.

4.3.3. The contract funds a service for any Harrow resident with needs around housing, welfare benefits, financial services, employment, physical and mental wellbeing, family and personal matters, as well as immigration and asylum queries.

4.3.4. The service will provide assistance to support clients in completing forms, drafting emails and letters, and accessing online services. It will also provide assistance to seek information or mediate/ negotiate on the client's behalf. The service will provide clear, comprehensive, relevant and up to date information and advice detailing individual rights and responsibilities.

4.3.5. The provider(s) will work to ensure a clear and efficient resident's journey with accurate signposting of other services that involve one route in assessing their need. A triage and referral pathway will be agreed within a formal network of information and

advice providers ensuring quality assurance, safeguarding considerations and mechanisms to make a complaint are clear and accessible.

4.3.6. The provider(s) should ensure that mechanisms are in place that makes the service easy to use and navigate providing a variety of available options. This should include self-management and empowering a resident to make their decisions in a timely way that prevents escalation.

4.3.7. The provider(s) role is to contribute to the delivery of the strategy and to take the lead in the development of the established Information and Advice Network (comprising of the council, strategic partners, and local service providers); a digital platform and working with partners to join up services and map community assets. The network should be utilised as a vehicle for capacity building within the sector and for improve collective standards.

4.3.8. Service outcomes:

- Residents are able to access good quality Information and Advice through multi-channels including digital ones.
- Residents are able to get their issues resolved at initial point of access or soon after and report higher satisfaction levels with the service they receive.
- Residents find referrals into the service effective and seamless
- Residents are able to access general information and advice at other service points in the borough through integration with council/partner offer
- Residents are prevented from their needs becoming acute via accessing 'preventative interventions' in the community
- Residents are able to find support related to information and advice closer to where they live including within communities of greater need.
- The Information and Advice sector in Harrow is joined up and working

## **5. Implications of the Recommendation**

### **5.1. Financial resources for the proposed extension**

5.1.1. The total proposed contract value for the extension is £54,000, This is based on the current yearly contract value of £216,000 per annum. The contract is proposed to be extended for three months, from 1st January 2025 to 31st March 2025. The extension will be funded from the existing budget.

### **5.2. Financial resources for the proposed contract**

5.2.1. The total proposed contract value for the service is £1,242,000, over the course of the five-year contract, including the optional one year plus one year extension, this is based on the contract value of £248,400 per annum.

5.2.2. The annual budget is made up of the existing £216,000 per annum revenue budget and in total £32,400 pa contributions from Housing, Corporate Strategy and Childrens Services.

5.2.3. Feedback from the incumbent has indicated the biggest barrier in delivering the current service is funding and without an increase it would be challenging to deliver any new specification in full (as laid out in point 4.3.2). The proposed funding includes a 15% increase to the existing budget which takes into account market feedback, as well as address the changes in residents' need in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent global cost of living crisis.

5.2.4. Funding for the extension of the contract in year four and five is subject to MTFS decisions and the provider(s) performance which has been included in the Risk Management Implications. If funding for the extension of the contract in year four and five is not made available, the service will be reduced by a variation of the contract or the council will seek to commence a new recommissioning exercise, in line with the strategic priorities, so there is no additional pressure on Council resources.

### **5.3. Staffing/workforce**

5.3.1. The Council will inform bidders if the incumbent provider states that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 ("TUPE") and/or Property lease/rental agreements apply to the new contract.

### **5.4. Performance Issues**

5.4.1. The information and advice strategy sets out the expected outcomes, which will be monitored on a quarterly basis as part of contract management arrangements.

### **5.5. Environmental Implications**

5.5.1. The service does not have a significant impact on the environment. However, the providers will be required to demonstrate their ability to meet the Council's Climate Change obligations in ensuring that they have put in place measures to reduce waste, minimise unnecessary travel and adopt energy efficient practices.

### **5.6. Data Protection Implications**

5.6.1. The provider will be required to adhere to the Council's Data Sharing Protocol (for the purposes of sharing some service user data with service areas across the Council and with external professionals). A Data Sharing Protocol will be drafted in line with guidance and approval by the Council's Information Governance Lead.



## 6. Risk Management Implications

6.1. Risks included on corporate or directorate risk register? **No**

6.2. Separate risk register in place? **No**

6.3. The relevant risks contained in the register are attached/summarised below. **n/a**

6.4. The following key risks should be taken into account when agreeing the recommendations in this report:

<b>Risk Description</b>	<b>Mitigations</b>	<b>RAG Status</b>
The procurement process does not comply with relevant legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Competitive tendering process to be undertaken in compliance with the Council's contract procedure rules and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015</li> </ul>	<b>GREEN</b>
There are insufficient resources in place to renew the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The service is funded through existing identified budgets, including external funding to mitigate impacts on the Council's core budget.</li> <li>▪ The current total funding is secured for the duration of the three-year contract. The extension of the contract in 2027-28 and 2028-29 is subject to performance and MTFS budget discussions.</li> <li>▪ If funding for the extension of the contract in year four and five is not made available the service will be reduced by a variation of the contract or we will seek to commence a new recommissioning exercise, in line with the strategic priorities, so there is no additional pressure on Council resources.</li> </ul>	<b>AMBER</b>
The procurement process does not deliver value-for money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The risk is mitigated by a competitive and rigorous tender process which will enable us to select a supplier that can provide the general information and advice service that we require for this fixed budget amount.</li> </ul>	<b>GREEN</b>
Arrangements for monitoring and managing the performance of the recommissioned service are not adequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The contract will be monitored on a quarterly basis.</li> <li>▪ Contract performance measures and mitigations include monitoring of KPIs, improvement plans and break clauses</li> </ul>	<b>GREEN</b>

## 7. Procurement Implications

7.1. The current contract can be extended by three months from 1st January 2025 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 by applying Regulation 72 (1) (e) of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.

7.2. The re-procurement process will be carried out in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. A UK Notice will be issued, and the Council will adopt the Light Touch Regime for this procurement. The proposed top level evaluation criteria will be:

- Price 30%
- Quality 60% (including 5% allocated to Carbon Reduction)
- Social Value 10%

## **8. Legal Implications**

The Council must comply with its Equality Act 2010 duties and in particular s.149 of the Equality Act 2010. As the decision maker, Cabinet has a duty to have due regard to the stated aims. An Equality Impact Assessment is attached as at Appendix 1 and the equality implications are summarised in this report.

### **In relation to recommendation 1:**

The main body of the report seeks approval to extend the term of the contract with for a further 3-month period to secure continuity of service pending a re-procurement exercise for replacement services.

The Council has exhausted its options to extend the contract under the terms of the contract and is seeking approval under Regulation 72 of The Public Contracts Regulations (PCR 2015) to modify the contract to allow for a further three-month extension. PCR 2015 applies as the aggregated value of the original contract, the subsequent direct award and this extension mean it is above the Light Touch Regime threshold.

PCR 2015 sets out instances where the modification of a contract does not trigger new procurement activity. The Council may in this instance rely on Regulation 72 (1) (e) of PCR 2015 to extend the term of the contract because the modification, irrespective of its value, is not substantial. The modification must not change the substance of the services to be delivered or extend its scope or change the economic balance of the contract in favour of the contractor in a manner which was not provided for in the initial contract or indeed falls under any of the provisions set out in Regulation 72 (1) (8).

The Council must take note that despite Regulation 72(1)(e) every modification of contract carries a potential risk of challenge. To mitigate the risk in this particular case, it is imperative that the Council maintains a clear audit trail of the justification for the extension and the decision-making process and has in place a robust timetable for the procurement of replacement services to ensure that a new contract is awarded before the end of the extension period.

Council Officers must be able to demonstrate that the extension will offer Best Value to the Council and that the contract will continue to meet the Council's requirements.

The Council must ensure that the Contracts Register is updated accordingly.

**In relation to recommendation 2:**

The services to be called off fall under the Light Touch Regime (LTR) and however it is important to note that they are under the LTR threshold.

Under the Public Contracts Regulations (PCR 2015) there is no prescribed procedure for the procurement of light touch services. Contracting Authorities have flexibility to use any process or procedure they choose to run the procurement for light touch services, as long as the procedure is in compliance with the mandatory requirements set out in PCR 2015 summarised below:

- i) FTS Advertising: The publication of a contract notice (CN) or prior information notice (PIN). Except where the grounds for using the negotiated procedure without a call for competition could have been used, for example where there is only one provider capable of supplying the services required.
- ii) The publication of a contract award notice following the procurement.
- iii) Compliance with the principles of transparency, non-discrimination, and equal treatment.
- iv) Time limits imposed by authority on suppliers, such as for responding to adverts and tenders, must be reasonable and proportionate. There are no stipulated minimum time periods in the LTR rules, and guidance suggests that contracting authorities should use their discretion and judgement on a case by case basis.

It is important that a proper audit trail is maintained throughout the procurement process to evidence the above process is followed.

The TUPE Regulations must be taken into consideration as part of the preparations for the commissioning and any subsequent re-commissioning of these services.

The procurement process proposed in the main body of the report provides a compliant route to market under PCR 2015 and also the Council's Contract Regulations.

**In relation to recommendations 3 and 4:**

The delegations referred to are permissible under section 9E of the Local Government Act 2000.

## **9. Financial Implications**

- 9.1. The award for this contract requires in total £1,242k over five years period, which is £248.4k per annum.
- 9.2. The annual budget is made of £216k per annum existing revenue budget and total of £32.4k per annum contribution from Housing, Childrens Services Early Help revenue budgets and external grant funding.
- 9.3. There is no impact on revenue budget as a result of this contract for the first three years as funding totalling £745.2k is confirmed . The funding for the extension of the contract in year four and five is subject to budget availability. If financial resources for the extension of the contract in year four and five are not made available, the service will be reduced by a variation to the contract.
- 9.4. There is no expectation of cashable savings as a result of this contract.
- 9.5. The proposed extension of the existing contract for three months, from 1st January 2025 to 31st March 2025 is fully funded from the existing budget.

## **10. Equalities implications / Public Sector Equality Duty**

- 10.1. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out the public sector equality duty to which the authority must have due regard. The Council's public sector equality duty is set out in s149 of the Equality Act 2010.
- 10.2. A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
  - a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act.
  - b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - c) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- 10.3. The relevant protected characteristics are age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex and sexual orientation. The proposed service must be open to all residents and the Council will have due regard to those with protected characteristics. Equalities monitoring is incorporated as part of the contract monitoring process to help identify the profile of service users accessing the service to ensure that the service is able to meet their needs and the Council is able to fulfil its equality duty.
- 10.4. As part of the re-commissioning process, a full EQIA has been undertaken to identify and address any disproportionality. The service is designed to positively impact all individuals seeking information and advice, however minor impact has been identified for some protected characteristics, with the mitigation also outlined in the EQIA.

## 11. Council Priorities

- 11.1. The recommissioning of the general information and advice service helps the Council meet its corporate priority of 'A council that puts residents first' and 'A place where those in need are supported' by procuring a service for Harrow residents in need that supports them to access help seamlessly at the earliest possible opportunity.

### **Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance**

**Statutory Officer: Ella Kesek**

Signed on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer

**Date: 21/06/2024**

**Statutory Officer: Abdul Elghedafi**

Signed on behalf of the Monitoring Officer

**Date: 27/06/2024**

**Chief Officer: Alex Dewsnap**

Signed by the Managing Director

**Date: 27/06/2024**

**Head of Procurement: Marzuki Haji**

Signed on behalf of the Head of Procurement

**Date: 28/06/2024**

Has the Portfolio Holder(s) been consulted? Yes

### **Mandatory Checks**

Ward Councillors notified: NO, as it impacts on all Wards

EqlA carried out: YES

EqlA cleared by: Jennifer Rock, (Acting) Policy Officer, EDI Team

### **Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers**

Contact: Tahira Bakhtiari, Policy Officer, [Tahira.bakhtiari@harrow.gov.uk](mailto:Tahira.bakhtiari@harrow.gov.uk)

Background Papers: No

**Call-in waived by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee: NO**