

**Housing Advice Service – Award Contract**

<b>Report of:</b>	<i>Acting Business Manager Housing Services</i>	<b>WARDS AFFECTED</b>  <b>ALL</b>
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<b>Lead Member Responsible:</b>	<i>Councillor Ed Turner Housing and Economic Development Portfolio Holder</i>	
<i>Overview and Scrutiny Committee</i>	<i>Housing</i>	
<i>Key Decision</i>	<i>Yes</i>	

**SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2003 the Executive Board authorised Housing Services to seek competitive tenders for the provision of housing legal advice in Oxford.**
- 2. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 2004 the EB authorised Officers to negotiate with two tenderers to ensure the contract could be let within the approved budget.**
- 3. Formal interviews with the tenderers were held on Friday 29 October 2004**
- 4. There are no staffing implications for the Council.**
- 5. The financial implications are as set out in this report.**
- 6. The proposal will help deliver the Council's vision in terms of the provision of affordable housing and in enhancing community safety, by providing advice on housing/homelessness issues to the community, and will contribute to the financial stability of the Council by helping to prevent homelessness.**
- 7. The proposal also accords with the broad themes of the Council's Community Strategy.**

## **Recommendations:**

### **The Executive Board is ASKED to:**

- a. Agree to the selection of Turpin, Miller and Higgins, Solicitors as the preferred supplier of the Housing Advice Service contract.**
- b. Authorise the Strategic Director, Housing Health and Community to enter into an appropriate contract with Turpin, Miller and Higgins Solicitors to provide the Housing Advice Service as specified for a three-year period commencing 4 April 2005.**
- c. Grant major project approval for the letting of the above contract.**

## **1.0 Background**

- .1 Following the review of housing advice in Oxford commissioned by the Housing Scrutiny Committee in early 2003, the Executive Board on 3 November 2003 agreed a number of recommendations, including a recommendation to seek competitive tenders for the provision of housing advice.
- .2 A further report outlining how housing advice should be provided between April 2004 and September 2004 (April 2005 if necessary) was presented and the recommendation approved on 24 November 2003.
- .3 A tender process involving the OJEC rules for procurement began in May 2004 with a closing date for submitted tender documentation by 27 August 2004.
- .4 Two submitted tenders were received, both with a tender price in excess of the budget available.
- .5 On 4 October EB agreed that Officers should negotiate with the tenderers to ensure a contract could be let within approved budget level.
- .6 Prior to negotiations with both tenderers, discussions were held with advice agencies in Oxford, including CAB and Welfare Rights, and a representative from the Legal Services Commission. It was considered that the most effective way of providing a housing advice service was through a single organisation providing the full range of housing advice to the community and to be a resource that advice agencies could access when required.

## **2.0 Tender Negotiations**

2.1 An informal meeting was held with each tenderer on 8 October 2004. The meeting was held to discuss possible reductions in the submitted tender price and any areas of the specification that could be prioritised or limited in volume in any way. Tenderers were asked to present their proposals to deliver the specified service within the approved budget of £167,000.

2.2 It was made clear by both tenderers that they would not be able to provide a service by 3 January 2005 as expected by the Council. The lead in time for recruitment, training, acquisition of premises where necessary and other start up arrangements was too short to achieve a commencement in January 2005. Both tenderers proposed an achievable start date of 4 April 2005 for the service.

2.3. Formal Interviews with both tenderers took place on Friday 29 October 2004.

2.4 The annual budget available for this contract is £167,000. This includes £161,000 from the City Council and £6,000 from West Oxfordshire District Council. The contract documents will set out the precise nature of the relationship between the selected supplier and both the City Council and WODC.

2.5 Cherwell District Council has confirmed they do not wish to participate in a joint approach to the provision of housing advice.

2.6 Both South Oxfordshire DC and the Vale of White Horse have not made a decision yet. If subsequent to the letting of this contract either or both of these authorities decide to use the housing advice service provided by the contractor then they will need to negotiate the level of service they require and agree a price with the contractor outside this contract.

2.7 **Turpin, Miller and Higgins Solicitors (TMH)** – a revised tender price for the first year of operation is £159,996. This will provide 4 caseworkers and 3 support workers specifically for this contract. TMH is able to provide the specified service from 4 April 2005. In addition TMH have recently been awarded a Legal Services Commission (LSC) contract to provide specialist-housing advice – part of the service previously provided in Oxford by OHRC. The provision of a County Court Scheme to help clients who need representation at court will be provided. A strong commitment was given by TMH to work with the Council and other agencies to provide the service. TMH is awaiting the outcome of a bid to CLS to pilot technological improvements to provide outreach/remote access to housing advice service. TMH propose a ‘monitoring committee’ made up of agencies representatives to discuss service and progress. TMH gave a commitment to pilot this service provision with City Council, WODC and Women’s Aid from 4 April 2005. Overall the proposals from TMH meet the needs of the Council and the advice agencies in Oxford from the commencement of the contract. TMH have a trusted reputation within the existing advice sector and have established mature working relationships with a range of advice providers. TMH has also used the tender process to promote the advice needs of Oxford and has successfully bid for a number of new contracts with the Legal Services Commission, including funding to provide advice and support to people suffering domestic violence.

2.8 **Shelter** – also submitted a tender and negotiations were completed, but for a number of reasons Shelter are not the preferred contractor to supply this service.

### 3.0 Tender Evaluation

3.1 The tender evaluation process is now complete and the following criteria were used to determine the preferred contractor to be recommended to provide the service.

**Criteria:**

Price.

References.

A formal interview/presentation on service delivery.

Evaluation of health and safety and equalities policies statements.

Evaluation of method statements on delivery of service training of staff and other advice agencies in Oxford.

Demonstrate commitment to work in partnership with the Council; knowledge of local advice network in Oxford; and knowledge of social welfare law.

3.2 During the tender and negotiation stages the working relationship with TMH was a key consideration. Officers are confident that a positive working relationship with TMH will be developed, and that they will be constructive, helpful, and committed to ensuring the delivery of housing advice with primary emphasis on the prevention of homelessness. The Council will ensure the contract award letter makes this clear and that these considerations form a part of the housing advice service contract.

#### **4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation**

4.1 Overall the tender process has been satisfactory and the Executive Board is asked to award the housing advice service contract to Turpin, Miller and Higgins Solicitors for a three-year period commencing April 2005.

THIS REPORT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY:  
Business Unit Manager – David Higgins - Finance  
Business Unit Manager – Lindsay Cane - Legal and Democratic Services  
Portfolio Holder – Councillor Ed Turner

Background documents:

Oxford Homelessness Strategy

Housing Scrutiny Committee report on Review of Housing Advice – 4 April 2003

Executive Board report on Housing Advice Service – Tender Negotiation – 4 October 2004