

To: City Executive Board
Date: 18 September 2018
Report of: Head of Housing
Title of Report: Re-commissioning of Housing Advisory Contract

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To request the City Executive Board agree the re-commissioning of an independent housing advisory service.
Key decision:	Yes
Executive Board Member:	Deputy Leader (Statutory) – Leisure & Housing (Councillor Linda Smith)
Corporate Priority:	Meeting Housing Needs
Policy Framework:	Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2018 to 2021
Recommendations: That the City Executive Board resolves to:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Re-commission the contract to provide an independent housing advisory contract; and 2. Delegate authority to the Head of Housing to award the contract in the best interests of the Council. 	

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Initial Equality Impact Assessment
Appendix 2	Risk Register

Introduction and background

1. This report is to seeking approval for the re-commissioning of the independent advisory contract for housing (which has had as its primary aims the prevention of homelessness and tenancy sustainment).
2. Local Housing Authorities have a statutory duty under the Housing Act 1996 to provide advisory services about homelessness including its prevention. The Act was amended from 3 April 2018 through changes made by the Homelessness Reduction

Act 2017 (HRA 17). The report to CEB in December 2017 set this out further. The duty regarding the prevention of homelessness is key to the success of the changes with the definition of “threatened with homelessness” changing to a period of 56 days (from 28 days) in which an applicant is likely to become homeless. (The 56 day period almost mirrors the period of a (no fault) s21 notice, the most common cause of homelessness). There is now a requirement for the authority to work with the applicant and produce a detailed personal housing plan, setting out the steps to be taken by both applicant and Council to help prevent homelessness. This has to be regularly reviewed and updated by the authority until prevention has been prevented (or the applicant has become homeless, when there are duties to help secure accommodation for at least 56 days, even if an applicant is not owed a statutory duty to secure settled accommodation).

Current position

3. The budgetary provision for an independent housing advice service has been provided and commissioned for many years, with the two key goals of the prevention of homelessness and sustaining the client in suitable housing. Shelter is the current provider of this service, with its contract ending on 30 September 2018. (A procurement waiver totalling six months will be requested to ensure continuity of independent advice.) It must be re-commissioned to comply with procurement requirements. The current value is £80,000 per annum and similar levels of budgetary provision continue although its full use is not recommended (as explained below). The current contract requires Shelter to provide a “drop-in” advisory service on two days a week; both of these are in St Aldates Chambers, following the closure of Templars Square. Office accommodation (in the Town Hall) is also provided within the contract.

Effect of 3 April 2018 changes to the Housing Act

4. Housing Options Officers currently do much homeless prevention work as part of their day to day work. There has been a significant increase in statutory prevention work because of the legislative changes and there has been an increase in capacity within the Options Team to manage the increased workload.
5. The change to the definition of “threatened with homelessness” to a period of 56 days means that Housing Options Officers are picking up cases at an earlier stage and Shelter (as current independent Housing Advice provider) is referring these clients to the Options Team, when previously they would have provided services in the 28-56 day period.
6. Furthermore, there is now a legislative requirement to complete a detailed assessment of needs and support in a personal housing plan. Actions are agreed by both officer and client to help secure or maintain suitable housing. It is considered that better outcomes are achieved when there is a single officer working with the client through this process and there is now capacity for this to happen. Additionally, under the Trailblazer Project, the Council now has an officer from both Aspire and Connections come into the office once a week, which will further help the assistance provided to many vulnerable single applicants.

The New Contract:

7. Officers consider there is merit in an independent advisory service. The primary focus will remain unchanged (although statutory prevention work would be directed to the Housing Options Team).
8. We are currently refining the contract specification for the new contract but it is envisaged that the contract provider would deal with the more complex cases on a referral basis from an advice agency. The agencies are capable of offering much general housing and homelessness advice as reflected in their statistical returns.
9. We would expect the contract provider to be able to offer the following:
 - Homelessness prevention advice
 - Tenancy Advice
 - General Housing Advice (including applying for housing)
 - Tenancy Sustainment work, including:
 - Budgeting support and debt advice
 - Working with employability providers
 - Family Support
 - Rent deposit advice (including the return of deposits paid to landlords)

Additionally, we will specify the contract provider provides regular training to improve the housing advice given by the advice agencies in Oxford.

10. Independent challenge would not be affected. There are two main areas of challenge: those in relation to the housing register and allocations (Part 6 of the Housing Act) and those relating to homeless decisions (Part 7).

With regard to the former, Shelter currently help customers with only a very small number of these (less than the advice agencies). Part 7 challenges can be made using legal aid rules. They can be time consuming to prepare. Apart from individual applicants challenging decisions, we receive these on behalf of clients from the national Shelter advice centre or from solicitors (usually Turpin & Miller). These organisations are either approached directly by applicants, or referrals made by Shelter locally to them. There is no reason why advice agencies cannot provide this referral role and we would expect this to happen.

11. As noted previously, all advice has been provided from City Council offices. Officers feel that an improved presence outside of the city centre would be beneficial, and that this also has the potential to improve links and housing advice provision at the four advice agencies in Oxford (Rose Hill and Donnington, Blackbird Leys, Oxfordshire Welfare Rights (Barton) and Citizens Advice). We envisage that the agencies would be able to offer much advice on housing and tenancy sustainment with referrals to the contract provider (who we hope could locate in one of the agencies) for more complex cases.

This neighbourhood approach should help more residents and also enable other issues and problems to be dealt with at the same time.

12. The provider will send statistical returns to officers to help ensure the wider objectives of the new contract are met. Quarterly monitoring meetings will be a

requirement of the contract. The referral process will be closely monitored to ensure arrangements are effective and the number of clients assisted remains high.

13. The value of the new contract would be expected to be in the region of £40,000 per annum and will start on 1 April 2019 for an initial two year period. The end date will therefore mirror that of the contract awarded to the advice agencies.

Financial Implications:

14. As part of the wider changes stemming from the HRA17 new statistical returns for Homelessness Prevention to Government have been introduced. These are important as some measures feature in some of the Government funding formulas for the Flexible Homeless Support Grant (FHSG) and HRA17 New Burdens funding. The key difference is that a person must have approached the Local Authority and made an application or had an initial assessment, and homelessness has been prevented. Therefore, the approach to the Council has to be at the start of the process. Previously, it did not matter whether the person had approached the Council or a separate agency.
15. There is no impact on approved budgets for the service area as the new contract is within existing budgetary provision, and should allow for some virement of budgets within homelessness to improve frontline delivery of homelessness prevention work.

Legal issues

16. This contract will be tendered through the usual procurement process.

Equalities impact

17. This is attached as Appendix 1.

Level of risk

18. A risk register is attached as Appendix 2.

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Background Papers: None