

VAWG and Youth Safety Commissioning

222 Upper Street N1 1XR

Report of: Corporate Director of Children's Services

Date: 7 March 2024

Ward(s): all

Contract award for 2223-0251 Domestic Abuse refuge

1. Synopsis

- 1.1. This report seeks approval for the contract award for the Domestic Abuse refuge service in accordance with Rule 31.1 of the Council's Procurement Rules.
- 1.2. The refuge will aim to meet the specific needs of women escaping abuse and be inclusive to women self-identifying as transgender women. The refuge service will operate in women-only buildings and only employ women staff. The refuge will provide a safe place to stay for survivors and their children and will aim to address both practical and emotional needs of families.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To award the contract for the Domestic Abuse refuge to Solace Women's Aid for the contract period of 36 months from an estimated start date of 1 April 2024 with provision to extend on one or more occasions not exceeding a further forty eight (48) months (maximum of 84 months) subject to satisfactory performance and available funding.
- 2.2. The total contract value is £1,284,087 for the maximum 84 month contract period based on an annual value of £183,441.

3. Date the decision is to be taken

- 3.1. 14 March 2024

4. Background

4.1. Nature of the service

- 4.1.1. The Domestic Abuse refuge accommodation and support service will reduce the level and impact of domestic abuse in Islington by increasing the safety of survivors and their families through:
- Meeting the specific needs of women escaping abuse and be inclusive to women self-identifying as transgender women. The refuge service will operate in women-only buildings and only employ women staff.
 - Providing a safe place to stay for survivors and their children and aiming to address both practical and emotional needs of families.
 - Providing women and their children with one to one and peer support aiming to enable families to cope with the trauma they've experienced, leave abusive relationships, regain their self-esteem and support them to begin rebuilding their life in safety and independence.
 - Demonstrating anti-racist values through actions and accountability to survivors from Black, Asian and minoritised backgrounds based on collaboration, inclusivity, and intersectional representation.
- 4.1.2. The council's VAWG Procurement Strategy 2023 -2032 was approved at the Executive meeting on 13 October 2022. The Domestic Abuse refuge service will deliver one third of the VAWG procurement strategy objectives. The rest of the objectives are covered in two separate procurements for the Core and Targeted IDVA and Black, Asian and minoritised women services, these contracts commenced in April 2023.
- 4.1.3. The council has a statutory duty to provide support to survivors of VAWG and their children. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 includes the duty to:
- provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children within safe accommodation, to ensure that victims and their children across England can access the right support in safe accommodation when they need it.
 - recognise children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right where they see, hear or experience the effects of domestic abuse. As such, any applicable duties in the Act toward victims apply to children falling under this definition to ensure they are duly supported in dealing with the impacts of experiencing abuse.
 - ensure that every victim/survivor, whether adult or child, is treated as an individual with different experiences, reactions and needs. Local areas should ensure that services are flexible and responsive to the victim's experience and voice, recognising both risk and need.
 - Offer community-based support for all children and survivors affected by domestic abuse
- 4.1.4. The strategy also adheres to The Children Act 1989 and 2004 and local and national Supporting Families Framework.

- 4.1.5. The refuge service will:
- Safeguard survivors and their children
 - Enable survivors to cope and recover from experiences of violence and abuse
 - Advocate for safety of women and girls and aspire to end violence against women and girls
 - Ensure survivors and their families have the opportunity to attain their full development and advancement, and lead happy and fulfilling lives
- 4.1.6. The refuge service will work in partnership with council services and other VAWG support organisations including Black, Asian and minoritised women, LGBTQ+ and services supporting disabled survivors. The service will establish partnership working arrangements with those services.
- 4.1.7. The service will also provide “floating support” to women after they move on from the refuge accommodation into follow on accommodation.
- 4.1.8. In preparation for this procurement the pre-tender assessment information was gathered and was informed by the Islington VAWG Strategy 2021 – 2026, which was launched in November 2021. The strategy sets out the borough’s commitment to make Islington a safer place to live, work, travel and visit for women and girls. This is achieved through increased investment in specialist VAWG Services funding new IDVA roles and establishing one of the first multi-agency DA Daily Safeguarding Meeting (DSM) in London, to provide a much faster, whole-system response to address perpetrators behaviours and address the needs of survivors and their children.
- 4.1.9. The service will work toward the delivery of the council’s VAWG strategic objectives to:
- Create and deliver a coordinated community response**
- Share the commitment to ending violence across organisations and communities so that no form of VAWG is tolerated and women and girls feel safe in their homes, schools, workplaces, public places and on public transport
 - Ensure that all victims/survivors can be confident that they will be believed if they report VAWG and that their disclosure will trigger immediate actions to support their safety and the safety of their families whilst also holding the perpetrator accountable
 - Develop education, training, awareness raising and communications campaigns to create a common language and understanding of VAWG and the services and support available to survivors, families and perpetrators
- Prevent violence and abuse from happening**
- Develop public awareness campaigns to prevent harassment and sexual violence in private and public spaces, to include targeted age-appropriate messages and messages specifically targeted at perpetrators
 - Educate children and young people about VAWG and healthy relationships with specific focused interventions with boys and young men in schools as well as in other settings working with children and young people

- Support the development of the VAWG Community Champions scheme to empower local communities and provide a network of peer-to-peer support and community educators including information for perpetrators

Protect survivors and families and provide support to help them to repair and recover from the violence and abuse they have experienced

- Deliver services across the Islington partnership that are both gender and trauma informed, victim and family centred, and which recognise the impacts of coercive and controlling behaviours
- Provide a prompt coordinated multi-agency safeguarding response to survivors and families at risk of serious harm and/or domestic homicide through Islington's DA Daily Safeguarding Meeting
- Support children, young people, and families to help them to process what has happened and to recover through innovative recovery-based services and counselling/therapeutic support

Challenge inequality throughout the delivery of or VAWG services and approach to prevent discrimination and address the impacts of intersectionality

- Equip and support our services to be survivor voice led and able to recognise the impacts of intersectionality so that they are able to work with survivors experiencing discrimination and multiple disadvantage
- Work collectively to combat racism and all forms of discrimination recognising that a one size fits all approach doesn't work including the ring fencing of funding for specialist VAWG services working with Black and minoritised communities
- Provide targeted work and resources to improve engagement and increase provision for other under-represented groups including LGBTQ+ communities, older people, and people with disabilities

Make perpetrators visible and accountable

- Work in partnership with services offering interventions and support to people using violence in their relationships where they have expressed a desire to change their behaviour and demonstrate self-awareness and insight into what they have done
- Work together with our statutory partners to improve criminal justice outcomes for survivors of all forms of VAWG including rape and sexual violence where offences have been reported
- Advocate for survivors ensuring that perpetrators will be visible and accountable in safety planning and work with families and services to acknowledge that they pose the primary risk to children in child safeguarding arrangements

4.1.10. Quotes provided by Islington refuge residents as part of pre-commissioning consultation:

- "I felt safe near her [refuge case worker]. Wrapped in care, I really felt like a human being and happy there because of them [refuge staff]."
- "I absolutely needed help and I received amazing therapy and support. The service is already good enough, all issues and inquiries are always dealt with immediately. Thank you so much for your ongoing support and helping women at their most vulnerable times in their lives."
- "The journey was easier with you to be honest, it was best moments of my life. To be able to stop things which was destroying me."

4.2. **Estimated value**

- 4.2.0. The Domestic Abuse refuge service is funded by the Council's Core VAWG budget. The contract period is 36 months with an estimated start date of 1 April 2024 with provision to extend on one or more occasions not exceeding a further forty eight (48) months (maximum of 84 months) subject to satisfactory performance and available funding.
- 4.2.1. The total contract value is £1,284,087 for the maximum 84 month contract period based on an annual value of £183,441.
- 4.2.2. Solace Women's Aid has also submitted additional social value offer described in paragraph 4.5.
- 4.2.3. Solace will provide 21 rooms for survivors and their children. The provision of a successful refuge service through this contract provides excellent value for money and crucial support to improve the safety of survivors and their children.
- 4.2.4. Islington's VAWG commissioning outcome measurement framework and contract monitoring process adheres to the set of National Shared Core Standards developed by members of a VAWG Sustainability Working Group, which drive forward quality improvements and provide benchmarks for service providers, funders and commissioners about the extent and mix of services that should be available, who should provide them, and the principles and practice base from which they should operate (Home Office 2016) as well as recommendations from SafeLives and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner.
- 4.2.5. Refuge outputs. In 2022/2023 financial year Islington's two refuge sites:
- Operated at 94% capacity (based on 21 bed spaces)
 - Moved 92% of women/families in a planned way to follow on accommodation providing additional floating support for three further months to all women/families
 - Provided direct support to 105 children residing at the refuges with their mothers
- 4.2.6. Refuge impact: Islington refuge service provide exceptional outcomes for survivors of VAWG. The high impact delivery combined with well-established partnership approach means that Islington survivors feel significantly safer after engaging with services. Key outcomes delivered in 2022-2023:
- 72% of Islington survivors feel safer after engaging with IDVA services (this is 7% higher than London average and 11% higher than National average according to *A Patchwork of Provision; How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales* - Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report)
 - 73% of Islington survivors feel more in control after engaging with the IDVA services (this is 13% higher than London average and 14% higher than National average according to *A Patchwork of Provision; How to meet the*

needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales - Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report)

In addition, following intervention from the family support services:

- 96% of mothers reported improved confidence in their parenting skills
- 86% of children and young people reported improved relationship with their mother
- 89% of children and young people reported improved resilience and emotional wellbeing
- 92% of children and young people reported feeling safer

4.2.5 Women's Aid Evidence Hub DA report estimated (based on national research) found that annual cost of domestic abuse in Islington was £25.7 million:

- £8.5m (33%) – lost economic output
- £7.7m (30%) – physical and mental health care
- £5.6m (22%) – criminal justice
- £1.7m (7%) – civil legal services
- £1.35m (5%) – social services
- £0.9m (4%) – housing and refuges

4.3. **Timetable**

4.3.1. The current contract for this service expires on 31 March 2024. Due to Solace Women's Aid being the current provider TUPE will not apply.

4.3.2. The new contract is due to commence on 1 April 2024.

4.4. **Options appraisal**

4.4.1. Procurement routes considered:

- Option 1 – Joint commissioning
- Option 2 – Consortium model
- Option 3 – In-sourcing provision
- Option 4 – Procurement via competitive tender process

4.4.2. Joint commissioning was considered however this was not a recommended option due to lack of interest from the boroughs we approached due to the differences in their respective commissioning arrangements for VAWG services.

4.4.3. Consortium model was not a recommended option. Such an approach will impact on the ability to provide domestic abuse specialised services, as it would not be economically viable and would disadvantage more specialist domestic abuse services providers whilst part of consortium with a larger housing provider.

4.4.4. In-sourcing provision was not the recommended option. Providing the service in-house would risk losing the specialist knowledge and expertise that the established voluntary and independent providers have gained working with survivors. Many of the main providers of VAWG services have established track records in the delivery of VAWG services and are able to provide economical additionality through their built-in services e.g. specialist legal services and counselling providing better value for money. The key reason for not in-sourcing the provision is to offer survivors

independent advocacy provided by Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) providers. From consultations with survivors, we are aware that they value this when previously encountered challenging or in their perspective negative experiences with council services (i.e. involvement with Social Services or Housing). More-over delivering in-house VAWG provision goes against the Domestic Abuse Commissioner recommendation. The benefit of awarding the contracts to VCS providers is bridging the gap between survivors and statutory services including encouraging the survivors to engage with police.

4.4.5. Procurement via competitive tender process was the recommended option. The commissioning model is designed to ensure thorough oversight from a contractual, budgetary and performance management perspective, whilst still meeting need and demand for specialist services and best achieving economies of scale. The option demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that services are focussed on the needs of survivors of VAWG.

4.5. **Key Considerations**

4.5.1. In addition to the holistic proposed approach towards meeting survivors needs, reducing the risks and managing partnership approach, Solace set out their approach to providing additional value of activities that they propose to deliver beyond the contractual obligation including how those activities will improve the social, economic, and environmental outcomes of the local area. Those include:

- Legal surgeries
- Specialist briefing and training sessions for survivors and professionals including from local VCS providers focusing on improving wellbeing, support into work CV workshops and independent living
- Social Work student placements
- Offering opportunities for Islington Care Leavers to engage in volunteering as well as promoting paid roles recruitment via the Care Leavers services

4.5.2. London Living Wage has been considered and will apply.

4.5.3. Best value procurement was considered and ensuring tender values quality over costs to enable specialist VAWG providers to apply.

4.5.4. There is no TUPE implications.

4.6. **Evaluation**

4.6.1. The tender was conducted in one stage, known as the Open Procedure, as the tender is 'open' to all organisations who express an interest. The Open Procedure included minimum requirements which organisations must meet before the rest of their tender is evaluated.

4.6.2. The contract was awarded to the Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT) in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations. MEAT for this contract is cost 30% and quality 70%.

Quality made up of:

- Proposed model of service and staffing (20%) – successful provider scored 16%
- Proposed approach to social value (20%) – successful provider scored 20%
- Proposed approach to meeting the needs of a diverse client group and promoting the voice of survivors (10%) – successful provider scored 8%
- Proposed approach to managing risk and safety (10%) – successful provider scored 10%
- Proposed approach to quality assurance, service monitoring and continuous improvement (5%) – successful provider scored 5%
- Proposed approach to partnership and multi-agency working (5%) – successful provider scored 5%

Cost 30% - successful provider scored 30%

Quality 70% - successful provider scored 64%

- Provider exceeded the minimum requirement of the method statement on two questions
- There was no 'added value' on these two questions, but this does not impact the high quality of the provision being offered.
- They added significant value to the method statement on the remaining three questions

Total 100% - provider scored 94%

4.6.3. The successful bid exceeded requirements for two of the award criteria, and added significant value in the other four award criteria (including the proposed approach to social value) scoring top marks of five out of five. Overall, Solace Women's Aid achieved a score of 64% for quality and 30% for cost.

4.6.4. The commissioning model was designed to ensure thorough oversight from a contractual, budgetary and performance management perspective, whilst still meeting need and demand for specialist services and best achieving economies of scale. The successful provider demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that services are focused on the needs of survivors of VAWG.

4.6.5. The commissioning process was informed by consultation with key stakeholders including service users, survivors, and their children (where appropriate), VAWG service providers and statutory, voluntary and community VAWG Strategy Board partners. The consultation was completed as part of the development of the VAWG Procurement strategy 2023. The ongoing co-production with survivors informed the final service specification and Experts in Experience joined the procurement panel.

4.6.6. The evaluation panel consisted of:

- Two Experts in Experience
- Specialist VAWG Multiple-Disadvantage advisor and
- VAWG Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Panel chair)

4.7. **Business risks**

- 4.7.1. Recruitment. Provider will continue to work close with Islington Council on prioritising local recruitment, increasing volunteering capacity and utilising VAWG services to promote any upcoming vacancies. Solace have a robust pull of in-house locum staff ensuring better safeguarding of HR processes.
- 4.7.2. Poor quality of referrals increasing the risk of survivors need to move out of the refuge in an emergency. Provider will work with the Islington VAWG Workforce Development Team to deliver refresher awareness/training with partner organisations, targeted communication campaigns via VAWG networks to ensure referrals for the refuges are completed thoroughly and risk management plans are well considered.
- 4.7.3. The Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklist) Regulations 2010 explicitly prohibit the compilation, use, sale or supply of blacklists containing details of trade union members and their activities. Following a motion to full Council on 26 March 2013, all tenderers will be required to complete an anti-blacklisting declaration. Where an organisation is unable to declare that they have never blacklisted, they will be required to evidence that they have 'self-cleansed'. The Council will not award a contract to organisations found guilty of blacklisting unless they have demonstrated 'self-cleansing' and taken adequate measures to remedy past actions and prevent re-occurrences.
- 4.7.4. The following relevant information is required to be specifically approved in accordance with rule 2.8 of the Procurement Rules:

Relevant information	Information/section in report
1. Nature of the service	To agree the contract Domestic Abuse refuge to be awarded to Solace Women's Aid, as outlined in this report. See paragraph 2.1
2. Estimated value	Contract value is £1,284,087 for the maximum 84 month contract period based on an annual value of £183,441. See paragraph 4.2
3. Timetable	The current contract expires on 31 March 2024. This contract should commence on the 1 April 2024.

	See paragraph 4.3
4. Options appraisal for tender procedure including consideration of collaboration opportunities	Procurement via competitive tender process was the recommended option. See paragraph 4.4
5. Consideration of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social benefit clauses; • London Living Wage; • Best value; • TUPE, pensions and other staffing implications 	The provider scored 20% (max score) for Social Value See paragraph 4.5
6. Award criteria	The provider was chosen to the Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT) in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations. MEAT for this contract is quality 70% and cost 30%. See paragraph 4.6
7. Any business risks associated with entering the contract	As outlined in this report See paragraph 4.7
8. Any other relevant financial, legal or other considerations.	As outlined in this report See paragraph 5

5. Implications

5.1. Financial Implications

5.1.1. The report author is seeking approval of the award of the contract for the Domestic Abuse refuge to Solace Women's Aid for the initial contract period of 36 months from the 1 April 2024 with a provision to extend for a maximum of 48 months (maximum of 84 months in total).

5.1.2. The annual contract value is £183,441, amounting to £550,323 for the initial 36 months and £1,284,087 for the maximum contract period of 84 months.

5.1.3. There is sufficient funds within the core VAWG budget to cover the annual contract cost of £183,441.

5.1.4. There should be sound contract management in place to ensure VFM and availability of continuing funding before any extensions are made.

5.2. **Legal Implications**

5.2.1. This report seeks approval for the award of a contract to Solace Women's Aid for the provision of domestic abuse refuge services.

5.2.2. The Council has power to provide services in respect of domestic abuse refuge provision for women and children under the Care Act 2014 which specifies that freedom from abuse and neglect is a key aspect of a person's wellbeing (section 1(2)(c)), and local authorities have a duty to provide advice and support to prevent the arising or worsening of care and support needs arising from abuse (section 4).

5.2.3. The council may enter into contracts with providers of domestic abuse refuge services under section 1 of the Local Government (Contracts) Act 1997.

5.2.4. The total value of the proposed contract with Solace Women's Aid over the maximum seven year contract period is £1,284,087 (£183,441 per year) which is above the statutory threshold for "light-touch" contracts, so the provisions of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (the Regulations) are engaged. Therefore, the tender required advertisement on the Find a Tender service and this Contract Award Report must be published. The Council's Procurement Rules require contracts for "light touch" services over the value of £500,000 revenue to be subject to competitive tender.

5.2.5. The contract has been procured by competitive tendering using a procurement process based on the Open Procedure (Regulation 76) in compliance with the Regulations and the Council's Procurement Rules. The tender was advertised on the Find A Tender service.

5.2.6. The tender bids were evaluated and the award decision was based on the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT). Therefore, the Corporate Director may award this contract to Solace Women's Aid as recommended in this report.

5.3. **Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030**

5.3.1. Solace have been renting both refuge buildings from local housing association. Both building (exact details haven't been included in this report to ensure security of their locations) are being regularly checked and maintained by the landlord.

5.3.2. Solace are working in-line with ISO14001 standards.

- 5.3.3. Solace have environmental Policy, reviewed 3-yearly, ensuring local/ national alignment. Feeding into dedicated SMART Islington Service Action Plan. Overseen by Service Manager (updated quarterly), reported to Solace's Service Sub-Committee (Board of Trustees).
- 5.3.4. The landlord has launched their 2023-2026 Environmental Sustainability Strategy. This strategy includes:
- Improving energy efficiency
 - Using electric vehicles
 - Installing insulation, improving ventilation and replacing inefficient boilers and windows
 - Piloting new technologies to help tackle damp and mould
- 5.3.5. The commissioner will work with provider and the landlord to ensure both refuge sites are prioritised in the above improvements to raise the quality of life of refuge residents and make both buildings more sustainable.
- 5.4. **Equalities Impact Assessment**
- 5.4.1. The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.
- 5.4.2. An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required in relation to this report, because full EIA was completed as part of the review of the VAWG Procurement strategy (submitted April 2022) findings of which were used to implement this commissioning.

6. Conclusion and reasons for the decision

- 6.1. To agree the contract for the Domestic Abuse refuge to be awarded to Solace Women's Aid, as outlined in this report. Solace tender scored 94% providing exceptional quality submission and value for money including significant social value investment.

7. Record of the decision

7.1. I have today decided to take the decision set out in section 2 of this report for the reasons set out above.

Authorised by:

Corporate Director of Children's Services

Date: 14 March 2024

Appendices: None

Background papers: None

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