

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 19 October 2023

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Executive Director Environment & Regeneration

**PORTFOLIO:** Community Safety

**SUBJECT:** Refugee Resettlement Service Contract

**WARD(S)** Borough Wide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 The Report is to seek approval from Executive Board to arrange for the Resettlement Contract to be delivered in house.

The Refugee Resettlement Contract was first issued in 2019 and is due to expire on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. Plus Dane are the commissioned provider who deliver services to a number of diverse clients groups, including Refugee, Ukraine and asylum seeker households.

The report is to request that the upon expiry of the existing Resettlement contract, the service be transferred and delivered in house, which will involve TUPE arrangement process for the existing staffing Team.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That**

**(1) the report be noted; and**

**(2) the Board consider that upon expiry of the Resettlement Contract in March 2024, the service be transferred back In-house within the agreed Local Authority directorate.**

## **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **3.1 Background information**

Refugees resettled through the UK Government's humanitarian relief programmes are those where it has been determined that resettlement is in their best interests – principally (but not limited to) the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) whose purpose is to resettle 20,000 Refugees to the UK, who have fled conflict within their own countries. Also, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) whose purpose is to resettle up to 3,000 Refugees, specifically children at risk and their families, from

Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt.

- 3.1.2 The Local Authority commissioned Plus Dane Group in partnership with SHAP in 2019, to deliver the Refugee Resettlement service contact, which is due to expire on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.
- 3.1.3 The original service was set up as part of Halton's involvement in the VPRS Syrian resettlement scheme alongside our commitment to resettle 100 individuals from a wider Liverpool City Region pledge
- 3.1.4 The scheme has grown, and Halton pledged a further 80 individuals in 2019. Unfortunately, the pandemic resulted in a delay in achieving full resettlement, with 28 pledges remain outstanding.
- 3.1.5 However, since then Halton has become a Dispersal Area for asylum seekers and now has responsibility for a large initial assessment facility for asylum seekers.
- 3.1.6 There are ongoing commitments under Homes for Ukraine and widening responsibility to consider. As well as several areas of mounting tension across the world such as Libya, and Sudan. It is likely that Halton will continue to make further pledges to support refugees to integrate into Halton as part of the ongoing commitment to diversity Halton alongside our LCR Partners for years to come.
- 3.1.7 During the last three years the Government has requested further commitment from Local Authorities, to resettle a number of different diverse client groups, including Ukraine and Afghan families and asylum seekers with granted leave to remain. This has placed additional pressure upon all statutory and none statutory services.
- 3.1.8 Plus Dane have successfully delivered a valued service to the above client groups and instrumental in introducing new support services across the Borough.

### **3.2 Legal Requirements**

Government policy has altered recently with the Illegal Migration Act 2023. This means that as the government is rolling out attempts to reduce contracts held with Hotels currently being used as Contingency Accommodation. The Home Office are also seeking to legally deport new migrants arriving to the UK to Rwanda.

- 3.2.1 The Home office currently is looking to focus on safe and legal routes for asylum and refugee resettlement. However, there is currently a backlog of 7.000 cases nationally.

### **3.3 Core Business Flexibility**

The original program was set up with a clear timeline plan, however the needs of the cohort have changed dramatically with a further increase in demand.

3.3.1 There is a need for some in-built flexibility to respond to changes in policy and demand to reduce pressures on other front-line services. The current contract has been adapted to provide some flexibility to deal with high-risk asylum seeker cases, which this has been utilized on several occasions.

3.3.2 The Homes for Ukraine crisis meant a huge increase in capacity of caseloads with over 16 individuals arriving in the first two weeks and over 30 by the three-month stage with a total of 63 arriving in total.

3.3.3 The refugee services needed an element of flexibility in order to meet the demand, which was facilitated by the quality and willingness of the staff team. However unlike many other areas across the northwest Halton avoided having to contract for a further standalone service, as the contract provider was able to pull in additional resources within the existing team to meet demand.

#### **3.4 Current Operational Issues**

Currently the team consists of three full time staff members, two of which who are permanently employed by Plus Dane Group and one member who is employed permanently by their contracted partner SHAP. This has led to some confusion for the staff team which effects employment terms and conditions, as well as working across two different IT a software systems.

3.4.1 As the contract is due to end, it would be necessary to pursue the procurement process and commission a provider to manage the agreed future contract award. The uncertainty of the future of the service moving forward would likely dissuade providers from bidding for a short term contract.

3.4.2 The option to bring the service back into the Local Authority would offer a range of services, including translation in delivering a quality service.

#### **3.5 Contract Proposal Options**

A number of proposal options have been identified as detailed below.

- **Link in with General Tenancy support contract**  
Both the Generic Tenancy Support and Resettlement contracts are delivered by the same housing provider, Plus Dane.

Both contracts run parallel and expire March 2024. The procurement for the general support contact is underway, however, there is a reluctance to lock the Resettlement Contract in for a further three years.

- **Tender process via procurement for 1-2 years,**  
Option to offer a short term contract for upto two years is a consideration. However, there are concerns that a short term contract would not attract the right provider. This would also prove difficult and challenging for the new provider to fully meet the contractual requirements, which was an issue with the first contract issued to an external provider.
- **Waiver Process**  
Option to request a waiver for the existing contract for a further year upto 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025. This would allow the Local Authority additional time to bring the service back in house.
- **In House Service in accordance with TUPE**  
Bringing the service back into the Local Authority is the preferred option, which would give added value to the service delivery and prove more cost effective and beneficial to many of the Local Authority statutory services.

If agreeable, the service transfer and TUPE process would need to commence with immediate effect to meet the existing contract expiry.

### **3.6 Preferred Option**

The preferred option is to have an in-house Resettlement service, which would offer many benefits to the Local Authority;

- Bi-lingual case workers that can work across both Adult and Children`s services
- Flexible service provision to meet the changing Home Office demands
- Stability and security to existing team
- Minimal disruption to clients
- Cost effective service with added value.
- The team could make better use of local facilities, using community centres and other hot desk locations to meet with clients to further integrate them within the communities they live in.

### **3.7 Service Transfer**

Transferring the service in-house would require further discussions with the Plus Dane Group about the transfer of assets. The process should be straightforward, as the only assets being transferred would be the actual Staff team and access to files and data.

- 3.7.1 The service provider initially held paper files, however, all case records are held in a sharepoint document. There are a small number of active case records, which could be registered with the Local Authority, using Eclipse.

- 3.7.2 The in house service would offer substantial savings, given the present contract value. All savings would be transferred back into the Refugee Resettlement budget and utilised to increase and improve services across the Borough.
- 3.7.3 The existing Staff are a small team, consisting of three members, who, in accordance with employment law arrangements, would be subject to being transferred back into the Local Authority.
- 3.7.4 Presently there is a disparity around salaries, given that the caseworkers are employed by the two partnership agencies. The recommendation would be to bring staff in house and align salaries in line with Local Authority pay scales.
- 3.7.4 It is a Home Office requirement to provide Face to Face translation support in the first six weeks of arrival The present service provider contracts a bank of Self-employed translators who offer Face to Face and telephone-based translation – Predominantly Arabic but including, Russian, Kurdish, Farsi, Dari and Tigrinya.
- 3.7.5 The Local Authority could apply the same process by adding the translators to the HBC supplier list and they can be used when required,

### **3.8 Efficiencies**

The in house service indicates that there would be savings in the longer term. The annual cost of out-sourcing the Refugee Resettlement contract service is 186,305 per annum. However, there has not been an increase in value over the past three years, which would indicate that there would be additional costs going forward to cover cost of living and salary increase costs.

- 3.8.1 The in- house service would sit within the agreed directorate, whereby, it could be managed more efficiently, with control around budgets forecasts for both short and long term service planning. The service would enable the Local Authority to be more proactive when bidding for future funding streams, which will seek to benefit front line services for the this cohort and also the wider community.
- 3.8.2 If approved, the Local Authority would take a proactive approach in communicating their plan with the present provider and seek to make the transition streamlined for all involved, with limited impact on the existing contracts and commitments.

## **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 None

## **5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 As the programme is Home Office funded, there are no direct financial implications for the Local Authority. The proposal to bring the service in house would be more cost effective and efficient. The present contract value is due to increase substantially, whereby, the in house service would offer savings in excess of £100,000

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

### **6.1 Children & Young People in Halton**

- 6.1.2 Halton's participation in the UK Resettlement Schemes is seeing a change in its demographic, particularly in its schools with over 100 young refugees under the age of 18 now living in Halton who come from a variety of different countries, cultures and who don't have English as a first language.

- 6.1.3 Within the grant funding there is a separate education tariff to support those schools who have provided places to the refugee children

### **6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

- 6.2.1 As Halton's demographic changes - it's seen as a positive thing for the people of Halton to actively interact with people from different backgrounds, ensuring they are equipped with the skills and experiences to engage with the wider communities...

- 6.2.2 There are many statutory and voluntary agencies involved with this cohort of clients, to ensure they have access to education and employment to support them in their learning process to achieve positive career pathway plans

### **6.3 A Healthy Halton**

- 6.3.1 Whilst there have been some additional challenges around health related issues – these have been effectively managed by staff and partners, with regular meetings to ensure any issues are addressed as quickly as possible.

- 6.3.2 The Resettlement Team are actively involved with Health professionals to ensure clients are fully supported and all health issues are reported and addressed accordingly.

- 6.3.3 The provision of the in house Refugee Resettlement Service will contribute to improving the Health and Wellbeing of Halton

Residents.

**6.4 A Safer Halton**

None identified at this stage

**7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 The identified risks are those related to housing stock, capacity across Halton and community cohesion or tensions. Officers, working with Partners, are confident that if and when issues arise – they can be managed effectively, to ensure there is minimal negative impact upon either of the refugees or local residents

7.1.2 To pursue the option to procure and tender the service externally, there is a risk that a different provider may be appointed for a two /three year period, which may not be in the best interests of the existing vulnerable service users.

**8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

An EIA is not identified for this report

**9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 None identified at this stage

**10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None under the meaning of the Act.