



PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

Subject Heading:

Provision for Autism Support

SLT Lead:

Barbara Nicholls, Strategic Director of People

Report Author and contact details:

Sophie Barron, Commissioner & Project Manager,

T: 01708 431082

E: Sophie.Barron@havering.gov.uk

Policy context:

Delivering Integrated services and working in partnerships to achieve improved outcomes and value for money services for residents

Financial summary:

The current contract is £80k annually, and is an offer for adults 18+. The funding is cost neutral to the Council as it recommended to recommission an alternate service that meets current needs that can deliver the priorities in the Council's All Age Autism Strategy.

The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives

People - Things that matter for residents x

Place - A great place to live, work and enjoy

Resources - A well run Council that delivers for People and Place.

SUMMARY

The current contract with Sycamore Trust started in February 2018, and was extended again in 2021 due to a failed procurement cycle. At that time, no bid was qualified for the Autism 'lot' however in order to ensure continuity of service during the pandemic period, it was considered in the best of interests of users of the service and the council. Due to the current contracts approaching end date of the 31st January 2024 and difficulty in securing

additional funding, officers were preparing to give Sycamore Trust notice. However, the need for a final decision became urgent due to the need for Sycamore Trust to give three months' notice on their current lease. The Council confirmed on the 9th October 2023 that its intention was the contract would be allowed to lapse on 31st January 2024. It was and is intended that engagement with people with Autism, their families and communities is undertaken to plan with our residents the new service offer after the contract has ended. However it is recognised that there is now a risk of a gap in service for our vulnerable residents with Autism and their families, so it is proposed to extend the service for a further six months, to enable further time to work with people who use the current service around the future proposed model. It is of note that the service as currently commissioned, is an offer for those aged 18+, and in order to meet the aims of the All-Age Autism Strategy, a different service offer needs to be developed and commissioned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that People Subcommittee

- Notes the proposal to extend the current arrangement with the Sycamore Trust for 6 months (from 1st February 2024) whilst carrying out a review of services and ensure a new service model that is aligned to other available services (particularly the new and expanding service provided by North East London Foundation NHS Trust)
- Notes that the Sycamore Trust asked the Council to make its intentions clear by October 2023 due to the need for a three-month break clause in their current lease for premises
- Notes that to coincide with this review, it is proposed that the Council will engage with the autistic community to gain further insight on what the current needs are, providing the Council with an opportunity to map services across partner organisations to establish gaps and avoid any duplication. It is our intention to use this information to help determine and shape a service that meets the current needs of residents with Autism, their families and communities.
- Consider asking officers to return to this Sub committee in late Spring 2024 with an update.

REPORT DETAIL

1. Havering currently commissions the Sycamore Trust to deliver a preventative offer for Adults with Autism and related conditions only, at a cost of £80,000.00 per annum. The current contract ends on the 31st January 2024.
2. The current provider has delivered this service since 2018. In 2021 a procurement exercise was completed but the procurement cycle failed due to no suitable bids being received. As a result of this, an extension was awarded to the Sycamore

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Trust as an interim measure from 1st February 2021 to ensure continuity of service for users of the service, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was considered in the best interests of the council.

3. Throughout 2023, various options have been explored to secure additional investment to expand the adult service to an all-age offering to deliver on our 'All Age Autism Strategy', agreed by Cabinet in August 2022. It is now understood the Sycamore Trust do deliver an all age offer from the hub but by utilising funding from other Local Authorities. There is currently no peer support and social inclusion offer for Havering Children with Autism other than signposting and advice and a Parent Support Group. Unfortunately, despite exploring various funding streams it has not been possible with the current budget pressures impacting Havering and our Health partners, to secure any additional funding. This means completely redesigning the service offer to maximise the impact of the council funding of £80k.
4. With the launch of the all-age strategy and the development and expansion of NELFT's Autism Diagnostic pathways earlier in 2023, the current service specification is no longer fit for purpose. In addition, there have been some service delivery-related issues with the commissioned provider, i.e. low numbers of new referrals when now compared to the numbers coming through the new NELFT diagnostic pathways; and a large spend on rental costs. The service currently supports 3.1% of Havering's predicted adult autism community which supports that a review of current autism services is required.
5. The Council is also aware that there is increased demand for support for parents of children with autism due to a large demographic shift of children with additional needs moving into the borough which is detailed in the 2021 School Census. There has also been an increase in requests for peer support for those over 30, which is currently not delivered within the current contract.
6. Whilst exploring the decision to let the contract lapse at its end date, the Council was asked by the provider to decide on the future of the contract due to a break clause in their rental agreement of just over three months. They needed to give notice to their landlord by mid-October to avoid any financial difficulty caused by extending the lease post the expiration of the contract.
7. Given the need to consider whether the current service is delivering best value for the residents and the council, and the need to consider how the Council's resources could best deliver against the priorities of the All Age Strategy 2022, and given that this contract was coming to a natural end in any event, officers recommended to the Strategic Director of People that that the current contract with Sycamore should not be extended further. It has been the case since the failed procurement in 2020/21, that the service required redesign. Due to the impact of COVID and its effects on staffing capacity, this has been delayed. As a result, a

service redesign was planned to be followed by a new commissioning exercise, which will commence imminently.

8. After formal notification, similar concerns were raised by service users of the Autism Hub regarding lack of interim support between the contract lapse and the recommissioning of a new all-age autism service.
9. Through the Equalities Impact Assessment, it is recognised that due to the timescales, there is a risk of a gap in service, impacting particularly on the wellbeing of current users of the service

Next steps

10. In view of the above, it was decided to signal the council's intention that the current contract be allowed to end with the provider given notice by no later than the end of October 2023. Between now and the end of the contracts determined end, there will be a review of similar services, which includes NELFT's expanded diagnostic pathways. To coincide with this review, it is proposed that the Council will consult with people with Autism, their families and communities to develop a needs assessment of current needs, providing us with an opportunity to map services across partner organisations with a view to establish gaps and avoid any duplication. It is our intention to use this information to help determine and shape a service that meets the future needs of our residents with Autism and their communities.
11. Prior to informing the current provider, Sycamore Trust, of the proposed decision communications were sent to key stakeholders in confidence including colleagues in North East London Integrated Care Board (NEL ICB), and the Autism Partnership Board. It is the case that there are concerns about the risk of potential service provision gaps that could be left by letting the contract lapse, which is understood by the Council.
12. To mitigate concerns raised by service users and identified through the Equalities Impact Assessment, it is now recommended that the current contract be extended for a further 6 months to enable the Council to engage with residents with Autism, their families and communities and review similar services with the intention of commissioning a new offer.

IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

Financial implications and risks:

The lapsing of this contract is cost neutral to the council as it is intended to recommission an alternate service. A review and consultation will be undertaken with people with people with Autism, their families and communities which is intended to result in a new service provision being provided in the future.

Legal implications and risks:

The Council has duties under the Care Act 2014 to provide care and support to eligible individuals. It is understood that the services provided by the Autism Hub do not fall into the category of such care and support and therefore if there is a gap in provision of the type of services provided by the Autism Hub it should not result in a breach of statutory duties to any such individuals. However, if the contract is extended for 6 months then no such risks will apply.

The contract was due to come to an end in Jan 2024 and has been extended once already. A further six months' extension in the circumstances appears reasonable, given there is insufficient time for the review and re-procurement to complete before the current contract end date.

Human Resources implications and risks:

The recommendations made in this report do not give rise to any identifiable HR risks or implications that would affect either the Council or its workforce.

Equalities implications and risks:

An Equalities Impact and Health Assessment is attached as Appendix 1.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

There are no Environmental and climate change implications and risks.