

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	11 JULY 2022		
TITLE:	CORONER REMOVALS CONTRACT - DELEGATED AUTHORITY TO SPEND AND AWARD CONTRACT		
LEAD COUNCILLOR SERVICE:	COUNCILLOR BROCK	PORTFOLIO	LEADERSHIP
	PUBLIC PROTECTION/CORONERS	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of the ongoing procurement process for the Coroner Removals Contract to be implemented in December 2022 and following a competitive procurement process to seek delegated authority to enter into a contract with the most economically advantageous tenderer in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the recommended procurement route and process as described within the report.
- 2.2 That the Executive Director For Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services be granted delegated authority in consultation with the Leader of the Council, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Assistant Director of Finance to enter into a contract(s) and spend to provide coroner removals with the most economically advantageous tenderer.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading Borough Council are host authority for the administration of the Coroners Service on behalf of the six Berkshire unitary authorities.
- 3.2 Approximately 2100 deaths are reported to the Coroner each year and a proportion of these die in the community throughout the Berkshire area.
- 3.3 The Coroner has power under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 to order the removal of a body to any suitable place for a post-mortem examination to take place.
- 3.4 Contracts to provide the removal service ensures the most effective use of resources in the delivery of high quality, best value public services.

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Current Position:

4.1.1 The Council has in place a contract with a funeral director for the removal and transportation of bodies within the county area of Berkshire, which it manages on behalf of HM Senior Coroner Berkshire. The present contract arrangements were put in place on 3 June 2019. The contract term was initially for 3 years until 3 June 2022 with an option to extend for a further 2 years.

4.1.2 The contractors have given notice that they will not extend the contract for a further 2 years. They have instead agreed to continue to provide the service for a further 6 months until midnight 9 December 2022 to allow the Council to undertake a new procurement process.

4.2 Options Proposed

4.2.1 The proposal is to award new contracts for this service from 00.01am 10 December 2022 for a period of 3 years with the option of extending the contract for a further 1 + 1 years subject to performance, with a 12 month notice period. As for current contracts the county area will be divided up into 4 zones and tenderers can bid for one or more of the zones. The process for this procurement exercise is ongoing.

4.2.2 This model of service delivery is common throughout England and Wales for Coroners Services due to the bespoke nature of the contract. External providers from the Funeral Sector are experienced and trained in the business of body removal which ensures consistency and sensitivity when dealing with bereaved families. This will ensure a robust and resilient business contingency, and ensure removals are attended within time constraints, and allow for regular monitoring and reviews. A single point of contact is the preferred option for key stakeholders including the Coroner's Office, Thames Valley Police and South-Central Ambulance.

4.3 Other Options Considered

4.3.1 **Rota system** - A rota could be established whereby participating funeral directors would be called upon on a rotational basis to provide the service. The Coroner's Office would provide the list to Thames Valley Police who initiate the call outs with work offered on a first come, first served basis. This would be outside of the procurement process with risks associated to service delivery and potentially variation in costs.

4.3.2 **In house** - There is an option to provide this service directly by Reading Borough Council, however the initial capital outlay, time to implement and on-going costs are prohibitive at this time and would exceed the estimated costs of the contract. The Service would need to establish contractual arrangements to ensure availability of trained staff 24/7 365 days of the year. This option is being considered as part of the feasibility project being undertaken into the provision of a regional mortuary. This could provide economies of scale over a wider area. The proposed initial term of this contract should not impact on proposals in this area if the option is pursued.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 This is a Berkshire wide service which provides support for the Coroner to perform her duties and ensures a cost effective and efficient service for the combined population of the six Berkshire unitary authorities.

5.2 Contribution to the Corporate Plan Themes

5.2.1 Healthy environment

This service ensures deceased persons are conveyed to the mortuary in a timely and dignified manner and for their deaths to be investigated. This is a statutory requirement under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. A quick, professional and sensitive service is essential to ensure the mental wellbeing of the affected bereaved family members.

Electric private ambulances for conveying deceased are new to the market, and it is unlikely our contractors will have these available in their fleet. Efforts have been made to reduce the number of transfers required to the mortuary by effective scrutiny at the scene. Through collaboration with Thames Valley Police and SCAS, deaths are triaged, and many are kept within the premises of the family nominated funeral director. This, alongside additional investigative efforts to ascertain causes of death without a requirement for post-mortem, ensure transfers are only required where strictly necessary.

5.2.2 Thriving Communities

As a statutory service, all persons are treated equally, irrespective of any economic, social, cultural, ethnic or religious factors. In some circumstances, the service accommodates family wishes and religious sensibilities, such as transfer to a facility with CT scanning, if the Coroner deems this appropriate.

5.2.3 Inclusive Economy

The contract allows for tenders across four geographical zones. This seeks to attract small local businesses as well as national providers.

5.4 The contract makes the following contributions to the TEAM Reading values:

Together - The contract allows for effective delivery of the service through partnership working with key stakeholders including; Thames Valley Police who both initiate the call outs and together with South Central Ambulance Service attend the scene and with NHS Trusts in securing safe receipt of the deceased to the mortuary.

Efficiency - The contract is the current best practice and most efficient model for delivering the service. It utilises the skills of the Funeral Services industry which have the necessary equipment and key staff.

Make a Difference - The contract makes a positive difference to the bereaved who are provided with a timely and sensitive service at often a very distressing time.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Climate Impact Assessment Tool gives a Net Low Negative rating for this tender due to the limited number of removals required.

6.2 The Coroner's Removals is a necessary service requiring specialist commercial vehicles to fulfil the contract needs. Due to the nature of the market, the uptake and use of electric vehicles within the funeral services sector is slow. The tender process will act to encourage the tenderer to consider their environmental impact and options to reduce this going forwards, in line with Reading Borough Council's Climate Emergency Strategy.

6.3 The Coroner's service is actively scrutinising all transfers to ensure those required are necessary and aim to reduce the numbers needed by ordering fewer post-mortems.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 The procurement process will be a single stage open competitive selection. There are no other community engagements taking place relevant to this contract.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 The decision will not have a differential impact on: racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The procurement exercise is subject to the Public Contract Regulations 2015, and as such the principles of non-discrimination, equal treatment, transparency, mutual recognition and proportionality will be applied.

9.2 In accordance with the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and the Council Contract Procedure Rules, the opportunity will be advertised on the Councils electronic tendering portal and via 'Contracts Finder'.

9.3 It is intended to enter into a contract based upon the most economically advantageous tender in accordance with the criteria stated in the specification.

9.4 One or more contracts will be entered into between the successful tenderers and Reading Borough Council.

9.5 Under the constitution of the council for contracts above £500k, the authority to award is either by a formal decision of Council or Committee, or by an officer with an appropriate delegated Authority as set out in the Delegations Register or delegated specifically by a formal decision of Council or Committee.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The estimated cost associated with the contract is approximately £110,000 pa across Berkshire, with a total value over the contract period including extensions c£550,000. This is based on our most recent contract with a commercial price of £175 per removal, and approximately 600 transfers conducted per annum. Benchmarking across 30 Coronal areas shows removal costs vary between £25 - £350 per removal based on local arrangements.

10.2 The costs for the Coroners Service are apportioned under a joint arrangement with the six local authorities in Berkshire: Bracknell Forest Council, Reading Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, West Berkshire Council, Wokingham Borough Council and Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

10.3 Financial risks are shown in table below.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 Local Authority benchmarking data.

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REPORT TEMPLATE

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications arising from the proposals set out in this report are set out below:-

1. Revenue Implications

Use this Table in the report or as an Appendix to set out the revenue implications:

	2021/22 £000	2022/23 £000	2023/24 £000
Employee costs (see note1) Other running costs - Fixed Rate Capital financings costs			
Expenditure	£110,000	£110,000	£110,000
Income from: Fees and charges (see note2) Grant funding (specify) Other income			
Total Income	0	0	0
Net Cost(+)/saving (-)	£110,000	£110,000	£110,000

The net cost of the proposal can be funded from the Coroners Service/4605 budget.

These are estimates, as the awarded procurement price could be higher, however we would award the most advantageous (lowest price) and sustainable service.

If the price is over the above estimated costs, we request a delegated sign off for approval at the appropriate level.

2. Capital Implications

Capital Programme reference from budget book: page line	2021/22 £000	2022/23 £000	2023/24 £000
Proposed Capital Expenditure			
Funded by Grant (specify) Section 106 (specify) Other services Capital Receipts/Borrowing			
Total Funding			

Note: where more than one option /proposal is being made it may be easier to set out the above information in an Appendix.

3. Value for Money (VFM)

Benchmarking Results conducted by 30 local authorities in 2021 show a wide variation in costs per removal. These ranged from £25 to £350. This reflects the local arrangements in place and the market conditions in that local area. The contract is highly specialised with a limited pool of suppliers. Previous procurement exercises have resulted in a wide variation in price from potential bidders. The procurement intends to ensure value for money by a suitable balance between price and quality.

4. Risk Assessment.

Include relevant comments around any key financial risks associated with the proposal(s)

Financial risk assessment

Risk	Level	Control/Mitigation
High level of removals	Low	Annual figures are steady, with little fluctuation. Levels are anticipated to drop with the on-going sudden death process agreement and Coronial efforts to reduce post-mortems
Increased/High cost per removal	High	Require a fixed rate per removal. Division of area into 4 zones to reduce transport time/fuel consumption costs and increase competition. Reduce extension time to 3+1+1 providing freedom to leave contract.
No bids	Moderate	Review specification and adjust to better match market expectations and be more attractive. Implement contingency rota arrangements.
Removal cost between mortuaries/out of area	Low	Coroner making efforts to reduce requirement for specialist post-mortems.
Additional resource / fire service required at additional cost	Low	Sudden death process agreement ensures those with severe underlying health conditions (e.g. super morbid obesity) along with Coroner's efforts to reduce post-mortems ensures a reduction in complicated removals.