

22 March 2019

Stakeholder Briefing Note: Procurement of Interpretation and Language Services

Background

The NHS in the South West currently has eight suppliers of language and translation services to GPs, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists across Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly.

These suppliers are commissioned by NHS England to undertake:

- interpretation - spoken word or British Sign Language (BSL)
- translation - written word or braille transcription

Interpreters work with patients, carers and clinicians to help them understand each other when they do not speak the same language. Not being able to communicate well with health professionals can increase the frequency of missed appointments, undermine the effectiveness of consultations and adversely affect patient experience.

Current position

The NHS is committed to providing high-quality, equitable, effective healthcare services that are responsive to the needs of all patients, including those who require language support.

Current services vary widely, with different levels of service and standards across the South West. Some were commissioned by primary care trusts, before the NHS reconfiguration in 2013. Some contracts are also due to end shortly.

In this light, NHS England and clinical commissioning groups in the South West have decided to take to market all their interpreting and translation contracts for primary care in Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly, with a view to appointing the best supplier (or suppliers) from 1 October 2019.

The aim is to ensure that support for patients in primary care is:

- of high quality
- equitable and consistent
- resilient and capable of coping with fluctuations in demand.

The proposal is to move away from multiple, variable contracts and agreements for the different types of interpreting and translation services, by adopting the standard national service specification which is based on service user feedback and evidence of good practice.

Bids will be invited from 'framework providers', which meet criteria for appointment on the basis that they have passed rigorous selection criteria to ensure their products are of a high quality, their prices are fair and their financial position is stable. The framework will be refreshed regularly to ensure it stays current and includes the latest innovative products, services and suppliers.

There is nothing to prevent suppliers that are not on the framework from discussing the option of becoming a sub-contractor of one of the framework suppliers, providing they are able to meet the framework supplier's quality and price criteria. The commissioner would not be party to any of these discussions or subsequent arrangements that take place.

Having one provider of services across the South West would simplify the booking arrangements for primary care contractors and achieve the greatest efficiencies. However, it is recognised that the size of the area might make it more practicable to procure contracts in more than one lot, perhaps based on clinical commissioning groups. The options will be market-tested before the approach is decided.

The contract(s) will be awarded in June 2019, ready for implementation from 1 October.

Engagement

We are seeking views on current services as this will help us secure the best outcome for patients and for primary care providers.

Stakeholders being approached include:

- Healthwatch
- GP practices
- Dental practices
- Pharmacies
- Optometrists
- Local committees representing GPs, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists
- Patient and stakeholder groups, as identified by CCGs.

Each is being asked for input on the following questions:

- Have you used the translation and interpretation service?
- What has been good about the service?
- What could have been improved and why?

The outcomes, along with existing evidence, will be used to help support the evaluation process for bids. Stakeholder groups will also be asked if they would like to support the procurement by taking part in the evaluation.