

**WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
**FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY 5 JUNE 2019**

**FLEXIBLE HOMELESSNESS SUPPORT GRANT**

**REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER FOR CUSTOMER SERVICES**

**(Contact: Jon Dearing, Tel: (01993) 861221)**

**I. PURPOSE**

To consider the planned expenditure of the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant.

**2. RECOMMENDATION**

That the Committee makes comment to the Cabinet as appropriate.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1. From 1 April 2017 the Government removed the Temporary Accommodation Managements Fee from the Housing Benefit system. This was in line with the Government announcement in the 2015 Spending Review and Autumn Statement, that the subsidy for the temporary management fee paid from the Department for Work and Pensions to Local Authorities on a household basis would end from 2017/18.
- 3.2. The Council had very minimal expenditure in this area of Housing Benefit and therefore had benefited from the additional funding; which was ring-fenced to activities that would prevent or relieve homelessness. Funding was provided for two years (2017/18 and 2018/19) with additional funding being made available for 2019/20. The funding allocations are included in paragraph 5.2 below.
- 3.3. It is proposed that the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant is utilised to further assist us in managing the property side of Housing, so we can maximise the options available to us in terms of emergency, temporary and long-term accommodation. The need for this approach is illustrated by the high waiting lists, high numbers of long-term empty dwelling; and the volumes/costs associated with emergency accommodation provision.
- 3.4. West Oxfordshire DC has received a larger allocation than Cotswold and Forest of Dean District Councils. Proposals are therefore made in two categories:
  - (i) Partner Projects with equal amounts funding being pooled by the three Housing Authority Partners (West Oxfordshire, Cotswold and Forest of Dean) to maximise the benefit of the resources in relation to common problems; and
  - (ii) West Oxfordshire District Council Project; designed to address specific local issues within the district.

**Partner Projects:**

- 3.5. These proposals are aimed at addressing the lack of available accommodation in the three partner Districts. There are limited options and significant costs associated with the provision of emergency accommodation within the Districts, as well as a shortage of longer-term accommodation. The Partner Projects part of the proposal was initially put in place following approval by all three partner Cabinets during 2018 and consisted of two

dedicated joint officers (on two year fixed term contracts) and a joint Private Sector Rental Fund. The specific objectives of each of these aspects are as follows:

- **Housing Property Manager** (Joint post). This officer's principal responsibilities will be securing and managing emergency accommodation; liaising with Registered Providers to ensure timely move-on from temporary accommodation and minimisation of void periods; reduction of the number of long-term empty properties; and management of any resultant bought/leased residential property
  - **Private Rented Sector Officer** (Joint post). This officer's principal responsibilities (reporting to the above Property Manager post) will be designing and implementing a private sector placement policy that is workable for the Councils and the sector; liaison with Private Rented Sector (PRS) landlords and agents; the monitoring and management of all Long Term Empty Properties within the districts and management of the new PRS Fund (see below)
  - **PRS Fund**. There will be a modest budget for each Council to fund provision (loan) of cash deposits, fees and payments of rent in advance; as well as payments to help households make their new accommodation liveable. This Fund will be managed by the PRS Officer (see above), who will be responsible for securing repayment and recycling of these 'loans' to ensure that the Councils maximise the value of this budget.
- 3.6. In addition to 3.5 (above) and in response to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 the Homeseeker Plus partnership purchased an 'add-on' assessment tool (Homelessness Prevention Assessments (HPA2)) to assist officers with the assessment and processing of prevention and homeless relief cases.
- 3.7. HPA2 is a basic model designed mainly to offer a basic diary system and to provide statistics to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). It collects minimal information on customers' needs/situations so although it meets the Councils Government reporting needs it doesn't provide as full an assessment tool as previous 'paper based' forms and processes. The HPA2 module links with the Choice Base Lettings system, however it doesn't encourage customers to look for other options such as private rented or supported accommodation.
- 3.8. The current supplier offers enhanced system options such as an interactive customer assessment tool which encourages the customer to explore other solutions, such as private rented and support accommodation.
- 3.9. Either solution would ensure that not only are the Councils legal duties being met, but also that customers receive an enhanced experience.

### **West Oxfordshire District Council Projects**

- 3.10. The Council funding remaining after above contribution to the Partnership Projects will continue to allow us to address an issue that is a national trend but particularly prevalent within West Oxfordshire. As already stated, this is a WODC Project but the learning from this is anticipated to be of value to all partners in the prevention of homelessness.
- 3.11. Analysis of the Homelessness Returns that we produce for the DCLG show a growing problem within WODC in terms of the reasons, for those to whom we have a homelessness duty, losing their last settled accommodation. Please note: we currently

have a legal duty to those who are (a) homeless, (b) eligible, in terms of their residency status within the UK, (c) in priority need; e.g. families with children, disabled applicants, (d) are not deemed to be intentionally homeless and (e) have a local connection to the District.

- 3.12. Over the last two years (1 April 2016 to 15 March 2019) the main reasons for loss of previous accommodation have changed. Of the 241 homeless applications made in this two year period (where we established that we had a duty) 34% were due to parents or relatives no longer being willing to accommodate adult children. A further 26 % were a result of violent or non-violent breakdown of relationships. Both of these reasons increased during that two year period.
- 3.13. The proposal is therefore to continue with the 'Families First' project which is aimed at working closely with families and couples to help them resolve or alleviate their problems; with the aim of reducing the risk of a homelessness situation developing. This will be done through the provision of a dedicated project officer and a modest fund to assist (where appropriate) with the provision of family/relationship mediation; as well as minor accommodation adaptations to help alleviate multi-generational accommodation sharing challenges.
- 3.14. The 'Families First' project has worked effectively with households/individuals where there is a risk of homelessness. The project officer will work with our existing network of partners and local organisations to support these vulnerable households with any issues that may contribute to the risk of them becoming homeless.
- 3.15. The Council also recognises that it plays a vital role in tackling domestic abuse and officers are therefore keen to implement a 'Target Hardening and Sanctuary' Scheme with our partners. In order to meet the requirements of these vulnerable residents, the Target Hardening and Sanctuary Scheme would be developed to enable customers, who are victims of domestic abuse to choose whether they remain in their home with professionally installed security measures. The Scheme would be administered by West Oxfordshire District Council but will work in close partnership with relevant agencies such as Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service (ODAS) Registered Providers and the Community Safety Partnership, with the safety assessment and necessary works carried out by Safe Partnership.
- 3.16. West Oxfordshire also has high numbers of young people presenting as homeless (38% of all applications compared to the national average of 20%). This age group often have complex issues, but limited accommodation options. To further support this work with families, the proposal is to fund an additional 'Complex Needs' Prevention Project post who will work with young people intensively to ensure that their options are maximised. This will include ensuring that the existing Young Persons and Adult Pathways are fully utilised and appropriate move on accommodation sourced.
- 3.17. With the additional funding we would also like to implement additional new initiatives:-
  - (i) A 'Rough Sleeper' Fund – The Council works in partnership with connection and Streetlink to connect with people who are sleeping rough quickly with the aim to assisting them into accommodation as quickly as possible. For the entrenched rough sleepers this could mean moving to a supported housing unit or similar with usually no state benefits in place or any personal belongings. This scheme would aim to offer some short term relief until benefits can be put in place and enable the person to buy personal items;

- (ii) Bed and Breakfast move on fund – Often customers who are in need of emergency accommodation have little in the way of belongings or savings to assist them in moving into more permanent or longer term accommodation. Housing Associations often require two to four weeks rent in advance to secure tenancies. Whilst there are charities that can supply second hand/up-cycled furniture, these do come at a cost and there can also be the issue of transporting these items. For some customers, having to find both rent in advance and money for furniture, often at short notice, can be a barrier to moving on. Therefore setting aside a small amount of money to assist with this could make the stay in short term emergency accommodation considerably shorter;
- (iii) Severe Weather Provision (SWEP) - Currently we have no SWEP provision within the district. Although it is recognised that there are few instances of rough sleeping, due to the close partnership working with Connections and the swift intervention should anyone come to the Councils attention, during the winter months anyone who does find themselves ‘roofless’ would be expected to present to a project in Oxford City for overnight ‘sit up’ accommodation. The Council could therefore work with its partner agencies in sourcing appropriate accommodation within the district and sourcing volunteers to run this during period of severe weather for the winter 2019/20.

3.18 In addition to the above we are also working closely with our colleagues across Oxfordshire to co-ordinate and enhance further partnership working in relation to homelessness. Reports will be submitted to members once the details are finalised.

#### 4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

The Council could choose to use these funds in an alternative way. However, it should be noted that the funding is ring-fenced to the prevention and relief of homelessness.

#### 5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. The level of funding allocated to each of the three Housing partner Councils is detailed in paragraph 5.2. As this Council’s allocation significantly exceeds those of Cotswold and Forest of Dean District Councils, it is recommended that the Council pools £40,000 per year to fund ‘Partner Projects’ and utilises the remainder of its funding for a WODC specific project. Therefore the breakdown of planned expenditure is in the two categories of ‘Partner Projects’ and ‘WODC Project’, as explained above.

5.2. Grant allocations were announced as follows:

Council	2019/20 Grant Allocation	2017 – 2018 Surplus	Total Available Grant Funding
West Oxfordshire DC	£134,522	£119,246	£253,768
Cotswold DC	£50,559	£67,539	£118,098
Forest of Dean DC	£40,000	£67,539	£107,539

**Partner Projects** – It is proposed that the three partner councils (WODC, CDC & FoDDC) pool £40,000 per annum; thus providing a total annual pooled budget of £120,000 per annum. It is proposed that this pooled budget should be utilised as follows:

- £43,500 per annum to fund the continuation and extension of a joint Housing Property Manager.
  - £37,500 per annum to fund the extension of a joint Private Rented Sector Liaison Officer.
  - £39,000 per annum (or adjusted amount if above resource costs are adjusted) to fund the extension of a joint PRS Fund (to be fully utilised, in equal shares per Council, by 31 March 2020).
- 5.3. The total (maximum) expenditure in relation to the 'Partner Projects' will therefore be £120,000 over the one year funding period; which means that the grant will be fully utilised for the prevention of homelessness and there will be no funding contribution requirement from any of the partner councils.
- 5.4. **WODC Projects** – Following the £40,000 per annum contribution to the 'Partner Projects' detailed in paragraph 5.2, this Council will have £94,522 excess funding from its 2019/20 grant allocation. It is proposed that this additional budget should be utilised as follows:
- £30,000 per annum to fund the extension of a 'Families First' Project Officer for an additional 2 years.
  - £4,000 per annum (or adjusted amount if above resource cost is adjusted) to fund the extension of a WODC 'Families First' fund (for an additional 2 years)
  - £30,000 per annum to fund a 'Complex Needs' Homelessness Prevention Project Officer for 2 years
  - £5,000 per annum to fund the creation of a 'Rough Sleepers' fund for 2 years
  - £10,000 per annum to fund the creation of a 'Bed and Breakfast' move on fund for 2 years.
  - £5,000 per annum to fund the creation of a district 'SWEP' provision for 2 years
- 5.5. Any surplus would be ring-fenced to support activities that would prevent or relieve homelessness; including investigating alternative accommodation options and investing in pre-prevention activities.
- 5.6. The total (maximum) expenditure in relation to the 'WODC Project' will therefore be £168,000 over the two year funding period; which means that the WODC grant allocation for 2019/20 and some surplus from previous years will be fully utilised for the prevention of homelessness and that there will be no funding contribution requirement from the Council.

## 6. RISKS

There is a reputational risk to the Council if it does not effectively utilise this grant funding to prevent homelessness.

## 7. REASONS

To ensure that the ring-fenced grant funding contributes to the prevention and relief of homelessness.

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Background Papers:  
None