



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 15 JANUARY 2025
Subject	REVIEW OF HOUSING RESOURCES
Wards affected	None
Accountable member	Councillor Geoff Saul - Executive Member for Housing & Social Welfare Email: geoff.saul@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Jon Dearing, Interim Executive Director Email: democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Caroline Clissold, Business Manager Housing Email: democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	<p>To brief members on the continuing pressures facing the Housing Service</p> <p>To outline the risk should the Housing Team be unable to deliver statutory duties due to increased volumes of residents contacting the service</p> <p>To seek approval to recruit additional staff resources to assist with the complex and increasing volumes of homelessness presentation</p>
Annexes	None
Recommendation(s)	<p>That the Executive resolves to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approve the creation of two additional Housing Officer Posts2. Delegate the allocation of additional resources from Housing Project Reserves (or any additional ring-fenced short-term grants) to the Business Manager - Housing in consultation with the Executive Member for Housing & Social Welfare and the Chief Finance Officer subject to compliance with the ring-fenced grant conditions

Corporate priorities

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Putting Residents First● A Good Quality of Life for All● Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO

I. BACKGROUND

- I.1** The Housing Team has seen many changing demands over the last 7 years including the introduction of new legislation, the Covid Pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis. The service has also seen new burdens from the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act and various strands of housing related refugee work. All of the above have seen increasing numbers of people seeking assistance with Housing issues as they are either homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- I.2** Rising homelessness generally and the lack of truly affordable housing across the country is a national problem.
- I.3** The Housing Team is a statutory service and are responsible for ensuring that the council meet a number of statutory requirements as laid down by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (alongside other legislative requirements)
- I.4** These statutory duties include, but are not limited to, providing a full and accessible to all Housing Options service, preventing homelessness and relieving homelessness should it occur. The Housing Team are also responsible for maintaining a fair and transparent Choice Based Lettings system (Homeseeker Plus) and managing the clients in B&B emergency accommodation as well as in Council owned Hostels.
- I.5** Preventing homelessness is always the best approach for both the customer and the local authority. The Housing Team, on average, prevent over 200 households a year from becoming homeless. By finding people alternative long-term accommodation or negotiating with family or landlords to keep people in their homes, the use of expensive B&B accommodation is lessened.
- I.6** The Housing Team also take a robust approach to rough sleeping, working with our Outreach service to identify and contact rough sleeping at the very first sighting. This approach means that West Oxfordshire has no entrenched rough sleepers and regularly report low to zero numbers of 'new to the street' rough sleeping.
- I.7** The financial impact on the council of housing people in temporary accommodation is severe due to the legislative restrictions on the claiming of housing benefit on this type of accommodation. The financial cost is on average £315 per person per week in benefit subsidy loses.
- I.8** Since mid 2024, numbers of households presenting as homeless to the Council have risen exponentially as the cost-of-living crisis deepens. Lack of move on accommodation for singles in either temporary accommodation or supported adult homelessness accommodation within the countywide pathways, combined with additional new pressures from other cohorts is impacting on the Housing service as a whole.
- I.9** Changes to the Homes for Ukraine (HfU) announced on the 26th November 2024 are also likely to increase contacts for housing advice and intervention from this cohort.
- I.10** In 2023, The Housing Team had a rolling average of 29 households over and above who we can house in council owned properties (and are therefore accommodated in expensive

B&B/hotels). During mid to late 2024, this number has risen to around 70 above the Council's hostel capacity and continues to rise.

- 1.11 The Housing Team are working with our colleagues across the council to source additional emergency accommodation and increase the supply of affordable housing in the long term, however, have implemented short term solutions to assist with the increased workloads.
- 1.12 The Housing Team have responded to these new challenges in part by using annual Homelessness Prevention Grant to fund agency Staff specifically targeted to undertake complex homelessness casework with a focus on ensuring that vulnerable clients have access to safe accommodation. However, this is not a sustainable way to meet the increasing demands on the service in the long term.

2. HOUSING RESOURCES & STRUCTURE

- 2.1 The Housing Team's structure has changed significantly since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in order to meet new Prevention and Relief Duties.
- 2.2 The West Oxfordshire DC based Housing Team comprises of:
 - 3 x FTE Prevention Officers,
 - 2 x FTE Complex Needs Prevention Officers
 - 1 x FTE Homelessness Relief Officer
 - 2 x FTE Housing Refugee Officers (one of which is on a 2 year fixed term contract).
- 2.3 In addition, there are 4 x Shared Housing Leads, each specialising in specific areas – Homelessness, Homeseeker Plus, Hostels and Complex Needs plus a shared Business Manager.
- 2.4 In order to keep up with the increased demand, the Council have also employed agency workers at significant cost. Whilst agency workers have proven to be invaluable in meeting our statutory duties, lessening the need for expensive B&B and Travelodge accommodation and providing support to clients to prevent homelessness, the cost of these types of contracts is expensive. On average an agency worker costs twice that of a permanent member of staff.
- 2.5 Housing Leads spend a significant amount of time recruiting into post and training agency staff to support the permanent Team. This training includes IT system and process training alongside locality-based housing pathway and partner agency training as most agency staff do not live in the area. There is a high turnover as would be expected from agency staff contracts.

3. CRISIS RESPONSE

- 3.1 Crises are thought of as rare, short term and unpredictable events that will happen at some point, and when they do, they have a devastating impact. Covid followed by the Cost-of-Living Crisis are both examples and the refugee crisis is yet another, all of which have occurred within a 4-year period with no respite in between.

- 3.1 What links these examples is that they demand an immediate response from Housing professionals to cope with these increased demands. Resources must be found from short term funding with expensive agency Staff to provide an effective response.
- 3.2 The councils Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Homelessness Advisor recommends that a caseload for complex, homelessness work should not exceed 30 cases per officer. The Homelessness Relief Officers are now working with an average caseload of 40 (or more) households at various stages of homelessness.
- 3.3 The lag in the assembling of resourcing combined with Homelessness Relief Officers having higher caseloads than is manageable poses reputational risk for the council as well as risking potential failures in complying with Housing Legislation
- 3.4 As it stands today, there is no clear end in sight for any of these crisis responses, therefore it is proposed that the Council agree to move to a fully resourced permanent structure financed from the direct homelessness grant funding received from government.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Government grants and financial awards have been given to local authorities for many years with the aim of assisting with the prevention of homelessness.
- 4.2 From 2021/22 local authorities have been awarded an annual Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG). From 2023 onwards West Oxfordshire has also received an additional Top Up grant to reflect new pressures from refugee groups:

Year	HPG	Top Up	Total
2023-24	£269,927	£220,541	£490,468
2024-25	£282,704	£215,177	£497,881
2025-26	£645,730	£0	£645,730

- 4.3 The increased award for 2025/26 reflects the governments awareness that homelessness is increasing nationally and reflects their commitment to providing resources to assist local authorities in addressing these issues. In addition to the HPG award for 2025/26, the council also holds £293,000 in the Housing Project Reserves, which is sufficient funding to meet the costs of employing the additional staffing set out in below.

- 4.4 The annual costs of a Homelessness Relief Officer post is:

Post	Basic Salary	Additional Costs (NI, Pension)	Total
Homelessness Relief Officer	£31,017	£4,576	£35,592

- 4.5 The average weekly cost of sourcing agency staff is around £1,500.
- 4.6 It is therefore proposed that the Housing Project Reserves are used to recruit up to two additional Homelessness Relief Officers.
- 4.7 Should any of the funding streams cease, all roles within the Housing Team will need to be reviewed and action taken to either reduce the number of posts to match resource availability or request further consideration be given to the base budget.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Insufficient resourcing within the Housing Team could lead to statutory functions not being met.
- 5.2 This could leave the council liable to defend lapses in statutory functions in court and could result in fines and/ or Housing Ombudsman interventions

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 Although there is no reason to believe that the annual allocation of the Homelessness Prevention Grants will cease, should this be the case then the Housing Team will need to undergo a restructure or reorganisation of resource priorities.

7 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.1 None

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 None

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 None

(END)