



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	CABINET – 10 November 2021
Report Number	Agenda Item 7
Subject	Our House and Housing First Project Updates and Funding Extension Options
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Merylyn Davies Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities Tel: 07966 796178 Email: Merylyn.davies@westoxon.gov.uk
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Summary/Purpose	To update members on the ‘Our House’ and Housing First projects since their inception, to recommend the continuation of the projects and outline future opportunities over the next two years
Annexes	Annex A – Main Housing Funding Streams
Recommendation/s	That Cabinet: a) Agrees the recommendation to continue the projects for a further 18 months from April 2022; b) Agrees to outsource the Support element of both projects via waiver; c) Agrees to the exploration of external funding sources including bidding for Government and/or community grant funds in order to continue the projects; d) Agrees to use Housing Reserve / Housing Grant Underspend as set out in 2.35 to guarantee the continuation of the projects whilst alternative funding options are explored; and e) Approves the delegation of any amendments to these allocations to the Housing Manager in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness subject to compliance with funding allocation conditions.
Corporate priorities	Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities

	<p>Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population</p> <p>Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance: Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council</p>
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	<p>Economic O&S Committee</p> <p>Chief Finance Officer</p> <p>Cabinet Members with Responsibility for Housing and Finance</p> <p>Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Chief Executive</p> <p>Head of Legal Services</p>

I. BACKGROUND

- I.1.** West Oxfordshire District Council has worked with our Countywide partners for many years to provide a collaborative approach to ending rough sleeping in the County.
- I.2.** As a result of this collaboration, Oxfordshire has both an established Young Peoples Supported Accommodation Pathway and an Adult Homelessness Pathway and has achieved much success in reducing the numbers of those that are sleeping out. The Adult Homelessness Pathway will be refreshed for 2022- 2025 by adopting a more Housing First focused approach, whilst still continuing to deliver effective supported accommodation. However, due to the high concentration of rough sleeping in Oxford City, and the graduation of people from rural areas to the services located in the City much of the funding and supported accommodation projects are located in Oxford.
- I.3.** Many of our local residents who have high support needs, however, do not wish to be relocated outside of our District or to loose contact with their own support networks in the area. The traditional supported accommodation approach does not work for all with many clients preferring the 'own front door' or to live in smaller shared schemes.
- I.4.** West Oxfordshire District Council has therefore created two innovative projects in recent years: the Housing First Project and the 'Our House' Project with the help of external funding and close working with our local partners to address the needs of our local residents who are either rough sleeping, at threat of rough sleeping or are unable to remain at home with family or friends.

Housing First Project

- I.5.** The Housing First philosophy is to provide a stable, independent home and intensive personalised support and case management to homeless people with multiple and complex needs who would otherwise not be able to access social or private rented accommodation. Housing First is therefore aimed at our most complex of clients who have either a history of rough sleeping or have been unable to sustain tenancies in the past and have been rejected for housing because of these issues.
- I.6.** The West Oxfordshire Housing First Project was initially established with Aspire, West Oxfordshire District Council and Cottsway through external funding from the Nationwide Community Fund for a one year period in mid 2020. The initial target was to provide long term accommodation to six of our most complex clients and was further extended in January 2021 with funding through the Next Steps Fund to include a second housing provider, Sovereign Housing Association, and to fund a further two placements, bringing the total to eight properties.
- I.7.** Although the Housing First project works alongside the Adult Homeless Pathway, the key objectives are to give people from West Oxfordshire an 'own front door' alternative to the more traditional shared supported accommodation approach and to improve affordable accommodation options for single, unemployed people with complex issues.

The Our House Project

- 1.8. On average, around 23% of all applicants who seek assistance from the West Oxfordshire Housing Team as they are threatened with homelessness are young people (25 or under). The current National average is 21.7%. Therefore, the Our House Project was initially set up as a pilot in 2018 to provide an alternative to the traditional route of B&B/Hostel type accommodation or a referral into supported accommodation, which may not be suitable for everyone. The Project was initially a collaboration with Cottsway Housing Association, with the Council being the 'Lead Organisation' and Cottsway being the 'Delivery Partner', with Aspire Oxford joining the partnership in 2020. The project was funded from a Community Housing Fund grant.
- 1.9. Aspire is a registered charity and social enterprise which supports young people and adults facing severe and multiple disadvantages to move into and towards employment, training and education. They are also a partner of the Oxfordshire's homeless pathway and run both Housing First projects with our partner Local Authorities as well as other Homelessness prevention programmes for West Oxfordshire and our County partners.
- 1.10. The Our House project was initially established for a two year period in March 2018 and further extended in March 2020 until March 2022
- 1.11. Although the Our House Project works alongside the Young Peoples' Supported Accommodation Pathway and the Adult Homelessness Pathway, the key objectives are to give young people from West Oxfordshire a unique alternative to the more traditional supported accommodation approach and to improve affordable accommodation options for single, unemployed people under the age of 35.

2. MAIN POINTS

Housing First Project

- 2.1. West Oxfordshire District Council was approached by Aspire Oxford in early 2020 to become a partner in a Housing First project collaboration with Cottsway Housing.
- 2.2. Aspire were successful in securing funding from the Nationwide Building Society Community Fund to set up a pilot Housing First project in West Oxfordshire. Cottsway Housing Association agreed to pledge 6 properties to the scheme. A further small amount of funding was secured from the Next Steps Accommodation Programme in November 2020 which enabled the Housing Team to secure a further two properties from Sovereign Housing Association, taking the total properties available to Housing First clients to eight.
- 2.3. The support provided by the Housing First project also begins at a very early stage, usually when a person is either rough sleeping or in emergency accommodation. This relationship building is vital to ensure that the support needs of the individual are fully explored before matching them to a property. Expectations of engagement and pre- tenancy training can be undertaken before entering into a tenancy agreement. Most individuals find this initial support vital in sustaining emergency accommodation or being able to accept an offer of emergency accommodation when they otherwise would have remained rough sleeping.

- 2.4. Without the support provided by the Housing First project, it would have been likely that the Housing Associations would not have accepted the clients due to their past history and / or complex nature of their needs. These clients would therefore have been either left in expensive emergency accommodation or a possible return to rough sleeping if they could not sustain an emergency accommodation placement without dedicated support.
- 2.5. All Housing First clients were offered initial 12 month Starter tenancies with the aim that as the Project progressed and the clients were able to reach a good level of stability, their tenancy would be converted into long term, Assured tenancies and the support reduced until not needed. The Housing Providers and Support Provider would then be able to offer the resulting 'vacant' space on the Project to another client.
- 2.6. **Outcome:** Aspire, our partner Housing Associations and the Housing Team were able to refer eight clients with complex needs into long term accommodation. Of those eight, seven still remain in long term tenancies, of which three are in the process being converted into Assured tenancies. We are working with the eighth client to look for alternative accommodation as the location of the first property was not suitable.
- 2.7. Three new clients have been identified to take the place of the original clients who have now reached long term stability.
- 2.8. The funding of the Housing First pilot has now ended. However, the Department Of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), formally the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has given its approval to use £19,000 of the £100,000 Temporary Accommodation Uplift paid to West Oxfordshire in April 2021 to extend the current Housing First project until March 2022.
- 2.9. As the Project will have new clients moving into accommodation over the next quarter, it is vital that the specific support in West Oxfordshire continue past March 2022 when the current fund ends and the Recommissioned Adult Homeless Pathway beds in.
- 2.10. Once the new Adult Homeless Pathway beds in during 2022/23 it is anticipated that the West Oxfordshire specific scheme gradually reduces as client's stabilise and are able to manage their tenancy, with any new properties and clients being referred to the Countywide scheme.
- 2.11. Both Aspire and our Housing Association partners remain committed to the project and to extending the agreement into 2022/2023 and beyond.

Our House Project

- 2.12. There are currently three project houses situated within Witney accommodating thirteen participants in total ranging from 18 – 24 years of age. The majority of referrals into the project are from young people who were either 'sofa surfing' or 'street homeless'.
- 2.13. As the residents have varying levels of need, a bespoke package of support is identified for each new resident prior to them moving into the property thus unlocking further potential by better managing the support required of the trainees and their own personal journeys towards employment and independent living.

- 2.14.** There were further objectives of making use of ‘hard to let’ larger properties (initially within the social sector), providing opportunities for young individuals to learn new work skills and find employment, and the enhancement of the Council’s working relationship with its main social housing provider, Cottsway Housing Association.
- 2.15.** Support for residents was initially provided ‘in house’ from Cottsway Housing Association. However, during the initial two years the project was adapted to suit better the needs of the individuals. In order to support them on their journey towards independent living a new partnership with Aspire was entered into further to enrich the project and the support element is now contracted out to them.
- 2.16.** The project’s success is measured on outcomes as follows:
- Increase the housing options for younger residents
 - Help young people into employment
 - Utilise hard to let larger properties
 - Give individuals a real sense of pride in their shared home (as well as the skills to maintain it)
 - Take young people out of the Homelessness pathways and out of the welfare support system completely.
- 2.17.** Aspire works with Cottsway and the Council to form a ‘move on’ pathway to move on from the Our House project into introductory tenancies, based on their successful tenancy sustainment within the project. This housing model aims to connect with individuals who are unable to thrive in the current homeless pathways in Oxfordshire and provides housing alongside intensive, wrap-around support.
- 2.18.** The majority of the residents accommodated in the three properties have had complex and sometimes challenging support needs and mental health issues meaning that the project has often had to be very reactive to certain situations to help reduce further escalations. The continuation of the project in partnership with Aspire will provide more experienced and diverse support with a greater variety of resource to support the trainee giving them the tools and unique opportunities to leave homelessness behind them for good.
- 2.19.** Aspire continued to provide intensive support throughout the Covid 19 crisis and the various lockdowns. This support was expanded to provide Covid specific support including:
- Regular visits, house meetings, appointments at the Hub, phone-calls, emails and/or text messages
 - Referrals to MIND Mental Wealth Academy & Turning Point where appropriate
 - Delivered PPE/Lateral Flow Tests
 - Delivered food parcels
 - Employment opportunities, Kickstart and online training
 - Assisted with CV updates
 - Benefits advice
 - Workshop Opportunities
 - Social Activities
- 2.20.** With three properties now adapted and discussions ongoing with regards to expanding this to include other properties, the project has grown into an innovative and much needed

resource which has supported 16 individuals since April 2020 alone. Options for those young people prior to Our House would have been unsecure and often dangerous sofa surfing arrangements, emergency accommodation or supported accommodation out of the area.

2.21. The 'Our House' project has provided some much needed single accommodation for young people within West Oxfordshire and has assisted us with discharging our duties to Care Leavers. Residents have been able to access employment and training opportunities and work alongside independent work coaches to establish their own plans and goals towards employment. Given the nature of the project there have been challenges, but these have been overcome through the work of various partnerships the project has created.

2.22. Outcomes: Our House project achievements for the current thirteen residents:

- 8 people are in employment
- Employers include: Aspire, Starbucks, Noble Foods, Newlands Care Home, Travelodge, Burford Garden Centre.
- 1 person is in Work Experience & Education: 3 days at Sylva Foundation Professional Furniture Making Course and 2 days gaining work experience with Crawley Classic Motorcycles.
- 2 people are actively searching for work and attending interviews
- 2 people are not work ready

2.23. The current funding arrangements through the Community Housing Fund are due to end in March 2022. The cost per annum of delivering the project is £60,000.

Proposal

2.24. The Housing Team recently underwent a full procurement Tender exercise to secure a similar support package for residents of a newly acquired homelessness hostel in Witney. The Tender outlined the service need for high level, person centred support to be provided to the residents of the hostel. Limited interest was received demonstrating that there is little competition in the area to provide this type of support service.

2.25. Learning from the limited interest in providing similar support in our Hostel, it is therefore proposed that Cabinet agrees to combine the support elements of both the Housing First project and the Our House projects and offer this to the current support provider, Aspire, on a waiver basis. The contract should be for 18 months to concur with the Hostel Support Contract which will run (until October 2023).

2.26. As the Adult Homelessness Pathways gradually takes over the full support elements of the existing Housing First Projects across the county, it is anticipated that the Housing First element of this proposal will decrease, allowing the Housing Team to work with both Aspire and Cottsway to source new properties for the Our House project, therefore increasing the opportunities for young people in the area.

2.27. The Housing Team will then look to combine the separate strands of support into one whole contract which covers the all West Oxfordshire projects needing support and the resident support for any West Oxfordshire owned Hostels and award to one provider through a full procurement exercise in October 2023.

- 2.28. The Housing Team will also explore further funding options during the next 2 years to compliment funding from our Housing Prevention grants and underspend from previous years.
- 2.29. Housing and Homelessness currently have sufficient funding to meet the costs of extending the Housing First and Our House projects in the Housing Reserves account due to an underspend in both this year's and previous year's Homelessness Prevention grant allocations. The ethos of both projects meets the requirements set out in the Ministry Of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), now DLUHC funding allocations letter dated January 2021.
- 2.30. Housing Options was also able to secure additional funding through the (DLUHC) Rough Sleeper Initiative year 4 (RSI4) funding allocation and through the Temporary Accommodation Uplift allocation to support other schemes that were initially to be allocated to the Homelessness Prevention Grant 2021/22 so has an underspend of approximately £50,000 from the 2021/22 allocation.
- 2.31. It is also further proposed that the Housing Team explore other grant funded options specifically through the Rough Sleeping Initiative, year 5 (RSI5).
- 2.32. Specific funding allocations where underspends have been identified:

Homelessness Prevention Grant 2021/22	£50,000
Housing Reserves from previous year's Homelessness Prevention Grant Underspend	£194,000
Total:	£244,000

- 2.32. Proposed Combined Support Package per annum for 2022/23:

Total:	£97,500
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- 2.33. Total cost of the combined support Proposal:

Year 1 (full year)	£97,500
Year 2 (6 months)	£48,750
Total:	£146,250

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. There are multiple complex funding streams supporting the work of the Housing Team particularly with regard to homeless prevention and project work. Some of these funding streams are subject to bids and some are allocations. Often these come through at short notice and require officers to investigate options and put together work packages in short time frames. A list of relevant funding streams and how they relate to West Oxfordshire can be found in **Annex A**.

- 3.2. The proposals set out in section 2.26 onwards are aimed at addressing the expectations set out by the DLUHC and maximising the use of available accommodation in the West Oxfordshire District. There are limited options and significant costs associated with the provision of emergency accommodation within the District, as well as a shortage of longer-term accommodation.
- 3.3. The proposal is therefore aimed at reducing the use and time spent in expensive short term, emergency accommodation by utilising the funds in the Housing Reserve account if further grant funding cannot be sourced, benefiting both the Council and the client in the longer term.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. Spending allocations need to follow the expectations set out in the MHCLG's (now DLUHC) allocation of funding letter January 2021 and comply with the conditions of any ring fenced grant schemes or funding bid awards.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. The current thirteen residents of the Our House project will need to be served notice and alternative properties sourced for them if we are unable to extend funding for the project into 2022/23. West Oxfordshire has a shortage of social and affordable one bedroom accommodation and the private sector would prove to be unaffordable to those in minimum wage jobs, apprenticeships or training.
- 5.2. Should the support be withdrawn for our Housing First clients, their tenancy could be at risk due to arrears or anti-social behaviour with notice being served if issues arose. Once an individual is evicted from social rented accommodation for these reasons, it is unlikely that other providers would consider them for alternative tenancies.
- 5.3. If move-on properties are not found for the Our House residents or the Housing First clients are evicted, this could force them into homelessness, emergency / B&B accommodation or rough sleeping.
- 5.4. West Oxfordshire District Council also has a steady stream of new homelessness presentations from individuals with complex needs. Some have previous tenancy issues with anti-social behaviour or arrears. Therefore the Housing Team find it difficult to agree long term tenancies with our social housing providers without high levels of support being in place.
- 5.5. Housing First provides the strong working partnership and reassurance to landlords needed to bridge this gap. Without access to this type of scheme/ partnership then our clients will struggle to be accepted by housing providers and could therefore be left in emergency accommodation or forced to sleep rough as they do not have the support that they need to maintain a tenancy.
- 5.6. There is a reputational risk to the Council if it does not use grant funding effectively for the specific purposes set out each year
- 5.7. There is also a risk that rising demands on the service from ongoing financial and housing challenges facing residents of the West Oxfordshire District Council area could impact on the Council's ability to deliver a full statutory Housing service if alternative options to

traditional Homelessness emergency accommodation and supported accommodation options are not considered

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1. None considered. However, Members may want to consider other options that have not been referred to within the report

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1. None