



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE MEETING – 13 SEPTEMBER 2023
Subject	ASYLUM DISPERSAL GRANT
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Joy Aitman - Stronger Healthy Communities Email: Joy.aitman@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Phil Martin, Assistant Director Business Support Email: Phil.martin@publicagroup.uk
Report author	Phil Martin, Assistant Director Business Support Email: Phil.martin@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	To consider the planned expenditure of the Asylum Dispersal Grant
Annexes	Annex A – Home Office - Funding Eligibility for Local Authorities Asylum Dispersal Scheme: Grant Payment 3 Annex B - Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)
Recommendation(s)	<i>That the Executive resolves to:</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><i>1. Approve the expenditure of £147,000 detailed within sections 3 and 5 of this report;</i><i>2. Delegate authority to make any amendments to these allocations, providing these are compliant with the ring fenced grant conditions, to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Executive Member responsible for Stronger Healthy Communities and the Informal Executive.</i>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● A Good Quality of Life for All● Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	YES

Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Executive Member with Responsibility for Stronger Healthy Communities; Chief Executive; S151 Officer, Head of Legal Services and Director of Governance

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Home Office changed the criteria for the 3rd round of Asylum Dispersal Grants to reflect concerns raised by Local Authorities in relation to the pressure on local services associated with supporting Asylum Seekers, including Contingency Accommodation / Hotels into the funding formula.
- 1.2 The Home Office awarded West Oxfordshire District Council £147,000 through the Asylum Dispersal Grant, which was calculated on the number of asylum seekers resident in the local authority area as of the 1st April 2023.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 On the 14th November 2022, the Home Office contacted the Council to inform it that they had commissioned a hotel in Witney to house Asylum Seekers on a temporary booking basis.
- 2.2 The hotel became fully operational on the 18th November and initially was designated / operated as a 'spot booking' venue and was run by a 3rd party company (Fine Fair) on behalf of the Home Office.
- 2.3 Due to the designation of the hotel, no funding was made available to the Council, County Council or NHS despite the need to provide basic support and health care to the individuals living in the hotel. After much lobbying by the Council and local MP, the Home Office change the designation of the hotel to 'Contingency Accommodation' on the 16th December 2022. At this point they confirmed that they had procured a longer term contract with the hotel owner to accommodate asylum seekers along with making funding available to the Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) who are responsible for commissioning / providing healthcare services to the people living in the hotel.
- 2.4 Whilst the change in designation was clearly a step in the right direction, no funding had been allocated to the Council to cover the time Officers were spending on co-ordinating the efforts of the various agencies who were supporting the people in the hotel and community / faith organisations who were actively involved in helping to meet basic needs such as clothing etc.
- 2.5 Running in parallel with the opening of the hotel, the Home Office through its 3rd party contractor (Clear Springs Ready Homes) had identified a property in Carterton, which they were proposing to house a small number of individuals as of the 9th December. The Council and other agencies were consulted in May 2022 on the suitability of the property and location and responded raising a number of concerns regarding the proposal but these were largely ignored.
- 2.6 Due to GDPR and other restrictions despite many requests to the Home Office for information on the individuals living in Carterton and what support arrangements are in place, to date all the Council has been told is a monthly welfare check is carried out and any issues would be raised with the relevant agency / organisation. The Council have asked Asylum Welcome, who they have been working closely with to provide support / advice to the people in the hotel, to reach out to the individuals in Carterton to make sure they are Ok and are looking at formalise support going forward.

3. PROPOSAL

- 3.1 The current approach for providing support to the people in the hotel and wider community groups involved is unsustainable as it has relied heavily on a small number of officers who have taken on the role in addition to their other responsibilities.
- 3.2 The proposal is to employ a dedicated Migration Support Officer on a 12 month Fixed Term Contract initially, who would provide both the capacity and support needed both internally as well as to the wider community going forward.
- 3.3 To complement the new coordinators role, the proposal incorporates funding to explore / implement a communication portal to address the ongoing challenge in the hotel of providing information in a form which can easily be accessed and updated. Currently there is a wide range of different languages spoken in the hotel and a reliance on the hotel management team / volunteers putting posters up in multiple languages, however the information can quickly become outdated and is not seen by everyone. As the majority of individuals have access to the internet via their phones, some form of multilingual portal, which community / faith groups could update and post information regarding activities would address this and improve overall communication throughout the hotel.
- 3.4 An area that requires urgent support is the actual co-ordination of activities and volunteering opportunities, as one of the big areas of concern at the moment is trying to give people a sense of purpose as this will help improve both their mental and physical wellbeing. Also this will help to ensure the children have things to do during the school holidays. An organisation has been identified that is ideally positioned to deliver this support, who are both locally based and able to mobilise the resources required very quickly.
- 3.5 Organisation such as Asylum Welcome / Care4Calais have done an amazing job of supporting the people in the hotel via their weekly drop in centre and being in the hotel on a day to day basis but their resources and funding is under significant pressure. It is being proposed that the Council provide these type of organisations with some financial support to ensure access to these services and support continue. To ensure the funding is inclusive and meets the needs of all asylum seekers in the district the proposal will look to expand the current focus of the support to include the individuals who are living in the dispersed accommodation in Carterton.
- 3.6 As there are a wide range of local organisations providing support and activities to the people in the hotel, which is either currently being funded through the use of their own reserves or donations the proposal includes the creation of a small grant scheme. This scheme aims to help ensure future support is financially more sustainable as well as unlocking activities that aren't currently run due to their costs. These could include the provision of regular food related sessions, where the residents of the hotel can cook food that reflects their own cultures and background, which will help with their wellbeing and mental health. The funding may also be used to cover the cost of transport or basic equipment to give the individuals in the hotel an opportunity to integrate into the wider community through volunteering type activities.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The small team from the Council have worked closely with local community and faith groups as well as support organisations such as Asylum Welcome / Care4Calais since the hotel

opened and recognise that they are better positioned to provide the ‘on the ground’ support to the individuals than the Council, hence why the majority of the funded is directed towards them.

- 4.2 This approach is consistent with the other Councils across Oxfordshire who also recognise whilst a wider systems approach worked well during the pandemic and also the Homes for Ukraine scheme a focused localised approach that reflects the area is more applicable in this instance.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council received the full amount of the grant on the 30th June 2023.
- 5.2 The proposals set out in the table below are aimed at meeting the needs of both the people living in the hotel and wider community, whilst being compliant with the terms of the grant from the Home Office.

Proposed Funding Item	Amount
Migration Support Officer	£52,000
Communications portal	£10,000
Refugee Co-ordinator	£20,000
Support Organisations	£20,000
Community Grant Scheme	£20,000
Sub Total	£122,000
Retained fund	£25,000
Total	£147,000

- 5.3 The remaining funding (£25,000) will be retained to help support any unforeseen developments and the allocation of this would be delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Executive Member responsible for Stronger Healthy Communities and the Informal Executive.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council would look to use a Memorandum of Understanding to set out the principles and practices that will apply to the working relationship between itself and any organisation it financially support. This will also outline the monitoring arrangements, responsibilities, accountability and governance structures.

6.2 The proposed grant scheme will have clear criteria, timescales and funding arrangements set out to ensure that the Council can effectively evaluate and monitoring the delivery of successful proposals.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

7.1 There is a reputational risk to the Council if it does not use this grant funding effectively for the specific purposes set out in the Home Office document - Funding Eligibility for Local Authorities Asylum Dispersal Scheme: Grant Payment 3, which can be found in Annex A.

7.2 Unless the current support arrangements are made more resilient / sustainable there is a risks destabilising the current status quo, which could have a negative impact upon the wider community as well as the resources of other agencies such as the NHS & Police. .

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.1 Please see attached Equalities Impact Assessment – Annex B

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

None

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None