



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 11 OCTOBER 2023
Subject	REVIEW OF HOUSING RESOURCES
Wards Affected	None
Accountable Member	Councillor Geoff Saul – Executive Member for Housing & Social Welfare. Email: <a href="mailto:geoff.saul@westoxon.gov.uk">geoff.saul@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Accountable Officer	Jon Dearing – Assistant Director, Resident Services. Email: <a href="mailto:jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk">jon.dearing@publicagroup.uk</a>
Report Author	Caroline Clissold – Business Manager, Housing. Email: <a href="mailto:caroline.clissold@publicagroup.uk">caroline.clissold@publicagroup.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	To brief members on the continuing pressures facing the Housing Service. To outline the work carried out by Fixed Term Contract Staff, and the impact on the service should these be lost, with a recommendation to make these staff permanent. To seek approval to recruit an additional member of staff to assist with the complex and increasing volumes of Housing financial transactions.
Annexes	Nil.
Recommendation(s)	<i>That the Executive Resolves to:</i> <i>a) Agree that the three fixed term contract posts as described in Section 4.3 are moved to permanent posts;</i> <i>b) Approve the recruitment of a new Housing Finance Project Officer (WODC specific) as laid out in Section 6.</i>
Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Putting Residents First</li><li>● A Good Quality of Life for All</li><li>● Working Together for West Oxfordshire</li></ul>
Key Decision	YES
Exempt	NO

## **I. BACKGROUND**

The housing service 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 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.

- 1.1** The Housing Teams are 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)
- 1.2** 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 (HomeseekerPlus) and managing the clients in our four Council owned Hostels - two of which are in West Oxfordshire and two in Cotswold district.
- 1.3** The Housing Team also provides professional advice and support to clients before a statutory homelessness duty occurs to prevent homelessness - often referred to as the pre-prevention stage. This benefits the client by preventing the need for them to move into insecure B&B or hostel type accommodation.
- 1.4** 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 loss is on average £215 per person per week and with a rolling average of 29 clients over and above who we can house in council owned properties (and are therefore accommodated in expensive B&B/hotels), which equates to an estimated cost to the council of £324,000 in 2023/24.
- 1.5** The Housing Team have responded to these new challenges in part by using annual Homelessness Prevention Grants to create new fixed term contract posts specifically targeted to undertake complex casework with a focus on preventing homelessness at the earliest possible stage.
- 1.6** When vacant posts have arisen within the Housing Team, some have also been repurposed to meet a particular demand or address an area of additional work not previously undertaken.

## **2. HOUSING RESOURCES & STRUCTURE**

- 2.1** The Housing Team is mainly a shared service across the three Publica authorities, with some site-specific roles employed on Fixed Term Contracts (FTC's) targeting clients with complex needs.
- 2.2** 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.
- 2.3** The client management of the council owned hostels was passed to the Housing Team during the pandemic in 2020 therefore roles within the Housing Team structure were repurposed to meet this additional area of responsibility.

- 2.4 The Housing Team currently has 58% permanent staff with the remaining 42% of staff on a FTC or Secondment. This equates to 16 FTE permanent staff and 12 FTE staff on fixed term contracts across the shared service.
- 2.5 Whilst these FTC posts 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 short-term nature of the contracts mean that these posts are difficult to recruit to.
- 2.6 In a recent example, a FTC post was advertised which received only one response, whereas at the same time a permanent post was advertised that received over 30 responses.
- 2.7 Housing Leads spend a significant amount of time recruiting into and training staff in these posts, but limited job security means there is a high turnover as post holders leave for more secure work elsewhere.

### **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 3-year period with no respite in between.
- 3.2 What links these examples is that they demand an immediate response from Housing professionals to cope with these increased demands. Resources have to be found from short term funding with FTC's and expensive Agency Staff to provide an effective response. This lag in the assembling of resourcing poses reputational risk for the councils as well as risking potential failures in complying with Housing Legislation.
- 3.3 To address some of these issues with resources, three specialist Complex Needs Prevention Officers have been employed on FTCs. These officers are all based in West Oxfordshire and are not shared with other authorities.
- 3.4 Four Temporary Accommodation Officers have also been employed, three of which are on FTC's, to manage the council owned hostel residents, however this is a separate specialist area of work with different funding streams, so these posts are not addressed within this report.

### **4. FIXED TERM CONTRACT ROLES**

- 4.1 Although the levels of clients seeking support from the Housing Team are currently at an all-time high, homelessness presentation levels to West Oxfordshire are beginning to stabilise at around 15 - 20% higher than pre-pandemic levels as we approach the winter period. Although sufficiently above pre-pandemic levels to have a significant impact on work levels and the council's finances, these numbers would be significantly higher if the FTC roles were not in place to work with clients to prevent homelessness in the early stages of being in housing difficulty.

4.2 Nationally, local authorities are also reporting spikes in rough sleeping, with our neighbouring authorities reporting even higher increases than national averages, whereas, thanks to the work of our specialist officers, West Oxfordshire is reporting zero entrenched rough sleepers with month on month low to zero 'new to the street' rough sleepers.

4.3 West Oxfordshire currently has the following FTC:

**Housing Prevention Complex Needs Specialist:**

The post was created in 2021 as a combined strategic and operational role in response to the new Domestic Abuse Act and the new burdens on housing to ensure safe and appropriate accommodation is provided to DA victims.

Entrenched rough sleepers are often very complex and need intensive time and support to identify options and encourage engagement with appropriate agencies to move off the streets.

The post was successful in both ensuring that the principles of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 were fully embedded into working practices as well as 'bringing in' all of the then identified entrenched rough sleepers.

The post is a level 2 specialist with responsibilities of representing the council at county wide meetings, contributing to and responding to countywide strategies and managing small budgets to assist either victims of DA or for providing bespoke options for rough sleepers.

**Housing Prevention Officers - Complex needs x 2 (incorporating the Families First post)**

The original Families First post was created in 2016 and the role has been operating within the Housing Team since then. The role title has now changed to Prevention Officer - Complex needs to match that of the rest of the specialist Complex Needs Team. A second Homeless Prevention Officer - Complex Needs post was created at the beginning of the pandemic as the then Families First Officer's caseload was overwhelming.

Both roles target individuals or families that have complex needs at the earliest possible stage to prevent homelessness from occurring.

Both posts have been evaluated at Level 2 Caseworker

4.4 Each of the three posts holds a rolling caseload of 30 - 40 individuals or families each, where they provide intensive support and bespoke solutions to prevent homelessness before a duty arises. In addition, each officer will be able to offer short interventions to those households needing lower-level support.

- 4.5 It is therefore difficult to capture the true scale of the number of households that the three posts have assisted, but it is estimated that in 2022/2023 around 100 households were given intensive support that resulted in homelessness being prevented. In the absence of this support individuals and families would have been moved into temporary accommodation imposing a heavy additional financial burden on the council.
- 4.6 The council is currently reviewing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) for the Housing service as a whole therefore new data sets will be created specifically to monitor the effect of these posts on homelessness presentations.
- 4.7 The loss of 42% of the workforce should the staff either choose to leave for more permanent roles would have a detrimental effect on the service, the clients and the Housing Team's ability to meet even the most basic of our statutory duties.

**5. FUNDING STREAMS FOR FTC POSTS**

- 5.1 Government grants and financial awards have been given to local authorities for many years with the aim of assisting with the prevention of homelessness. This was initially in the form of a Temporary Accommodation Management Fee. In 2017, this moved to the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant and the Homelessness Reduction Grant.
- 5.2 From 2021/22 these two grants were combined for into the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and West Oxfordshire District Council receives this annually as detailed below:

2021-22	£253,329
2022-23	£260,156
2023-24	£269,927
2024-25	£282,704

- 5.3 In addition to the HPG, Top Ups or Uplifts are sometimes awarded during the financial year. These additional awards can be quite substantial, but are often awarded at the last minute with ring fenced conditions and short timescales in which to spend them. The Homes for Ukraine Top Up for example was for an additional £225,000 for 2023/24 however was not announced until June 2023, with the condition that it is spent by 31st March 2024.
- 5.4 However, these Top Up's and Uplifts cannot be relied upon as they are short notice awards to address additional pressures that have arisen during the financial year.
- 5.5 The HPG currently funds the costs of the three Complex Needs specialist officers.
- 5.6 Homelessness prevention remains a key focus for DLUHC alongside eradicating rough sleeping. In 2022 the methodology of calculating the HPG awards was fully reviewed, and a new formula adopted therefore there is no current indication that the HPG will cease at the end of 2025.
- 5.7 From 2023 onwards advance notification of the amount of the grant to be received will now be given in two years tranches.

## **6. ADDITIONAL HOUSING FINANCE PROJECT OFFICER**

- 6.1** Housing finance is complex with multiple income streams from Grants, Housing Benefits and personal contributions for those in emergency accommodation.
- 6.2** The Housing Team also needs to ensure that our emergency accommodation suppliers are paid in a timely manner.
- 6.3** The Homelessness Prevention Grants for each of our three authorities is split into multiple pots to assist our clients with the financial aspects of securing alternative housing and supplying them with essential white goods, furniture and basics. These funds are used to both prevent homelessness occurring as well as ensure that clients placed in emergency accommodation have what they need to move on swiftly into secure accommodation.
- 6.4** Since 2020, the Housing Team have also had the responsibility of ensuring that our Hostels received maximum rent via Benefits and personal contributions.
- 6.5** In the past year, the Housing Team have seen increasing numbers of refugee groups seeking assistance with their housing. Each group has its own complicated system of reimbursement of housing costs, further increasing the demands on our financial resources.
- 6.6** This work amounts to thousands of transactions through the Housing accounts across the three Publica authorities each year, all of which must be closely monitored.
- 6.7** Each household placed in any form of emergency accommodation will also need to have a Housing Benefit claim made. Across the three Publica authorities this can be around a thousand claims made each year, of which around 50-55% relate to West Oxfordshire
- 6.8** In 2020, the Housing Team received a COMF allocation to employ a temporary officer to manage these numerous and complex transactions. This work was evaluated in 2021 and a new, permanent post of Housing Finance Project officer was created by repurposing a vacant post.
- 6.9** The post holder also assesses housing clients wishing to access funds to ensure that the HPG is distributed fairly and to those most in need, and according to the ring-fenced rules laid out by DLUHC.
- 6.10** However, whilst the post holder has ensured that the Housing finances have been to the most part managed effectively, West Oxfordshire has suffered some losses in housing benefit income. West Oxfordshire has the highest number of homelessness presentations and the volume of transactions and claims needed exceed the workload of one person.
- 6.11** There is no existing base budget available to fund an additional post however the post will be funded from unspent Homelessness Prevention funds from previous years. It is therefore proposed that the Executive approve the recruitment of a second, West Oxfordshire specific Housing Finance Project Officer.

## **7. PROPOSAL**

- 7.1** As the Housing Team is now heavily reliant on FTC's to deliver essential and statutory services, it is proposed that the three Complex Needs Prevention Officer posts be converted into permanent posts.

- 7.2 As volumes of Housing Finance transactions across the three districts are above what one post can manage effectively, it is further proposed that an additional West Oxfordshire specific Housing Finance Project Officer is approved.
- 7.3 Should Homelessness Prevention Grant be removed by the Government in the future then these four roles will be reviewed.

## 8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The costs of the posts (including on costs) are detailed below:

Post	Funding stream	£
Housing Prevention - Complex Needs Specialist	Grant	42,001
Housing Prevention Officer - Complex Needs	Grant	35,593
Housing Prevention Officer - Complex Needs (formally Families First)	Grant	37,151
Housing Finance Officer	Unspent Grants from previous years	36,071
<b>Total</b>		<b>150,816</b>

- 8.2 Although the current Housing Finance Project Officer has ensured that many hundreds of Housing Benefit claims have been submitted and benefits successfully claimed to recover some of the costs of emergency and hostel accommodation, given the sheer volume of placements needed mean that there have been some losses.
- 8.3 The table below provides an overview of the losses in income due to missed Housing Benefit opportunities. In 2020/21 and 2022/23 the Housing Team saw an average of 50% more placements needed per annum than in pre pandemic years with the 2019/20 figure reflecting the lower number of homelessness contacts:

Income Loss	HB
2019/20	£56,599
2020/21	£101,506
2021/22	£80,212
2022/23	£155,478

- 8.4 The post will therefore generate cost savings through ensuring that all allowable housing benefit income is claimed. The post will also assess claims for Homelessness Prevention funds which will help prevent homelessness as well as speed up the process of moving clients from B&B to secure accommodation where homelessness cannot be prevented.

- 8.5 FTC posts have the protections (including redundancy costs) after two years as permanent staff.
- 8.6 Whilst the proposal to make the FTC posts permanent incurs no additional costs to the net base budget in the short term, the longer-term funding of these posts will require additional resources should the grant funding reduce or cease.
- 8.7 Should any of the funding streams cease, the roles will be reviewed, and action taken to either reduce the number of these posts to match resource availability or request further consideration be given to the base budget.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Insufficient resourcing within the Housing Team could lead to statutory functions not being met.

## **10. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 10.1 Although there is no reason to believe that the annual allocation of the Homelessness Prevention Grants will cease, should this be the case then any roles that are made permanent may need to be made redundant.
- 10.2 However, as these posts have been in existence for many years, fixed term contracts have been renewed. Staff have now been employed over two years, so are therefore entitled to the same protections as staff employed as permanent from the outset.
- 10.3 With regards to the request for an additional Housing Finance Project Officer, as the workload is exceeding the capability of one post holder, losses in income from could continue to be incurred.

## **11. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 11.1 None

## **12. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 None

## **13. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 13.1 None

(END)