

**REPORT TITLE: HRA WELFARE FUND AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS
GRANT SPENDING PLANS.**

22 JUNE 2021

REPORT OF PORTFOLIO HOLDER: Cllr Kelsie Learney

Contact Officer: Gillian Knight Tel No: 01962 848 577 Email
gknight@winchester.gov.uk

WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

This paper sets out for discussion the proposed 2021/22 HRA Welfare Fund spending plan introduced to provide additional support and assistance for council tenants. The additional one off sum of £500,000 funded from the existing HRA balance was approved at full council on 24 February 2021. The proposals are brought forward in discussion with TACT and tenants.

The 2021/22 Homelessness Prevention Grant of £300,095 allocated by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) give local authorities control and flexibility in managing homelessness pressures and supporting those who are at risk of homelessness. This paper sets out for discussion the proposed spending plans to prevent homelessness and to support the most excluded within our communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the Policy Committee review and comment upon the proposed spending plans of the HRA Welfare fund and the Homelessness Prevention Grant.

1 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 1.1 The resources required to deliver on the spending plan objectives will come within existing staffing resources.
- 1.2 A one off allocation of funding from the existing HRA balance as approved at full council on 24 February 2021.
- 1.3 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) allocation of £330,095 from the annual Homelessness Prevention Grant.
- 1.4 The purpose of the government grant is to give local authorities control and flexibility in managing homelessness pressures and supporting those who are at risk of homelessness. It is expected that councils use it to fully enforce the Homelessness Reduction Act to help end rough sleeping by increasing activity to prevent single homelessness. To reduce family temporary accommodation numbers through maximising family homelessness prevention and to eliminate the use of unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation for families.

2 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

- 2.1 Background
- 2.2 The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on many households financial security. Studies have shown an increase in the characteristics of vulnerability for adults including poor health, low financial resilience and negative life events. There has been a significant rise in people losing their jobs, being forced to take salary cuts or accept reduced hours because of the pandemic. Working-age adults have been disproportionately hit by the virus, in particular younger adults, black, Asian and minority ethic adults and the self-employed.
- 2.3 Financial hardship and poor mental health often go hand in hand and can result in the threat of homelessness. Public Health England research into the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of adults has shown an increase in those experiencing anxiety, stress and low mood along with sleep problems. And it is likely that the effects of the pandemic on such households will be felt for months or even years to come.
- 2.4 £500,000 has been allocated as a one off sum from the HRA budget to fund additional support services to help with recovery for those tenants most adversely affected. The fund will also provide practical financial support to tenants facing hardship to help sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness.
- 2.5 The 2021/22 Homelessness Prevention Grant allocation awarded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is to give local authorities control and flexibility in managing homelessness pressures and to support those who are at risk of homelessness.

2.6 It is recognised that the council cannot prevent or solve homelessness alone. As such the homelessness prevention spending plan sets out areas of spend that best support partnership working opportunities whilst underpinning the council's statutory housing responsibilities to ensure preventative initiatives are central to service delivery.

2.7 Details of the Proposal

2.8 The Welfare Fund budget of £500,000 funded from the existing HRA balance was allocated to provide additional support for council tenants in consultation with TACT and tenants. Consultation took place with involved tenants and TACT Members on 17th March 2021 and with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Asset Management. The feedback document from the consultation event can be found in Background Documents.

2.9 **Strategic Commissioning:** Commissioning of local support services enabling the council to allocate resources and procure partner agencies already active in our communities. To help provide specialist help and support services that will deliver priority outcomes set out in operational service plans. Areas of additional support will include employment support to help with job searches, CV writing, life coaching and confidence building. Therapeutic services for those with poor mental health including befriending services. To support people struggling to afford to pay energy bills to take advantage of benefits, grants and help offered by the government and energy suppliers. Financial support for tenants moving into a new home to tackle appliance and furniture poverty. To prevent tenants falling in to debt by borrowing from high-interest loan providers to buy essential furnishings. Proposed spending budget of £100,000 over a two year programme.

2.10 **Digital Inclusion:** The pandemic highlighted the importance of digital inclusion but there are still significant levels of digital exclusion with people lacking the basic skills to use the internet effectively. This can be as result of unemployment, fewer educational qualifications, and people living with disabilities and is often associated with those living in social housing. The fund will support those tenants in receipt of Universal Credit, seeking employment or participating in training who are on low incomes. Providing training opportunities to help not just with computer skills but to help build confidence and awareness of opportunity. Proposed spending budget of £40,000 over a two year programme.

2.11 **Welfare Personalisation Budget:** To enable housing officers to be reactive through an emergency fund which is readily available to meet crisis need when tenants do not have sufficient funds to meet their basic need. It can act as an engagement tool to help support the more hard reach and complex need tenants and those involved in antisocial behaviour incidents. The budget will be used flexibly to meet a need that is not currently met thought the government welfare benefit system. Providing bespoke support that enhances a tenant's choice. Proposed spending budget of £80,000 over a two year programme.

- 2.12 **Increased Welfare Support Capacity:** The Tenancy Sustainment team was first established in 2019 as an in house support service to help tenants to live well. During the pandemic there was a substantial increase in tenant referrals to the team needing support and assistance. With increased demand in specialist areas such as mental health support and money and benefit assistance. Existing officers during 202/21 supported 60 tenants with mental health support and 150 tenants with money and benefit advice with successful outcomes helping to keep tenants in their home preventing the threat of homelessness. The need continues to grow and there are many more tenants who will benefit from the tenancy sustainment support service. To meet the resource demand and to support as many tenants in need as possible it is proposed to increase the capacity of the team by appointing two full time tenancy sustainment officers. There is a need to employ administrative support to proactively manage the referral process coming in to the tenancy support Service. The increase in resources will enable each additional officer to support another 50 to 60 tenants and will enable the service to accept another 100 plus referrals. Proposed spending budget of for 2021/22.
- 2.13 The Homelessness Prevention Grant spending plan for 2021/22 focuses on the positive changes in service delivery that have come about during the pandemic and which will support homelessness recovery plans.
- 2.14 **Social Inclusion Grant:** The council currently co-commission with Hampshire County Council (HCC) accommodation and support for the most complex single homeless households. A small contribution of £50,000 secured from the Homelessness Prevention Grant helps support the provision of 32 units of accommodation at West View House and the Sussex Street housing first provision. Due to the challenges of COVID 19 over the past year HCC have extended the contract until March 2023. The co-commission of services with HCC ensures that there is suitable accommodation available to prevent people from sleeping rough and to target support for those most in need. Proposed spending budget of £50,000 for 2021/22.
- 2.15 **Flexible Prevention Fund:** The provision of a flexible prevention fund of £50,000 for front line Housing Options Officers to help prevent and relieve homelessness through spend-to save initiatives increasing efficiency and lowering long term costs. Early intervention and engagement tactics can prevent homelessness and keep people in their homes with officers having timely access to a flexible spending budget. The fund could provide households facing homelessness with financial help to pay court costs to secure a stay of eviction. To help clear historic or current rent arrears to prevent households threatened with homelessness falling in to debt by borrowing from high-interest loan providers. Provide support to digitally connect homeless households to the internet, providing mobile devices to access essential government welfare benefits and health services. Proposed spending budget of £50,000 for 2021/22.
- 2.16 **Severe Weather Emergency Provision:** The Council has responsibility to deliver Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) to ensure a form of

emergency accommodation is available to anyone sleeping rough during periods of severe cold or hot weather to keep them safe from the elements. Following Covid19 the government advised local councils that shared sleeping spaces are no longer appropriate. In previous years the council has commissioned various local providers to provide dormitory style accommodation during SWEP but this is no longer appropriate provision and councils are instead expected to provide self-contained provision. Trinity Winchester and the Winchester Churches Night shelter are expanding their accommodation options and there will be opportunities for them to offer SWEP emergency self-contained accommodation. A budget of £15,000 will be required to cover incurred partner agency SWEP costs and to include supplementing accommodation offers through local hotel provision. Proposed spending budget of £15,000 for 2021/22.

- 2.17 **Young Persons Emergency Beds:** To continue to fund 2 emergency beds with high level support for local vulnerable young people aged 17 to 21 at Westgate Place an A2 Dominion supported housing project. The intensive support is currently commissioned by Hampshire County Council. Proposed spending budget of £10,000 for 2021/22.
- 2.18 **Housing Jigsaw Module:** The MRI Housing Jigsaw software system manages the front line housing options service helping to prevent homelessness. A new module 'Rise' provides a platform designed to support local councils, the voluntary sector and wider partners to manage and monitor rough sleeping pathways and outreach work. Proposed spending budget of £10,000 for 2021/22.
- 2.19 **Staffing Resources.** The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and COVID19 has placed a number of additional burdens and responsibilities' on the Housing Options Teams. Most other Hampshire Authorities have since increased staffing resources to support service delivery. The council has remained operating with the same number of officers in place prior to the additional responsibilities introduced through both legislation and the pandemic. Comparisons of staffing resources have been made with Eastleigh Borough Council and East Hampshire Borough Council which have the nearest comparators in terms of homelessness prevention and relief duties. But who have less single homeless complex need customers.

Local Authority	Staffing Resource	Caseload
WCC	4 FT officers	155
EHBC	5 FT /1 PT officers	146
EBC	6Ft officers	119

It is expected that homelessness presentations are likely to increase due to the end of government furlough financial assistance schemes, paused evictions from within the private rented housing sector and potential mortgage debt. To resource an additional full time Housing options and a support officer role, recruited on a fixed term basis via the Homelessness Preventing Grant will provide extra support and assistance to a further 30 to 40 residents and improve resilience within the team. Proposed spending budget of £102,550 for a 2 year period.

- 2.20 Both spending plans will be left with contingency funding of £99,920 for the HRA Welfare Fund with £62,054 remaining of the MHCLG Homelessness Prevention Grant allowing for future need.
- 2.21 Conclusion
- 2.22 Both proposed spending plans are crucial to continue to build recovery of front line services. To maintain good and positive service delivery changes that have come about during the pandemic to ensure help and support is readily available for our most in need communities to live well.

3 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 3.1 Discussions took place to offer a reduction in rent to all tenants in the form of a rent free week during 2021/22. But this would not have benefited the most in need tenants as those tenants in receipt of welfare benefits including Housing Benefit and Universal Credit would not receive any financial gain from a rent free week. To keep the money in reserve is not recommended as support for tenants is needed now to enable and assist the council's recovery work.
- 3.2 To retain the MHCLG Homelessness Prevention Grant until the full extent of homelessness is known post COVID 19 not recommended as support for homeless households is needed now to enable and assist the council's recovery work.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Committee Reports:-

BHP004, PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS & ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY18 JUNE 2019

[BHP004](#)

Other Background Documents:-

Tenant Welfare Consultation & Feedback Document



Tenant Welfare
Consultation & Feedb

Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Action Plan 2019-2024

[Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan](#)

APPENDICES:

None