

Memorandum

TO: Oxford City Council

FROM: Homelessness Team 11: Zixuan Fu, Enrique Gaya, Selena Milanovic and Jonathan Pickering.

DATE: 24th May 2020

RE: Prevention of homelessness during and after Covid-19

Introduction

Homelessness has remained a significant issue both in Oxford and across the UK. During Covid-19 we have seen some very promising new national policies to ensure the homeless are not left on the streets in the middle of a pandemic, however a more long-term solution is needed. This memo will argue that the most important role Oxford City Council can play now is to prevent a rise in homeless women due to a rise in home violence. The proposal consists in highlighting the great potential of volunteers across the city of Oxford, who could accommodate them in a spare room for a maximum of four weeks. The volunteer assignment process will take into consideration gender, hobbies and other preferences, thus ensuring a strong synergy between both parties.

Background

Covid-19 has drastically increased the number of people at risk of homelessness. To address this, the government's *Everyone In* scheme has accommodated rough sleepers across the UK in empty hotel rooms. Moreover, renters' eviction notices have been extended from 1 month to 3 months. Nevertheless, these temporary solutions are not a long-term solution to the problem and we therefore urge the Oxford City Council to expand on this progress. The largest, and therefore first, group of vulnerable people to be addressed are victims of domestic violence. Indeed, the lockdown has resulted in a 22% surge in reported incidences [1]. A fast and durable response must be implemented, addressing both, an urgent need for help and the affordability of alternative housing which is a particular issue in Oxford's housing market.

Plan of action

We are proposing our new programme '*Hommies*' which will seek to:

1. Involve the local community by allowing volunteers to house vulnerable individuals (i.e. primarily women) for a maximum of 4 weeks with the assurance of the council that length of the stay will not be extended beyond the initial agreement.
2. Match both parties (i.e. vulnerable women and volunteers) considering personal profiles that include the expressed preferences on gender, hobbies etc.
3. Continue the city council's policy of *Housing First* by ensuring that those at risk of homelessness are provided housing prior to risking spending a night sleeping on the streets.

According to the most recent *Oxfordshire Strategic Review of Domestic Abuse* [3], of the 30'000 people 'at risk' of domestic abuse only 6% asked for help, with 25% of those calls coming from the city of Oxford. The goal is to encourage women who are reluctant about leaving the home of the perpetrator that there is safe accommodation in their living area for them. The greater the number of volunteers we have, the greater impact this policy will be able to have, therefore we will seek to provide incentives beyond individuals' kindness. Options are membership proofs that will provide discounts in selected stores and the possibility of being part of a community with a marked impact on the community's life.

Recommendation and Implementation

Oxford City Council approaches potential users (i.e. potential volunteers and people at risk of homelessness) through campaigning, public announcing and advertising. Oxford-based charities that work on homelessness issues and technology start-ups such as Oxford Hub, Spare Room.co.uk and Beam.org can support with this phase. This will involve a short compliance training to assist volunteers in managing situations that may arise during the volunteering period (i.e. approach with mental health incidences and unwanted visits).

Engaging and Matching

Volunteers and potential homelessness upload their portfolios on the service. All the information collected through the platform should be protected and only be used for this project. City council is responsible for background checking of volunteers, as well as the basic information survey of homelessness who are in risk of losing their current accommodations. City council provides warrants and endorsement for both parties. The platform matches volunteers and the vulnerable individuals based on their portfolios, identities, preferences and past experiences to assure connecting people in need with suitable hosts.

Accommodation regulation

City council signs contracts with the volunteers and the vulnerable people separately. The length of the stay ranges between 1 and 4 weeks. The minimum duration was extrapolated from the current timing necessary to respond to re-housing requests and the maximum is to accommodate the volunteers. Volunteers are required to provide safe accommodations for their guests and are not permitted to evict them prior to the agreed date. Social workers of the Oxford City Council should assure a proper relationship between two parties by weekly checks.

Post volunteering

City council offers personalized support to the homeless during and after the accommodation. Partner charities that specialize in skill-development for homelessness, mental support, long-term housing around Oxfordshire provide continuous help. Volunteers are credited by the Oxford City council to appraise their support and engagement in building the community. A schematic illustration of the process is presented in Figure 1.

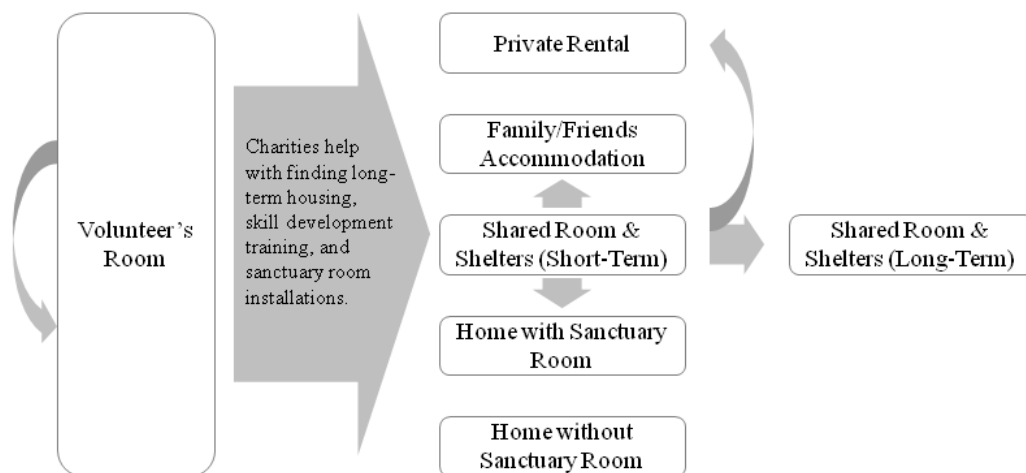


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the tasks undertaken after the volunteering end.

Phase 1- Development and Integration

Once the pilot has operated for at least 5 months, with sufficient volunteers and at least 20 vulnerable women brought into secondary permanent housing, we will seek to develop the technology of this programme and its website. This will be done by employing web developers, designers, marketing & branding firms and freelancers pro bono. Over

the course of the first year we will seek to expand the programme by involving more volunteers and seek to integrate its services onto the Oxford City Council's website.

Phase 2- Scaling and Escalation

Provided the previous 17 months have proved successful, a tech company will be recruited as a partner and sponsor of the programme to help develop an app for smartphone use. Subsequently, we will open this app and programme to the other districts of Oxfordshire and to the Oxfordshire County Council. With this, we aim to encourage more volunteers to use our digital infrastructure, mitigating the high number of vulnerable people traveling to the city for better care. Ultimately, we wish to establish our model across the UK and to serve as an inspiration internationally.

Costs

In addition to the immeasurable societal benefits of implementing the proposed policy, the monetary benefits are substantial. Indeed, the current urgent accommodation initiative [2] costs £160'000/year (See Table 2), while the cost for the pilot study of our proposal amounts to £13'737 (See Table 1). A clear breakdown of the costs for the implementation of our proposal is provided in the Table 1 while a breakdown of the current expenditures is presented in Table 2. Additionally, Table 3 provides further supporting considerations for our proposed policy implementation.

CONCEPT	ANNUAL COST
In-house IT team (City Council)	£1.200,00
Maintenance (servers +web domain)	£500,00
Web content creation (Covered by charities 50%)	£281,25
Social Media content and engagement (Covered by charities 50%)	£281,25
NHS health check (Covid-19 test covered)	£0,00
TOTAL FIX COST	£2.262,50
Benefit scheme (furniture)	£4.500,00
Floating support and tracking (support cost)	£2.400,00
Background check (10 hours/month)	£1.500,00
Matching supervision (8 hours/month)	£1.200,00
Exit strategy assessment (Covered by charities 50%)	£1.125,00
Training for volunteers (Covered by charities 50%)	£750,00
TOTAL VARIABLE COST (45 USERS)	£11.475,00
Web design	£0,00
Branding	£0,00
Web integration	£0,00
PRO BONO SERVICES	£0,00
TOTAL ANNUAL COST OF THE INITIATIVE	£13.737,50

Table 1: Cost breakdown analysis of our proposed solution.

Women at risk in Oxfordshire [3]	30.000
Women at risk in Oxford city [3]	7.500
% of women asking for help [3]	6%
Annual number of women asking for help in Oxford	450
% of women in urgent need of housing (minimum scenario)	10%
MINIMUM ANNUAL NUMBER OF WOMEN ENGAGED IN THE PROGRAMME	45

Housing option action	£826,00
Hotel for 4 weeks at 269pw GBP	£1.076,00
PRCS access scheme (one off cost)	£1.715,00
Private tenancy (LHA)	Cost incurred by DWP
TOTAL ANNUAL COST PER WOMAN	£3.617,00

TOTAL POTENTIAL COST (ANNUAL COST)	£162.765,00
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Table 2: Cost breakdown analysis of the currently adopted approach.

	Commercial opportunity	Feel good factor	CSR alignment (Local engagement, Wellbeing, employee engagement)	Relevant experience
IT Consultants (1)	✓	✓	✓	
IT start-up companies (2)	✓	✓	✓	
IT students from the University of Oxford		✓		✓

(1) PwC (IT division) has expressed already their interest

(2) Oxford, in the Top tech hubs in the UK (Local Economic and Employment, OECD, 2019).

Recent examples in Oxford (Sophos, Rebellion, NaturalMotion) of IT star-ups doing pro bono services during the Covid-19 crisis.

Table 3: Additional supporting considerations that strengthen our proposal.

References

[1] <https://safelives.org.uk/news-views/domestic-abuse-and-covid-19>

[2] https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/240459/cr0198_domesticabusebill_appg_report_2019_aw_web.pdf

[3] <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/fireandpublicsafety/DomesticAbuseStrategicReview.pdf>